

Informal moments

- If you would like to support our ministry through financial means, we have e-giving set-up on our website, or you are welcome to make use of the offering plates located near each of the doorways of the sanctuary. Thank you in advance for your generosity, and I thank you for the other expressions of generosity you share outside of your finances, such as your time, your energy, and acts of service.
- A big 'Thank you' to everyone who has helped to support our Project-22 food drive. A couple days ago, Biz was able to drop off 212 items to the Hartford Area Food Pantry, and I know a big part of that came from your generosity and support. We will continue to collect items until the end of the month, so it's not too late to help.
- We are serving dinner at the Banquet in Sioux Falls on April 22. If you are interested in helping with this either as a volunteer or to help cover the cost of the meal, please contact our office and we'll be sure to keep you in the loop. There is also a sign-up sheet and a donation basket on the table in the back.
- For those of you who have been asking, I'm happy to announce that the parsonage roof has been redone. Thank you all for your generosity and support of this project, as it will help keep my head dry during the spring storms! We have some other projects ongoing, including the fundraising for a new sound system, tuck pointing on the bell tower, and some more painting and repair work for the classrooms. As a reminder, there is a \$3000 matching fund for those building projects, so your continued generosity will go a long way towards helping to maintain this building, and keep our congregation out of debt.
- As our various programs begin to resume, including our Sunday School and Wednesday Live Out Loud program, we have been seeing an increase in our in-person attendance which has been wonderful. But we also want to be prepared for the future in case our numbers continue to grow, while also wanting to maintain some measure of physical distancing. One of the ideas on the table is to add a second worship service to our Sunday morning schedule sometime in the Fall. With that in mind, I am asking for your help by both praying for this, and by filling out a brief survey sharing your thoughts and insight. **Next week will be the last opportunity to respond, so if you haven't yet taken this survey please do so soon!**

Sharing of Joys and Concerns

Pastoral Prayer

- Coronavirus around the world
 - Doctors and nurses, as well as support staff such as cooks, janitors, housekeeping, all those assisting with the vaccine

- Covid has now passed 3 million deaths globally.

- Those in our Church and families fighting cancer, addiction, depression, and other illnesses.

- Continuing struggles in our nation amidst gun violence, even as more mass shootings take place every week.
 - Specific prayers for Indianapolis

- For the pandemic of racism in our nation.

- Minnesota in the wake of protests, riots, and police action, both in response to Daunte Wright's death, and the impending verdict in the legal case against Derek Chauvin.

- For God to challenge us and encourage us to express our faith in bold and innovative ways.

Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

Children's Moment

- It's easy to be a Chief's fan nowadays! They have a lot of good players, and they've been to the Super Bowl twice in the last couple years.
- But the best fans are the ones who cheer for their team even when they come dead last.
- That's the kind of fan we should be when it comes to Jesus. We should make Jesus the most important thing in our life, even when things are scary, or when things are going well. Sometimes it might even be unpopular to be a fan of Jesus, but we shouldn't let that stop us from learning about him, and trying to love like him.

Scripture

Revelation 2:8-11 (NRSV)

To the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These are the words of the first and the last, who was dead and came to life:

“I know your affliction and your poverty, even though you are rich. I know the slander on the part of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Beware, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison so that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have affliction. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. Whoever conquers will not be harmed by the second death.”

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

***Song**

Rise Up and Shine

Sermon

Once again, good morning friends. Today we continue our series on the letters to the seven churches of Revelation. Last week we had talked about the nature of the book of Revelation, and the great amount of symbolism and analogy that is all throughout the book. We also looked in depth at the letter addressed to the Church in Ephesus, and how they, like any church, need to have love at the forefront of everything they do or else their ministry is meaningless. Today, we forge ahead by looking at the letter addressed to the Church in Smyrna. As we do, will you please pray with me once more? O Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each and every one of our hearts be holy and pleasing to you, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

If you remember from last week, I'd mentioned that each of the letters written to these seven churches is addressed to a specific congregation of a particular city and community. And yet these writings, these warnings, praises, and advice, are meant to be read and heard in every church, including our own here today. This letter to the Church in Smyrna is no different. Thankfully, both for them and for us, the message Jesus has for this church is actually somewhat positive and encouraging. Most of the other letters all have something Jesus challenges, some issue that needs correcting or other advice to caution the community of faith. But Smyrna seems to be doing all right, all things considered. They are praised for their faithfulness and endurance.

But before we get too far into things, I want to give us a little background on the city of Smyrna itself. Ephesus, the city from last week, we know about through the letter written to the Ephesians... We know some of their history, their story, their struggles from Paul's earlier writings. But the only book of the Bible to mention Smyrna is Revelation, so most of us would know little to nothing about this community.

So let me establish some context for us. Smyrna was a somewhat prominent city. It wasn't as prosperous as Ephesus, but it was known for being a beautiful city. But above all, it was known for their faithfulness and loyalty to Rome. It was one of the oldest sites of the Imperial Cult in Asia, a cult that was committed to worshipping the Emperor of Rome as a god. In a time when being a Christian was considered illegal and worthy of persecution, such a bastion of Roman authority and law was a very dangerous place to be.

This is part of the reason why Jesus' message is one of encouragement, focusing on the church's faithfulness in the midst of hardship, suffering, and persecution. The Church in Smyrna was under constant attack, by both the Romans and the Jewish people in the city. Under the law, the Jewish faith had some measure of protection from Rome; they had been granted a particular "exception" to the law which normally required citizens to participate in the established pagan religion of Rome. The Christian faith was new enough that many within the Church still thought of themselves as Jews, and the average Roman citizen could barely see the distinction between the two. But the Jewish people did not consider the Christians to be properly Jewish, so they refused to extend the protection that the law gave the Jews to those early Churches. Without that legal protection, the Christians were under constant threat of arrest, torture, and execution.

Here in the United States, we don't really have a frame of reference when it comes to that level of public antagonism. It is really easy to be a Christian in our everyday lives. At the very least there are no laws against us being Christian. In fact, it is such an engrained part of our society and culture that when religious freedoms are

expanded to accommodate or allow for the practices and traditions of other faiths, we feel as though this is an attack on Christianity itself. But ever since our nation's creation, we can easily attend worship, in a great big building that is clearly labeled as a Christian Church. We can crank up the volume of the sermons, the songs, and the prayers as much as we like. All in all, we have it pretty good as Christians here in the United States.

Unfortunately, that isn't the case everywhere. There are over 50 countries where it is either illegal, or just plain dangerous to be a Christian or any other follower of a religion not accepted by the government or the larger, established religion. Even owning a Bible can lead to imprisonment. In such places, people have to worship very carefully, quietly, in secluded and isolated places so that they don't get arrested, harassed by their neighbors, or worse. In some cases, parents often do not teach Christianity to their children until the parents are sure that the children will not turn them or other family members in to the authorities.

According to a report from January of this year, published by a non-profit organization that tracks such things, there are 309 million Christians living in places with "very high" or "extreme" levels of persecution. For reference, that's roughly the population of the entire United States. The report further indicates that, on average, every day 13 Christians are killed for their faith, 12 Church or Christian buildings are attacked, another 12 Christians are arrested or imprisoned, and another 5 are abducted. This is the reality for many of our brother and sisters of faith. They know the hardship, the suffering, and the testing that Jesus describes in the letter to Smyrna. They experience the same kind of imprisonment, torture, and execution, the betrayal of

friends and family, simply because they believe something 'different' than the norm.

Such victims of persecution even become martyrs, demonstrating their faithfulness until death.

Friends, if you can hear, listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. What are we willing to endure for the sake of the gospel? Who or what are we faithful to, and for how long? If faithfulness means enduring hardship and living our faith no matter what others say or do, are we truly being faithful? Do we make our faith known to others in bold and innovative ways, offering words of God's grace and love, or do we hold back out of fear that we may be labeled a "Jesus freak" or a "Bible thumper"? Do we hold one another accountable, calling out the evils that we see around us? Do we challenge the authorities and people around us who allow sexism, racism, and bigotry to exist?

It can be hard to speak out to such things, especially when doing so may put a stumbling block on our careers, or drive a wedge between the relationships of our friends and family... But as Christians, we are called to be faithful to the gospel, faithful to the good news of Jesus, even to the point of death. So are we willing to die for our faith? It might be easy for us to say yes, since that's just not a potential reality here in South Dakota. So let me ask that question in another way: are we willing to live for our faith? Are we willing to be loyal to God and the One who calls us to serve the world in love? That would mean doing what we know is right, even when it makes us uncomfortable... Even if it means challenging our friends and coworkers and bosses on their inappropriate behaviors. It means living differently, because we know that our loyalty, our trust, and our faith is in something more important than anything else in this life.

This is the faithfulness of all the martyrs throughout Christian history... This includes the 20 Christians in Egypt who were killed in 2015 by ISIS. This is the faithfulness of William Wilberforce, a lawyer in England in the 1700s who fought the evils of slavery because his Christian faith convicted him that slavery is sin. This is the faithfulness of Corrie Ten Boom, who practiced a life of peace and forgiveness, even extending that forgiveness to the very Nazi officers who had murdered her family in a concentration camp. This is the faithfulness of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who challenged the beliefs of his time that African Americans were better off separated from the rest of society. His faith led him to pioneer the cause of civil rights and liberties for all people, even in the face of imprisonment, violence towards him and his family, and his eventual murder. That is the kind of faithfulness that Jesus praises, and desires for his followers.

For us to be faithful to the God who calls us to challenge sin and injustice, we need to persevere and endure the inevitable hardships of such challenges without fear. We need to be the kind of people who are willing to put aside our personal comforts and privileges in order to demonstrate God's love and grace wherever we go, no matter who we're with. It means reaching out to the poor, the outcast, the victims, and the refugees, and offering them love and grace and acceptance even when society tells us they aren't worth it, or that it may be dangerous, or that our generosity would be wasted. If we are to be the kind of the Church that is committed to serving God faithfully, that means we need to be willing to do some very uncomfortable things.

The world, filled with sin, darkness, pain, and hatred is our ministry field... And as long as that sin, that injustice, and that division still exists, then we have work to do. We

owe it to the millions of our brothers and sisters who die for their faith, and for the sake of the millions of people who haven't yet heard the greatest news in the world: that Jesus is the savior of the world, and is inviting each and every person to experience unlimited love, and abundant life.

So may we all remain faithful to the God who offers us the crown of life. Let us endure the hardships and sacrifices of seeking God above all else. Let us commit our very lives in service to God and this world, no matter what others may say. If you can hear, listen to what the Spirit is saying to you, and experience the conviction that moves us out of our complacency into declaring God's powerful, transformational work. Let's pray.

***Song**

My Faith Looks Up to Thee

UMH 452

***Benediction**