

Jan 10, 10 Rev 2:1-7 Series on Churches

Ephesus: THE CARELESS CHURCH

As we enter into a new decade we will be looking at who we are as a church using the churches found in the Book of Revelation chapters 2 and 3 to see if we might be like one of them, and if so, what should we be doing. So I would suggest sometime that you read these two chapters in order to understand God's message for our church. Come prepared to listen to God and to learn from him who we might be as a church and as individuals and maybe what we may have to do to do better. Isn't God Good to give us a hint of things he would like for us?

The church as we know is its people. We sing that once in a while when we sing, "I am the church, you are the church, we are the church together. All who follow Jesus all around the world, yes we're the church together. The church is not its building. The church is not its steeple, the church is its people."

So by that definition, we are the church together. Therefore, we need to BE the church of Jesus Christ with Jesus as the CEO, the CFO, and the top dog. We in reality are his servants. Though the sign on our board says "Williamsville United Methodist Church" we still are The Church of Jesus Christ **serv**ing through the Williamsville United Methodist Church.

So who are we? What are we doing right? Where can there be improvements? And is this really God's Church, or have we kind of taken over his role as CEO?

So we turn to the Book of Revelation for help looking at 7 different churches that received a message from God about its ministry. Today we turn to a church at Ephesus that Paul founded during one of his missionary journeys. Back then it was a bustling town because of all the trade routes going through it. Magic and idol worship were key elements of trade and when these people found faith in Jesus Christ they had a city wide bonfire where the new Christians came and burned all their magic books and idols together, casting away the old, and looking toward the new through Jesus Christ. So this was a very important church that Paul began and continued to nurture through his visits and through a letter written to him. Paul wrote these words to the church: *"You also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory."*

But listen now, to what God has to say to the church some years later as we hear God's first message to the leaders of the Ephesus church. **READ**

As we study these 7 churches you will find three things in each letter. First there will be a statement about the church. Second there will be an exhortation. Third there will be a promise.

One commentator called this the “careless” church. Let’s see why.

So first thing we see in this letter is **they seem to be doing a good job of ministry**. Check it out. The letter says, “I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance.” We can say ‘Amen’ to that. Seems like a great church on the right track. He even complements them on how they treat those who are false teachers, and we know Paul had warned all his churches that false teachers would come. He encouraged them to remain faithful to the Gospel he preached, that there was no other way but Jesus. He tells them to ‘put off the old, and put on the new.’ To ‘have the mind of Christ.’ Not the mind of the secular world.

So this church was doing the right things it seems. Now folks. Most churches do. We can always be a ‘busy’ church. We can always be a ‘giving’ church. We can be a ‘mission’ church. We can do all the things that we believe are good things, but then that does not mean that we are the church God wants us to be, right? What do you mean, pastor? Aren’t we doing what is right? I’d say yes. Just like the church at Ephesus was, but you know God looked deeper at the church. Remember, we just saw the good stuff they were doing. Now we turn to the exhortation.

The message of exhortation is: **YOU HAVE LOST YOUR FIRST LOVE**. NO! How can that be? What does he mean? Well, I believe he is telling them that some place along the way they forgot what the church was all about. They were into doing things, and that was okay, but they had forgotten about their first love and

that was their walk with God. They had drifted away from growing in grace and telling the story of salvation to doing works to find grace. They began to think if they did enough good things then they could have God's mercy and grace. They forgot the message... "It is by faith you have been saved, not works so none can boast." You see there's a difference in being busy and believing.

Remember our buddy Micah from our Advent lessons? Remember how his blood boiled with enthusiasm as he and some other shepherds saw the baby that the angel had told them about? Man his heart was on fire! Remember how they were told that 'today, in the city of David, the Savior was born?' And they found their Savior and knelt in humble adoration. God appeared to these lowly shepherds with the message. And being filled with the Holy Spirit some returned to their flocks, while Micah runs to town to awaken it with the message that the savior had been born. Maybe he was saying, "Repent for the kingdom of God has come. World it's time to wake up because God sent us his son so that we can have a new life of hope and peace and love and live with him in heaven for all eternity." He knocked on doors, shouted it up and down the street until he was just about hoarse. But no one paid much attention to him. They opened and closed their doors. They just ignored him on the street. Yet Micah's heart was on fire like a full blown furnace at top heat like the one that the Hebrew children were thrown in back in Babylon. For years he told the story. Every chance he had he would tell the story how God transformed his

life through allowing him to see the Savior for himself. He told the story from the beginning to the end. As he moved from place to place with his sheep he told the story to other shepherds. When he went to town for supplies he would tell the story in every shop. When he was eating a meal he would share it with others who sat at his table or shared a rock with him whether he knew them or not. But like the first time he shared his new found love, not many were interested. So we know what happened. That little light of his began to flicker, to be dimmer and dimmer and he told the story less and less. He got discouraged because no one would believe him. It got to the point his light went so low he stopped telling the story. He lost his first love. But years later every once in a while there would be a flicker of hope as he remembered the story.

Folks, there are many people who do that. You know they find the excitement of that first time and over a period of time that love seems to wear thin. Our messenger this morning says this church lost its first love. It lost its true mission. What was that mission? To tell the story. To repeat the story over and over again. “I love to tell the story because it is true. I love to tell the story of Jesus and his love.”

You see this church forgot what they were about. They forgot that it wasn't just about missions and taking special offerings or doing other things. Those weren't bad things, and God recognized them for their ministry. But their function was to tell the story. The church at Ephesus was brought into being to tell their

stories about how they were transformed by the Gospel of Jesus Christ preached by Paul. They were to tell others that “it was by faith one is saved, not works.” Sure Paul may have been gone by now, but the message was still alive. And life after life that was transformed over the years through the story meant that they had to continue to tell the story again and again. They had lost their first love. Or as our Scripture states, “I hold this against you: you have forsaken your first love.” Listen to the Message Translation: “I see what you’ve done-your hard, hard work, your refusal to quit. I know that you can’t stomach evil, that you weed out apostolic pretenders. I know your persistence, your courage in my cause, that you never wear out.” Man what a great legacy. However, we turn to these words from the messenger... “BUT,” you know when you read that something different is coming.... “BUT YOU WALKED AWAY FROM YOUR FIRST LOVE-WHY? What’s going on with you anyway? Do you have any idea how far you’ve fallen? A Lucifer fall!”

They had walked away from their first love. Perhaps they had begun to listen to the tricky sneaky slimy snake known as “Lucifer.” You know this happens more than you would think. That’s why more and more denominations come into being or that there are splits in denominations. Somehow the church loses its desire for the Gospel message and though they are doing the right things they start to major on the minor things and the most important thing they were to be doing falls by the

wayside. It happened in the Anglican church that's why John and Charles Wesley formed the Holy Club. We become caught up with the doing of the church rather than the central focus of the church which is to love Jesus with all your heart and soul. It's happened in the Methodist church when the Nazarene church and Wesleyan and Free Methodist branched out. Some began to think the Methodist church was getting too liberal, so these others began to call for a repentance and turning back to God but when it didn't happen within the church, they began other branches holding to the Holiness of God, keeping faith centered on Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

You see, I believe when you love Jesus then you will do the other things he asks you to do. You got to hear the message. You got to understand the message. You got to accept the message. Then you are ready to share the message.

I have said this in all honesty at every church I've been the pastor that if every pew was filled to overflowing but not one life was transformed then my ministry would be a failure. However, if there were only a few people who kept coming yet those who came had life changing experiences then my ministry was a success. You see, that's what God tells us to do. He tells us to tell the story. He asks us to share with others his love through what has happened in our lives.

Many years ago there was a man who always went to church during the week when people would share their stories with others. It was a great time and this man

enjoyed listening but he also enjoyed telling his story. He even had it written down so he could tell it again and again without leaving out one word. Over the years the paper was getting old and yellow, but he kept bringing it each week and would tell the same old story. On this particular night he was all dressed and went to his desk to get his paper. He reached into the spot where he always kept it, but tonight, it wasn't there. He began to panic, and he searched high and low in every nook and cranny of that desk. No spot was left unchecked. He pulled out each drawer, looked behind it to see if it fell behind. He looked between each paper that was in each drawer to make sure it hadn't got put with other papers. Finally, after all else failed, he called his wife and asked if she had seen his testimony. She said she had decided to clean out his desk and saw some yellow faded paper that was old and falling apart she thought it was time to throw it in the trash. He was horrified and he yelled out, "I don't have a story to tell anymore."

Now my friends, you can look at that story two ways. First, this man was excited about what God had done in his life and he wanted to continue to share the story with others, word for word, from beginning to the end how he found salvation. That excited him even if he kept telling the same story to the same people week after week. That was the good thing. But here is the other side of that story that I think is also as important and that is this. Yes, he had a story of what God did for him, BUT many wanted to know what was God doing today? You see that's the

ongoing story. We serve the living God that still transforms our lives. He keeps working on us.

The other day I was watching some TV show, don't remember which one, but one phrase stayed with me. They were talking about something and the one person said it was like peeling away an onion, piece by piece or layer by layer, and I thought right then and there that's just what God does in our lives over a time. Little by little, piece by piece, he peels away the outer skin to get at the core. If the core is bad, well, it's time to fix it. If the core is good then he can build on it.

My friends, this church at Ephesus perhaps was doing some of the right things, but some time or other they began to drift back to their old ways. They had forgotten their first love.

Now listen to the final thing. The messenger says: **“repent and do the things you did at first!”** Or as the Message Bible says, “Turn back! Recover your dear early love. No time to waste, for I'm well on my way to removing your light from the golden circle.”

OUCH! If this church didn't change, then God would be snuffing out its candle. We might look at it this way. If they didn't return to their first love then they would be all finished with their ministry and God would close the door on their

church. He wants a church he can use to transform life after life. He wants a church who can be a beacon to draw people to HIM.

Listen now to the promise: *“To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.”*

The promise is the church that repents, changes its ways, returns to its first love will see great things happening, for God is a forgiving and redeeming God.

During Charge Conference our DS spoke about Evangelism. He spoke that we need to get the story out, our story, your story, how has Jesus transformed your lives, and how he is continuing to do it. We need to make sure we never abandon our first love that JESUS IS LORD! I have to make sure that I never forget my experience of salvation and what God has done since that first time I said yes to him for ministry, and yes to him for salvation.

Three things I want to leave us with to make sure we aren't a “careless church” who has lost its first love. First, let's remember our first love and that is loving Jesus with our whole heart and soul and mind and strength. Second, let us repent for letting other stuff get in our way of worshipping or loving Jesus with our whole hearts. And lastly, let us restore our relationship with our God. Let us do that as a church, and most importantly as the people of God.

You see, God has given us the first warning. Have we lost our first love? Are we the 'careless' church who has been a busy church and not a believing church? Is God proud of us? Will he say good things about what we have done? Does he have something against us? Will he snuff out our candle? I hope not. Will you join in asking God for a vision for this church and how we can reach others for him? Will you help tell the story of Jesus love?

Let's ask God to give us a vision, repent of our sins and let's tell the story to others that God loves them and offer them the gift of salvation. I know if we do all that, God will keep our candlestick lit for years to come.... Praise be to our God for his redeeming love.