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Five Challenges: Look Beyond a Survival Focus

Revelation 3:7-13

As I am now approaching the time of my retirement, I thought it might be helpful to focus my last ten sermons on the ten thoughts I want to leave this church with. The first five will be challenges which I want to lay before this church as you move forward, and the last five will be thoughts of comfort I want to encourage you with.

So the first challenge I want to give to this church is, *this church needs to focus on more than just surviving!* With our strong financial reserves, our central location and this attractive space, this church has too much going for it, to do that. We need to focus on making a real difference for Christ in our community and our world.

What is more, it has been shown that churches that do focus mainly on their own survival as a church, most often *don't!* A number of years ago American Baptist Daniel Buttry wrote a book called, *Bringing Your Church Back to Life: Beyond Survival Mentality*. He writes about how many churches when they age develop a survival mentality where the central and even *only* issue of the church is “*How do we survive as a church?*” This attitude neither helps them in their mission, nor even in their survival. Buttry says that for such a church, “Attracting new members is like trying to sign people up for a cruise with the premise, ‘We don’t want to sink’.”

At The Community Church of Issaquah, we are not trying to recruit people to board a sinking ship. We are after people who want to be part of a church that is *going somewhere!* I don’t know *all* God is calling our church to do and be in the years to come – discerning that will be part of what the pastor who takes over after I am retired will need to help the church do. However, let me say I do believe this church has a mission beyond mere survival that God wants it to perform here in this community.

In the book of Revelation, when Christ wanted to refer to the mission individual churches had in their community, he referred to their “lampstand.” Since in Matthew 5:16 Jesus calls us to “let our light shine before others”, calling a church’s witness their “lampstand” in a natural image to use. But speaking through John, God says in our passage that churches that were not being faithful risked having their lampstand taken away. The church of Ephesus he told to repent or he would “remove their lampstand from its place.” But while there it is presented as a judgment of God, in another sense it’s a natural result: *a church that does not send out the light of Christ’s love and grace into the world does not need a lampstand!*

Let’s look a little closer at this passage from Revelation to see what it says about the kind of church we are called to be.

We see in our Scripture a contrast between two styles of churches. We must choose which style we want our church to be. One is the church at Philadelphia, not Pennsylvania of course, but in what was then Asia Minor. Of that church, the spirit of Christ says, "I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut." The other church is the church at Laodicea. The picture there is much different. There Christ sees a closed door which he is persistently trying to open—"Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come into you and eat with you, and you with me."

Open door or closed door? -- Each church must decide which it will be. As we look at this Scripture, I see three main areas which define the difference between these two kinds of churches.

First of all, a church with an open door is a church which believes in God's power to use them. Notice I did not say, "believes in their own power." The spirit of Christ says to the church of Philadelphia in the second part of verse 8, "I know you have but little power, and you have kept my word and have not denied my name." They had little power in the worldly sense, but drew on the power of God's promises.

The church of Philadelphia was the epitome of what a church like ours needs to be. We know we have a problem with limited resources in a worldly sense. While our financial reserves are strong, we have limited income, and our reserves will gradually dwindle. We don't have as many people as we need to handle volunteer tasks. Many of our people are older and don't have the energy to do some of what needs to be done. We don't have power as the world knows it. However, neither did the church at Philadelphia, and the witness of the church at Philadelphia rings out across time because they listened to God's word and responded, relying on God's power. We don't know what all of their challenges were, but we know Christ says of them in verse 10, that they have "kept his word of patient endurance." They didn't let their lack of resources keep them from being God's people. They didn't let the challenges of a hostile world keep them from being God's people. They knew their own power was inadequate, but they also knew God's power was great, and they relied on that power.

In contrast, the church of Laodicea had tremendous worldly resources. Laodicea was a banking center, and was also famous for its textile industry and for its medical school, which was known for making Phrygian powder, used in the making of eye salve. The city was so proud of its financial independence that when it had an earthquake in 60 A.D., it refused the customary imperial aid to restore the damage. The church in that city apparently took the same view of the resources God provides—"No thanks! We can do it on our own!" They were the "megachurch" of their day. The spirit of Christ says of them in verse 17, "For you say, 'I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.' You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked." It is significant that he is saying to a church in a city famous for eye salve that they are blind; and to a church famous for their textiles that they are naked. This church was condemned not because of its size or wealth, but because of its arrogance. The people there thought they didn't need anyone. If there is one thing the people of a small church like the Community Church of Issaquah know, it is that we need God. We cannot face the challenges we face on our own. It is only when you recognize your need for God that God's power can be released, and when God's power is released, then there is no obstacle which cannot be overcome.

A second area of difference between these two churches in Revelation surrounded their view of mission. The church at Laodicea, though powerful in a worldly way, had no passion for its mission. It wasn't that this church was doing terrible things. It was just that they were lukewarm. They wouldn't stick their neck out for anything. Verses 15-16 say, "I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth." People here in the northwest drink a lot of coffee. Some like straight coffee and some like espressos. Some swear by Starbucks, and some can't stand it. Some people drink it hot, and some people drink iced coffee or Frappuccino's. But one way I have found very few people like coffee is lukewarm! So it is with churches. The lukewarm church is the church that says mediocre is good enough. It's the one that says it's enough if we can get by and survive—it's enough if we can hold worship each Sunday morning. But the lukewarm church is destined to die.

To avoid being a lukewarm church, we must focus on our mission. Part of that means we need to commit ourselves to be personal evangelists. That means going up to people we see moving into our neighborhood and inviting them to church. That means sharing our faith with the people we know in the community. That means taking the risk of reaching out to people when we know we could be rejected. Most people who come to a church for the first time come because a layperson invited them, and that requires risk! That is the kind of risk which is necessary to keep our light shining. Again, Jesus said, "You don't light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house"—that is what is meant by a church's "lampstand."

But even beyond this personal witnessing, we have a mission here in this community! If a church is to be in a community it should make a difference in that community. At the Community Church of Issaquah, we have been doing that since our birth as a church – through Issaquah Community Services, Tent City, the Issaquah Food Bank, the Union Gospel Mission, The Sophia Way, Compassion House, and much more. Again, what form this takes in the future is something that needs to be done under the leadership of the pastor who succeeds me. But if we are to keep our lampstand, it has to be there.

A final difference between these two churches of Revelation was their attitude toward open doors. The most important thing about a church having an open door is the doors that it allows that church to open for others. Many churches close their doors to *this* kind of person or *that* kind of person. "Well, we just want to open our doors to the *best* people – Microsoft executives, and young, well-to-do families with children, and vibrant college students who will attract other vibrant college students – Lord we will open our doors to all of those you want to send. But, please Lord, no homeless people. And no more people with *problems* – I mean, we have enough of those!" Maybe the church as Laodicea was that kind of church. But God wants to set an open door before *all* of his children, an open door to hope and life. When a church closes a door to a person, they make it harder for God to open a door he wants open.

Many people have closed the door to God in their life. The passage from Revelation 3:20 has been made famous by a painting of Jesus knocking at the heart's door. An important detail of the painting is that there is no outside knob or handle on the door so that Jesus

can open it from the outside. It can only be opened from the inside by one willing to let Christ come in. But a lot of people keep the door closed. Some have closed the door to God because there is a trauma back there in their past. Maybe their loved one died when they shouldn't have. And in anger and hurt they have closed doors, when in truth what they want more than anything else in the world is for someone to come through that door and touch them.

While a church cannot open the door for them, a church can be a place which helps people open that door by loving them and accepting them. Can this church be a church that is about helping people re-open doors in their life – doors to hope and doors to God?

Or does this church simply want to get by? Have a church to come to in order to hear some good music on Sunday morning. Have someone to eat potlucks with. Not doing anything terribly bad, but not straining ourselves too much to reach out either. Being lukewarm. I would challenge this church to aspire to the standards of the church at Philadelphia!