

Last Sunday we looked at Jesus' letter to the church in Ephesus where he calls us to recover the love we had at first for him. Today God's Word comes to us from Christ's letter to the church in Laodicea where he says, "I know your works. You are neither cold nor hot. You're lukewarm... and I am about to spit you out."

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Laodicea was an impressive town. It was the kind of place that kept winning those polls for the best city to live in the Roman Empire. Economically it was very well off, in part because the town was strategically located along lucrative trade routes. It also had strong banking establishments, and a textile industry that was famous for its raven black wool. It even had something of a medical college that specialized in eye problems. The Roman historian Tacitus tells us that when a devastating earthquake struck in 60 A.D., the people of Laodicea rebuilt the town on their own without any aid from Rome.

It was a great city except for one significant problem. It wasn't near a supply of fresh drinking water. The town architects thought they had taken care of this issue with the construction of aqueducts. They imported cold water from a town six miles to the south, and from Hieropolis to the north, which had hot springs, they brought down hot water. However, like many good engineering ideas, this one didn't quite work. The aqueducts developed cracks. By the time the cold water arrived it had warmed up and when the hot water arrived it had cooled down. This meant all the drinking water in Laodicea was an awful lukewarm.

So, when Christ calls the Laodiceans "lukewarm," they must have grimaced. He hit them in their one soft spot. But remember, the people to whom the Lord has written his letter are the members of the church. They aren't cold. They aren't hot. They're lukewarm. You know what it feels to discover someone's commitment to you is lukewarm. It's like taking a drink from a cup of coffee that has sat on your desk too long. That's how Jesus described the Laodicean Christians commitment to him, and he was just looking for a place to spit.

What went wrong? As with most relationships, things between Jesus and the church in Laodicea didn't start bad. Like the water that started out hot up north and cold from the south, the faith of the Christians began with some edge to it. They were part of a church founded by the Apostle Paul, and in those early days the church took its ministry and mission seriously and was fervent in its desire to make a difference. But they got distracted by other things. Maybe it was their devotion to commerce, their famous raven black wool industry, their medicine and state of the art technology. Or maybe they just got distracted by the demands of ordinary living.

This is the great danger for the American Church as well. We are easily distracted from our own souls that yearn for a deeper love for Jesus Christ. None of us would say Jesus is unimportant. You wouldn't be in church if that's what you thought. But like that coffee cup that just sits on the desk while we busily attend to so many other things our faith has grown lukewarm.

Most of all we're distracted by our resolve to get life just the way we want it to be. All our striving and hard work, and all our technology, progress, and politics; and all our preoccupation with who is to blame for our problems, is built on the assumption that we should be able to make life right. Ironically, this preoccupies us with what is wrong. Don't you think this water thing drove the Laodiceans crazy? I'm thinking the editorials of the local paper were constantly opining about it, and the city leaders argued about levying taxes to fix this thing.

We know how easy it is to get preoccupied with what is wrong. In our lives we find that our relationships, jobs, or health is, well, not what we thought it would be. In our church we think. "It sure is taking a long time to find a new pastor. Is something wrong with us?" And in our world? Do I really need to remind you of the pathos around us in the world that is groaning in travail over wars, injustice, and a climate screaming for attention? Do any parents with young adults need to be reminded how hard it is to keep the next generation hopeful? Does the

church really need to be reminded that we need a Savior? It is striking that in his letter, Jesus told a rich city that they were poor, and a city known for its eye treatments that they were blind, and a city known for its textiles that they were naked.

You seldom meet anyone who claims to be rich, and if you did, you don't want to meet them again. That's because in our souls we know life is not an achievement to be earned, but a grace to be received with gratitude. If you consider the most important things in your life: those you love, your gifts and talents, your health, and the breath in your lungs—which of those did you earn? The critical things that actually define our lives have all come from the hand of a Savior.

That Savior says in his letter, “Listen! I am standing at the door knocking,” which means he's not going to break the door down to get to you. He honors your agency and freedom to make choices. But if you open the door, by prayerfully paying attention to him, he will come in and offer real wealth that is refined by fire. This means he will redeem your failures, hurts, and guilt. And he says he will cloth you in white robes. Notice, not with raven black wool but the white robes of his own righteousness. And he will anoint your eyes, which had to be striking to a city who thought they had the best eye doctors. But our eyes have to be anointed by the Great Physician to see that God the Savior is with us. Then he concludes his letter by writing “Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.”

On this Pentecost Sunday we remember that the Holy Spirit gave birth to the church, and literally enflamed the disciples with passion. And the Spirit then bridged all the social diversity of those around them by freeing the disciples to speak in diverse languages they didn't know they knew. But it is also important to know what was going on before the Holy Spirit came upon them.

Pentecost happened 50 days after Passover when Jews from far and wide were in Jerusalem for the Festival of Weeks, or Festival of Harvest. They were there to give thanks for the winter grain harvest, and to remember that long ago God brought them through the 40-year desert sojourn. It was one of the three holidays when they made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Year after year, the Jews gathered to offer prayers of thanksgiving. Maybe it had become routine and rote. Maybe they weren't even paying attention to their own prayers. But they prayed.

Meanwhile the disciples of Jesus along with some women including Mary the mother of Jesus were in an upper room in prayer. In fact, we're told in Acts 1:14, they were devoted to prayer. Maybe they were praying for the power of the Holy Spirit that Jesus had promised before his ascension.

So, the Jews are gathered around their upper room in prayer to God and the disciples are inside the upper room praying to the same God. And that is when the Spirit interrupted all of these prayers, setting the disciples on fire with Good News for the waiting world. And no one was lukewarm about Jesus that day.

This is how we open the door to Jesus—we pray. If Mary, the blessed virgin mother of Jesus, has to pray to see him, clearly, so do we. Do our prayers harness divine favors for the church? Of course not. God is never leashed. Do our prayers mean we get what we want? No, and often that's a very good thing. So, do our prayers change things? Absolutely. Mostly what it changes is the person praying. Prayer is how we pay attention. It is how we keep first things first. It's how we find hope when there are so many reasons for despair, and how we continue to stay in love when there are so many opportunities to hate.

I'm not being Pollyanna saying, “It's not so bad out there.” I read the papers. I know the score. But I am saying that despair, hate, cynicism, and blame are easy. Prayer engages us in the hard work of attending to our souls so we can become a truly grateful and hopeful people who have something useful to say to the world.

So, if the church wants to avoid getting a letter from Jesus saying he's done with our lukewarm spirituality, we need to humbly pray to see Jesus is with us. The Spirit will take it from there—filling you with a passion. And who wouldn't want to be a part of passionate and hopeful community of faith? Amen.