

Our Wednesday night class has been studying an overview of the Bible. After starting in Genesis, we are now in the Book of Revelation. We just completed a discussion of Jesus' letters to the seven churches in Chapters 2 and 3. Now each letter follows the same format. Jesus identifies Himself, and then depending on their ministry, He either commends their work or rebukes them for their lack of effort. As I have studied these letters over the years, I have found that there are definite lessons and warnings for the church today. These are not just letters written to churches long ago or to churches in the future; they also apply to us today and we need to seriously consider what Jesus is saying.

So this morning, let's look at one of these letters, Jesus' letter to the church at Sardis, and see what we can learn as a church. The church at Sardis was letting God down; not living up to the expectations of the Lord; not using the power of the Holy Spirit that God had made available to them. This letter is recorded in the third chapter of Revelation, the first six verses.

Read Revelation 3:1-6

Sardis was a city built on a large plateau above a river bottom which made it a great strategic location from which to defend itself from any possible attack. At one time it was a very wealthy and powerful city. However, the king got greedy and invaded Persia where he was defeated. He retreated to the stronghold of the city thinking that no one could take it. However, one of the Persian soldiers found a fault line in the rock foundation and led a group of soldiers into the city at night. The people of Sardis were so confident that they were safe and secure that there was no one on guard duty that night and the city was taken. Unfortunately, the city did not learn its lesson, and the same thing happened years later when Alexander the Great captured the city by coming in at night in a crack in the rocks while everybody was sleeping.

Like the city, the church at Sardis had become complacent and was resting on their past accomplishments and good works. Sardis had become a church in name only, a pretend church living off its past reputation. The church had become spiritually dead; it was just going through the motions which unfortunately, a lot of churches are doing today. Jesus tells the church to wake up. I wonder how many times Jesus has told churches over the years and today to wake up.

When I entered the ministry, I was required to take certain classes at Perkins School of Theology during the summer for several years. One of these classes was entitled Theology and the Practice of Ministry. Here's one of the questions that I had to answer prior to participating in the summer class. A pastor was late coming into his first worship service at his new church. He was found at the window of his study with tears flowing down his face. "What's wrong?" asked the usher. "Are you ill?" The pastor replied: "No, I was just looking out into the ally at all

those poor dirty little children playing.” The usher, dropped his head and replied: “Oh yes, I know what you mean, but you will get used it.” To which the pastor replied: “I know I will. That’s why I’m crying.” Are there things that we see every day but do not truly see? Discuss your “call” to and understanding of your ministry in light of this episode. While I spent six pages answering this thought-provoking question, in reality it applies to every one of us here this morning, since all of us are called into the ministry of the Lord, for we are all ministers.

During His ministry here on earth, Jesus gave sight to the blind and referred to Himself as the Light of the World. The Gospel of John contrasts the darkness of this world with the light that Jesus offers to all who believe in Him. Jesus came to open our eyes, not just physically, but spiritually as well. The first verse of the hymn we sang earlier states: “Open my eyes, that I may see glimpses of truth thou hast for me.” The truth is that many times we don’t see, or let’s face it, we don’t want to see what is going on around us; the needs, the hurts and the injustice that exists in our daily lives. We need Jesus to open our eyes today; to shine His light on what He wants us to see in this dark world.

If we really looked at life through the eyes of Jesus, we would see needs all around us. Our world is full of people hurting and in need of the love, mercy, and grace that we each as Christians are called to share in the name of the Lord. These needs may include both physical and spiritual needs. For example, there are those who are struggling financially just to get by each day, wondering where the next meal is coming from. Jesus stated in John 12:8 that we would always have the poor with us, and it seems like today there are more and more in this unfortunate state than ever before.

The author of the textbook that I used for that summer class on theology called these the “invisible people” – people around us each day that we don’t see; the people overlooked by society and the government that acts as if they don’t exist; the people we meet at the store or on the street, in our neighborhoods, organizations, and workplace who are hurting and have needs that we are not aware of. These are people who need a steady job; who can’t read; who are disabled; who are homeless and hungry; who have lost the will to live; and who are basically lost and forgotten. These are the children who go to bed every night hungry, or who are abused.

You know we can become so isolated in our own little world and comfort zone that we don’t see where God is calling us to help. And I will confess that I have been as guilty as anybody else of this. When I served in Grants, I was immersed into the needs of the community working almost every day at our food pantry and meeting with the people. Then Judy and I were transferred to the Northeast Heights of Albuquerque and served in an affluent church where the people with needs were invisible; we rarely went where the needs were. Fortunately, my eye sight was renewed when we were appointed to Socorro. Based on these experiences, I

have made it a habit to get outside of the walls of the church and try to learn the needs of the people in each community where we are called to serve.

In his book *On the Anvil*, Max Lucado has a chapter entitled “Eyes that never see; ears that never hear.” Max noted that complacency is the most deadly trick of the devil, not because it robs us of answers, but because it steals our questions. In other words, we get to a stage in life where we stop asking the “why” questions of life. Why are the children playing in a back alley on Sunday morning and not in Sunday School? Why are they dirty? Where are their parents? Do they have enough food and clothing? What can we do to help them? But there is a stage of life even worse than not asking the “why” questions, and that is asking the question and being content with no answer. History is jam-packed with lives that die with no purpose; lives filled with complacency and mediocrity; people who go through life and never, never make a difference.

In his book *Leadership in the Wesleyan Spirit*, Lovett Weems tells of a pastor in North Carolina who was once asked a tough question by a prospective member: “If your church closed today, would anyone miss it other than the members of the church?” Now there’s a serious question; think about that for a moment. Make a mental list of the people and groups in our community outside our congregation who would miss our church. What would they miss? Would the entire community of Rio Rancho say: “What will we do now? Where will we turn now? They were the only ones who were always there when we needed help?”

It is in answering such a question that we truly discover whether we are doing God’s will and using the full power of the Holy Spirit that was unleashed at Pentecost. This is a question that each church should be asking itself at least annually, if not more often. What if we closed our doors today? Would we be missed? Bill Bright of Campus Crusade for Christ once said that if the Holy Spirit left most churches today, ninety percent of its activities and programs would continue. What does that mean? Well, it means that most churches are only doing ten percent of what God intended them to do, like the church at Sardis; not using the full power of the Holy Spirit that God has given them. A lot of the programs at many churches are focused internally and not on the needs of the community; they are self-centered, self-serving, basically just looking out for themselves.

Mr. Weems noted that you can tell a lot about a church from its bulletins, newsletters and weekly emails. Struggling churches focus primary on routine business items such as meetings and financial issues. This is why the pastor who was watching the kids playing in the alley was crying. He knew that eventually, he would get so caught up in the day-to-day business of the church that he would soon forget the reason he was there – to make disciples for Jesus Christ, and to love and care for his neighbors. Growing churches instead emphasize what God is doing in the lives of the people around them. They focus primary on opportunities for spiritual

growth, the outreach of the church, caring for the needs of the community, and especially the personal involvement of its members in service projects.

I heard about a church that decided not to grow; can you believe that? Of course, some churches make this decision without knowing it by their inaction and complacency like Sardis, but this particular church made a deliberate effort not to grow. They had run out of room in their present building and had a limited number of parking spaces. They could not expand due to the limited space and the fact that there was no land for sale near them. Relocation was not a viable option at the time. Their space did not adequately serve their current membership. So, they decided: "We'll just stop growing!"

Because of this decision, they didn't put up any signs directing people to the church. They had no brochures and did no advertising. They didn't visit prospective members. When people said: "We would like to join the church," they would give them brochures about other churches of their denomination in the area. The only people received into membership were those who insisted and almost demanded to be members. Even the sign in front of the church had incorrect times for the worship services, though this happened by oversight, and not by plan.

Despite all this, the church continued to grow. The reason was the involvement of the church and its members for over twenty years in every imaginable aspect of mission in that community. Whether it was with people who were homeless or sick or destitute, everywhere you turned in that community, you found the people of this church. Because of that commitment, when new people moved into the community, the powerful word of mouth about this church attracted them. Despite their desire not to grow, the congregation would not give up these mission involvements. Service had become a way of life instead of a list of things to do (do you hear this)? So they frantically tried to understand: "Why is it that we cannot stop growing when we are working so hard at not growing?" The lesson for us is: if you want to thrive, serve; if you want to grow, meet the needs of those around you in acts of love and service in the name of Jesus Christ.

The story is told of a famous composer who had a rebellious son who would come in late night after night after his parents had gone to bed. But before he would go to his own room, he would go to his father's piano and slowly, as well as loudly, play a simple scale, all but the final note. Then leaving the scale unfinished, he would retire to his room. Meanwhile the father, hearing the scale minus the final note, would toss in his bed, his mind unable to relax because the scale was incomplete. Finally, the father would stumble down the stairs and hit the previous unstruck note. Only then would his mind surrender to sleep once again.

God's work will never be complete until the final note on the scale is played; until everyone has heard the Good News and accepted Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior; and until His love has

been extended to all His children through acts of service by His disciples. And despite all we are currently doing here in Rio Rancho, there is still much work to be done here. So here are the questions for you this morning: where is God calling us to serve next? What new mission projects does He want us to undertake? What does He want us to do? Who needs our help? What's going on in the back alleys of our community that God wants us to see?

Folks, there are things we see every day and then there are things we don't see. We need to see through the eyes of Jesus. May our motto be "open eyes, open ears, open hearts." Let us each make a commitment to pray that the Lord will open our eyes to the needs around us and show us where He wants us to serve next. Albert Outler, one of the scholars of the Methodist Church, said it best: "The world hears the gospel when it sees it – when Christians are clearly concerned with human existence, and cares for the needs of the less fortunate." May we each rediscover what it means to be true servants of God, and may we complete the final note of God's work here in Rio Rancho. Amen