

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
November 24, 2019

A Truly Successful Church

Revelation 3:14-22

The finance committee of First Baptist Church Laodicea had just wrapped up their budget planning meeting, and things were looking really good for next year. So far in the current fiscal year, as in previous years, giving had far exceeded expenses. If these offering trends continued, the congregation could count on another healthy surplus, a portion of which could be stashed away in another CD, to go along with all the other money the church had in savings. Mind you, there were no plans for any of this money to be invested in ministry or mission. Folks in the pews simply felt good about having it in the bank. It gave the congregation a sense of security and serenity.

When First Baptist Laodicea looks in the mirror, it sees a successful church with plenty of money, lots of property, a ton of programs, a prominent reputation, and the tallest steeple in town. But when the risen Christ looks at the church, he sees something different. Instead of abundance, he sees impoverishment. According to the living Lord, "You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, poor, blind, and naked" (v. 17). What looks to the church like a reason for pride and a sense of self-reliance, looks to Jesus like a reason for rebuke. That's why Jesus shows up at the church door.

Thankfully, with giving up so much, the church has been able to invest in a new security system, including one of those smart doorbell cameras. Now the pastor and church secretary have the option of looking on their cell phone to see who's standing at the door, and can speak to visitors remotely as well. "How may I help you?" To which Jesus replies, "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me" (v. 20). Eat with us? Maybe this visitor doesn't know that the church fellowship meal was actually last Sunday.

Actually, this visitor knows more about the church than the church knows about itself. The problem is, the church is so full of what it thinks it has and what it thinks it knows that the Lord of the church is now on the outside looking in, rather than on the inside where he wants to be. And not just on the inside, but on the inside sharing a meal with his people. Keep in mind that in that day and time, welcoming someone, particularly a stranger, into your home and sitting down to eat together was a significant act of not only hospitality, but of mutuality and intimate fellowship as well. Jesus' own ministry regularly involved table fellowship with others, especially those on the margins of society. And the early church continued Jesus' pattern of breaking bread with others from house to house. So when Jesus comes knocking on the church door in Laodicea, he doesn't just want a spot in the pew; he wants a seat at the table, where some of the closest, deepest, and most life-changing work takes place.

For one thing, the table is where gratitude gets cultivated and voiced. This Thursday, when you gather with family, friends, and loved ones, the focal point of your experience will be the table, and the food that fills it. The table is where we come to acknowledge our need, our dependence, our reliance on resources that we can't generate on our own.

In the classic western movie *Shenandoah*, Jimmy Stewart stars as Charlie Anderson, a Virginia farmer who's trying to keep his family out of the Civil War. One person summarizes the film's story this way:

With one empty place set for his dead wife and his children gathered around the supper table, Charlie begins a litany they obviously have heard before: "Now your mother wanted all of you raised as good Christians, and I might not be able to do that thorny job as well as she could, but I can do a little something about your manners."

He gestures that they all should bow their heads and continues: "Lord, we cleared this land, we plowed it, sowed it, and harvested it. We cooked the harvest. We wouldn't be here, we wouldn't be eatin', if we hadn't done it all ourselves. We worked dog-boned hard for every crumb and morsel, but we thank you just the same anyway, Lord, for the food we're about to eat. Amen."

Through the course of the movie, we see one tragedy after another strike the Anderson clan: the youngest son is mistaken for a soldier and captured, another son and his wife are murdered by marauders, and a third son is shot by an over-zealous sentry. When we next see Mr. Anderson at the supper table, there are four more empty places as he begins his ritual prayer. But this time we hear his voice quiver and break as the awful realization comes upon him that he is not in control, that he is not the master of his own destiny. His voice trails off as he finishes the words "if we hadn't done it all ourselves."

He stops, gets up, and walks away, a proud man, broken and stripped of his pride, knowing that he needs to turn to the Lord, but not yet ready to fall on his knees and ask for God's help.¹

In the church at Laodicea, a lot of the praying had gotten to where it sounded like Charlie Anderson's prayer. "Lord, we did all this, but we thank you just the same anyway." Here was a church that had become more reliant on itself than on God.

But this doesn't stop Christ from loving this congregation. In fact, he loves it so much that he shows up at their door, calling for repentance and renewed faith. They see themselves as strong and alive. But Jesus sees them as dead. And here he is at their front entrance, rightfully angry, but eager to love them back to life. To do that, he'll need to do more than just serve up a generous helping of condemnation. He'll also need to offer them spiritual resources that reinvigorate them. But these will be different from the kind of resources they've become accustomed to.

Keep in mind that the city of Laodicea had a reputation for prosperity. It was known for its financial strength, its linen and wool industry, and its advances in medicine. It produced an eye salve that was sold all over the Roman Empire. So a significant portion of Laodicea's population had grown accustomed to wealth, health, and fancy clothing. And sadly, the church had fallen right into line. It had assimilated to its culture, and blended right in. It was a rich church in a rich city. No wonder Jesus arrives calling for change.

If you're hosting a Thanksgiving gathering, you probably already have an idea of who is going to show up at your door. But if you had lived in New York City in the 1870s, some surprising characters might come knocking. On Thanksgiving Day, groups of school-aged children wore costumes and went from house to house, begging strangers to give them treats. It was called Ragamuffin Day, because the children would wear old and torn clothing as costumes. As families prepared their Thanksgiving feasts they were sometimes inundated by unexpected visitors asking for a hand-out. The children often collected fruits, baked goods, vegetables, candy, and even pennies. They were also smart enough to realize that to get the best goodies and treats, they should show up at the homes of the city's most well-to-do citizens. As it turns out, many of the wealthy elite didn't take kindly to what they

considered harassment by young costumed children, so they used their influence to call for an end to Ragamuffin Day and its parades of children.

Here was a Thanksgiving tradition where the poor came knocking at the door of the rich. The haves were on the inside and the have nots were on the outside. So which is it in today's text? In one respect, the proud and prosperous Laodicean Christians are on the inside, while the risen Jesus, the one who had been stripped of everything and nailed to a cross, is on the outside. But in another respect, the deeper truth is that the poor are on the inside and the rich one is on the outside. Though it has a lot of stuff within its walls, the Laodicean congregation is actually spiritually impoverished, while Jesus, the one on the outside, has all the wealth that church, and every church, really needs.

Reflecting on the church in Laodicea, preacher John Stott has said: "Here is welcome news for naked, blind beggars! They are poor; but Christ has gold. They are naked; but Christ has clothes. They are blind; but Christ has eyesalve. Let them no longer trust in their banks, their eyepowders and their clothing factories. Let them come to him!"²

But first, Jesus has come to them. His arrival at the door has been depicted by many artists. William Holman Hunt produced a version called *The Light of the World*. It hangs in St. Paul's Cathedral in London. Jesus wears a crown of thorns, with a halo around his head. His hands show the nail marks of his crucifixion. He wears a long white robe, like that worn by the high priest in Jewish tradition. In one hand, he carries a lantern, which provides most of the light for the scene. Night is almost here, perhaps an indication that Jesus has been standing there, knocking on the door, throughout the day. Time and opportunity are passing quickly.

As we approach Thanksgiving, we need to remember and reflect on how Jesus is knocking at the door of our church as well. He's not here to deliver a trophy for congregational achievement. Our prayer isn't, "Lord, we did all this, but we thank you just the same anyway." No, Jesus is at the entrance because we easily slip into complacency and self-reliance, and fail to be vigilant in gratitude. We start conforming to the ways of the world more than the way of Jesus. We fall into the trap of thinking that we're here to be prosperous and successful, as defined by the wider culture we inhabit. We become blind to our own state of need, and our utter dependence on the Lord, whose death and resurrection has made our life together possible in the first place.

Theologian and author D. Elton Trueblood once noted, "In our modern world, our real danger comes not from irreligion, but from mild religion."³ Whether in Laodicea or Bryans Road, religion can become mild. A congregation, and each of us who comprises it, can become lukewarm. Apathy starts to overtake appreciation. Self-satisfaction rises and gratitude declines. But then there's a knock at the door, both the door of the church and the door of your heart. It's Jesus, motivated by mercy and led by love, calling you to repentance and renewed commitment to a distinctive way of living in the world. "If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me."

¹ Summary by Alan Beck, from *Shenandoah* (Universal Pictures, 1965), rated PG, directed by Andrew V. McLaglen, written by James Lee Barrett <<https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2006/october/13975.html>>.

² Stott is quoted by Aaron Damiani, in the sermon, "A Good Friday Intervention." Preaching Today website. Accessed November 21, 2019 <<https://www.preachingtoday.com/sermons/sermons/2017/january/good-friday-intervention.html>>.

³ Quoted in *Leadership*, Vol. 7, No. 2.