

Dear friends in Christ,

St. Paul Lutheran Church is much more than just this building and the 5 acres of land on which it is built. It is people gathered around the Word of God. This is clearly indicated by the very word “church”, as it is used in the Bible and as it is derived from the Greek word “Ekklesia,” which is really a combination of two Greek words “ek,” which means “out of” and “kalew” which means “to call.” And so technically and scripturally speaking the word “church” means “the called out ones” referring to those whom God, in his grace, has called out of the darkness of sin and has called into his kingdom, which offers the forgiveness of sins, life and salvation.

Today, we are beginning a sermon series in which we are going to examine our lives in the church as the “called out ones” of God, to see if we are living up to our calling as God’s children, and how, with the help and guidance of God, we can improve the spiritual life and growth of our church.

The texts that we will use for our sermon series will be the seven letters addressed to seven different churches in Asia Minor, recorded for us in Revelation chapters 2 and 3. These are unique letters since they were dictated by Jesus himself and recorded by the Apostle John. Normally a letter is something that is private in nature, written by one individual to another. And yet in each case as Jesus closes these seven letters that we will be looking at, he says, **“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”** And so Jesus indicates that these special letters written to specific congregations with their particular problems and needs, are also to be applied to the church at large. We are invited and urged to apply the content of each of these letters to our own church and to our own individual lives.

The first of these seven letters was written to the church at Ephesus, and we will consider it under the theme: **“The Church that Lost Its First Love.”**

The Lord begins this letter by saying, **“To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands.”** In this first letter, Jesus identifies himself as the one who is walking among the seven golden lampstands, and he is holding the seven stars in his right hand. Jesus explains in the words before our text, that the seven golden lampstands refer to these seven churches to whom he is speaking and the seven stars are the pastors or spiritual leaders of these churches. And so he presents to us a very comforting thought that the Lord himself is ever present in his church and he has promised, **“Where two or three gather in my name there am I with them.”** And so even today as we gather here for worship, we can be assured of the Lord’s presence, and of his power and blessing through the Word.

The one expression that Jesus uses over and over again as he begins each of these seven letters is: **“I know your deeds.”** He knows what is going on in the church, in our church, in the lives of our individual people, and so it is important that we not try to hide what we are doing or not doing, because it is all as plain as day to him. This ought to prompt all of us to do a careful examination of ourselves.

In the first part of this letter, Jesus had some wonderful things to say about the church at Ephesus, **“I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.”** In so many respects they sound like the ideal congregation. They were an active, involved and doing church. There were people in the congregation who could be counted on to get the job done. They didn’t wait around for others to do things, rather each in their own way, using their particular talents, got to work. And Jesus commended that spirit.

They were also an orthodox church, that is, they were a church that considered the teaching and preaching of the pure Word of God to be of the utmost importance. They practiced discipline when their members were living in open and unrepentant sin, and they required their pastors to teach and preach the Word, the whole Word and nothing but the Word.

Make no mistake about it, it wasn’t an easy thing to become and remain a Christian in Ephesus, for besides being a thriving trade center where the sins of the East met the vices of the West, and where money was one of the false gods that people worshipped the most, Ephesus was also the headquarters for the worship of the heathen goddess Diana, whose appeal was practicing illicit sexual behavior in the name of religion. It is said that there were 1,000 prostitutes who carried out their trade in the Temple of Diana in the name of religion.

In the face of such trial and temptations, the Christians at Ephesus, though in the minority, remained strong and faithful, and separated themselves from these sinful practices. And so in many things the Lord found reason to praise this church at Ephesus, just as God would find a number of things in our church that would be pleasing and acceptable to Him. Our church places the

highest priority on teaching and preaching the pure Word of God. I'm sure you would be able to detect it rather quickly if that wasn't the case. We believe and teach that the entire Bible is the inspired and inerrant Word of God. And we have people in our midst who are ready and willing workers.

But Jesus continues in our text with a very serious concern, one that we also need to hear and apply to our church and to our individual lives, **“Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love.”** Now, in certain respects the church at Ephesus seemed to be just as active as ever. People were still going to church. They were still supporting the work of the church with their offerings. They hadn't been led astray into heresy. Nor had they given themselves over to gross and shameful sins. But here was the problem. The spirit and zeal of their first and greatest love for Christ was beginning to fade in the hearts of the people, so that in many ways their actions and activities in the church were dead works, they were simply going through the motions.

And this can so easily happen in any church. We can build fine buildings, we can maintain beautiful landscaping, we can provide all kinds of activities, we can seem to be growing in numbers, we can listen to orthodox sermons, we can say and sing all the right words at the right time, but it means nothing, it is empty worship, and it is displeasing to God if it all doesn't flow out of love for Christ and zeal for his Word.

So what is this first love really like? For the sake of illustration, we can compare it to a young man and woman who fall in love and plan to get married. When such love strikes the heart, he can't think of anyone but her, and she can't think of anyone but him. If possible he calls her several times a day to whisper sweet nothings into her ear. He buys her gifts he really can't afford. He is excited by the sound of her voice and the touch of her hand. First love is very exciting. But after they have been married for a while something begins to happen. He doesn't have time to call her anymore during the day. Instead of longing for the touch of her hand, he longs for the feel of a golf club or a fishing rod in his hand. Instead of gazing into her eyes for hours, he would rather watch the football game.

And that's what also can happen in the Christian's life. We begin to forget what it was first like when we came to know Jesus, the feeling of having a burden of guilt and shame removed from our shoulders when we learned how Christ has forgiven all of our sins. And this loss of first love doesn't happen overnight; rather it happens slowly over months and years if we don't check it. Your Bible starts gathering dust. Your prayers are less and less frequent. You may still go to church but not as eagerly or regularly as before. You hope that church doesn't ask you to do anything. Your offerings are mechanically placed in the offering plate rather than being brought in a spirit of love and sacrifice. You aren't concerned about bringing people with you to church to hear about Jesus, you let the pastor and elders worry about such things.

So what causes a Christian to begin to lose their first love? I suppose there are many answers to that question, you will have to search your own heart to find the answer for yourself. But there is one answer that is often common for all of us, neglect of God's Word. Maybe you have to travel a distance to get to church, and the devil uses that as a wedge to keep you from coming at times. Some take a new job that keeps them from hearing the Word every Sunday and receiving the Lord's Supper often, and they think it won't affect their faith life, but slowly and surely it does. Some get caught up in social circles and hanging out with friends that keep them up late on Saturday night and in bed on Sunday morning. Some feel they have been slighted, or wronged, or overlooked by the pastor or other members, which can sometimes happen inadvertently, and so they stay away, and their love for Christ grows cold, thinking that by doing this they are getting back at others when they are only hurting themselves. Others begin to think the Christian life is too restrictive, they want more freedom, without realizing that they are once again enslaving themselves under the yoke of sin. And so it goes.

Is this letter to the Ephesians, speaking to you this morning? Have you noticed a cooling off toward God and his Word? Is the Christian life becoming more and more of a Sunday morning business instead of a daily walk with Christ? If you have lost your first love for Christ or feel it is slipping away, Jesus has something very important to say to you. **“Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first.”** Remember, think about what God has promised you through faith in Christ, remember the vow of faithfulness you once spoke at your confirmation, realize what you will lose eternally if you ever lose Christ. And then repent, return to God's Word, retrace your steps to his altar, and revive your love for him. Confess your sin and Christ will restore in your heart the joy of salvation.

Finally, Jesus closes his letter to us this morning with a word of judgment and a word of promise. He says, **“If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.”** The loss of the lampstand, of course, means the loss of God's Word which alone can show us the way of salvation. But listen also to our Lord's promise, **“To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.”** God help us to overcome any and every temptation that would cause our love for Christ to grow cold, and with the help of the Holy Spirit to regain and retain our first love for Christ, until that day when our love can wax and wane no more, but will become fixed forever in heaven. Amen.