

Letters to the Churches, Pt. 2
Remember Your First Love
Revelation 2: 1-7

**First Presbyterian Church
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It's important to remember our love stories, They remind us who we are and why we carry on amidst the trials of a world such as this.

- Remember what a cute puppy he was? A little ball of black fur. Irresistible. He came right over to you. And we picked him out of the litter because he seemed to have such personality. That's important to remember when your 90lb two year old lab is caught shredding your new couch.
- C.S. Lewis described the mystery of friendship, It occurs in an instant of discovery. "Friendship is born at that moment when one person says to another, 'What? You too? I thought I was the only one.'" It's good to recall those days when first conversations went so late into the night. The hours passed without notice. The words flowed without hesitation. You realized, "I'm not alone and I'm not crazy."
- Can you still find the moment you fell in love? Remember the night we walked under the arbor to the big fountain? And looked at each other fully and deeply until we melted into each other's arms? I dreamed of you all night. I couldn't wait to see you again. The next day I couldn't even think straight, My mind, my skin, my soul was lit up with you. Nothing else seemed to matter.
- And once upon a time I came awake to Jesus, All at once I had released myself to him, And the weight of my sins was lifted. And the Scriptures came alive to me, as if every word were written for me. And I wanted to pray and sing. Even the simplest song moved me with worship, I wanted to talk about the Lord all day long. I wanted to learn to do his will and please him in everything. He totally had my heart.

First love is wonderful, It fills up your senses. It changes the way you look at everything. You've got a secret tucked in your heart. And you want to tell it. No one could talk you out of it. This is just the greatest.

And first love has to temper down into some sort of normal life. Some sense of balance has to return, First love feels like a sprint: I'd give it all for this moment and count it a fair trade. But long, enduring love is a marathon. You can't sprint; you have to pace. It has to be this way. And therein lies the danger. The potential for drift. Of taking for granted. Of not trying very hard and forgetting why you try at all.

To the angel of the church of Ephesus, Jesus spoke encouraging words. He indicated that this church had an enduring, steady, faithful love for him. He wrote, "I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, You cannot bear with those who do evil, You have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not: you have shown them to be false. You are bearing up for my name's sake." In other words, your service is strong. You can discern truth from error and you don't let false teaching about me slip into your fellowship. You keep on despite being a tiny minority in a loud, debaucherous culture. I'm proud of your faithfulness."

That's all good, Yet it sounds a bit like a personnel review. You get the good news first, "Hey, you're a steady worker. You're honest. You're a team player. You show up where you're supposed to. You stick to the rules and you hold to our company's mission." Great, Somehow, though, I feel like this can't be all.

And then comes the dreaded word. "But." What follows is going to be the only thing you remember for quite a while. The "but" will erase all the complements. This will be the only thing that matters until you've settled the critique and really heard the good stuff that came first.

"But this I have against you," says Jesus. "You have abandoned the love you had at first love." Stab, That's a reality slap, The flame has died to a flicker. And he knows it. "You're still performing but the passion has banished. I don't feel it from you anymore. We've got a failure of ardor, What happened to your 'want to'?" There's no denying it when it's exposed. You can't fake passionate love forever, or even for long, The Lord knows it. We know it. First love fades.

Now that they've been on a break for several months, I've finally gotten free of my obsession with the show *This is Us*, I've stopped worrying about the characters every day, But this week I recalled the episode where the main character's best friend let him know he and his wife were getting a divorce. This was shocking, even threatening news. What happened? Miguel explained the entire dissolution of the relationship with a simple, devastating example. Every day

of their marriage, Miguel got up first and made coffee for his wife. Splash of milk, two sugars. He put the cup on her bedside table. Every day for years. Then one morning, Miguel just didn't do it. He didn't bring Shelly coffee, And she didn't notice, On that day they realized they had stopped fighting to keep the passion in their marriage. There was no affair, no great argument. They just lost their connection to first love and retired from trying, It happens. In marriages. In friendships. At work. And with the Lord.

The gospel news is that the Lord Jesus remains passionate for his bride, the church. He pursues us even when we have gone into drift mode. His words are strong. They drip with passion. They arise from love. "Remember therefore from where you have fallen. Repent. And do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent." He won't let us go without a fight,

The church had lost its first love. But Jesus had a three-word prescription for restoring faded passion. *Remember. Repent. Do.* *Do* what you used to do when your heart was aflame, *Repent*, which means make a choice to change your mind about me. You do that by *remembering* what we once had, And before long as remember, repent and do, the flickering embers will fan into flame.

Recently I talked with a young man who was worried he was losing his love for Christ. He felt the drift. But he hadn't forgotten what he once had. "At camp it all seemed so real, We were all close to Jesus, We loved to worship. To pray together. To read the Bible. I came home excited about Jesus, But after a few months, I stopped feeling it, What happened? Is there anything I can do? I mean I have a lot of questions and sometimes I wonder if any of this is true."

As gently as I could I tried to ask a few diagnostic questions, Where are you reading in the Bible these days? "Well, I'm not really reading my Bible a whole lot. I got so busy that I haven't picked it up very much." Yeah, I get that, life is pretty busy. So, when do you usually say your prayers? At night or in the morning? "Well, that's just it, I fall asleep really fast at night, and then I wake up late and I have to hurry. So mainly I'm praying before a test or when something comes up that worries me." Yeah, yeah I can see that, So I see you at church. Which parts of worship do you find most meaningful? "I like church. But my mind is really busy. And I get kind of distracted. I don't always pay attention during the songs unless I really like them. And, no offense, but sometimes my mind wanders during your sermon." I'm not offended. That happens to me when I listen to sermons too. One more question, what kind of things are you doing in your life to serve Jesus and

care for his little ones? “Oh, I help out here and there. I try to be friendly to folks at church, but like I said, I’m just really busy.”

By that time, I didn’t really have to say anything more. He understood where the drift comes in, He realized you can’t have a *relationship* if you don’t *relate*. I gave him some good Scriptures to read and a devotional book to take him deeper into his identity in Christ. He knew he was facing a struggle mainly with himself, It just happens. And it’s hard.

Remember from where you have fallen says Jesus. And change your mind. That word “*repent*” means to elevate your mind. Lift your thoughts above where you are now so that you can see more and then know how to change, Capture the higher vision. Then you can plan to *do* more the things that keep you close and passionate. Remember. Repent. Do.

It all begins with remembering, Now if you don’t have a love story with Jesus to remember, you might want to do some serious pondering, Normal Christian experience is to have a time where you come awake to Jesus and fall in love with him, It may be quiet or explosive, but you know it’s real. If you’ve never experienced that, you may not have let Jesus into your heart. Talk to a pastor or an elder about that. We can help you find your true love in Christ.

For the rest of us, we can go back to the days when we came awake and fell in love with Christ. This might be to the very first moments of conversion. Or to a time of revival when your heart found its flame again. It might be decades ago or just a few months.

I remembered this week how mightily I struggled at age 14 to surrender my life to Christ, Friends urged me. My own soul longed to go from the outside to the inside with Jesus, But for months I just couldn’t do it. Then, the last day of camp, when the lead counselor gave an invitation, all of a sudden I could, I released. He came within. Or he came within me and then I released, Who can know the order of that mystery? But I know what happened. Joy filled me, Relief covered me. The Scriptures came alive to me. A closed book became a personal love letter to me. And I wanted to sing. All the time. The simplest camp song brought me right into praise. *Do Lord, oh do Lord, or do you remember me? I took Jesus as my Savior you take him too. Look away beyond the blue.* The simplest words. They were a golden love song for me. I sang them on a bike ride this week and felt again the wonder of first love.

Then I remembered how Jesus brought me back to himself when I was a pastor in my late thirties, heading for drift, First he captured my heart again, Oh I had become so sophisticated with all my training, My friend Steve brought me to a Promise Keepers event for pastors. I looked down my nose at these other goobers with their big Bibles and even bigger smiles. The first night I sat at the top row of the upper deck of the Georgia Dome. I ain't doin' this praise music. Two days later I was on the first row. Sinking to my knees. Surrendering my life again. Crying for the relief of it, And standing to sing with all my heart, *Lord, I lift your name on high. Lord I love to sing your praises. I'm so glad you're in my life. I'm so glad you came to save me.* Boom. Cracked heart. First love returned. Joy.

The Lord baptized my heart so the same year he could baptize my mind, I met theologians who loved Jesus and had devoted their lives to expressing the beauty of the Savior. They showed me how the whole story of salvation fits together in one magnificent whole tapestry. They wrote with a depth and a height that exceeded all the literature and philosophy I had ever studied. And for almost a quarter century I have joined them on a quest. To dive for pearls in the deepest waters, And bring them back up to the surface to show them to anyone who will listen. I read with my mind in eager anticipation of the unexpected moment when the Lord will, like a wrestler, flip me upside down from head to heart as my soul cries out for his beauty,

That's my preferred love language. *Words of affirmation*, I study and I praise to keep love bright. Your favorite love language may well be different. Truthfully, we're called to love Christ in all these ways,

For some, you give and receive love most happily through *gifts*. Wonderful, Thanksgiving receives the blessings of life as a love gift from God. So simple but so effective: count your blessings. Give thanks for each wondrous gift all the time, And give back, When we're in North Carolina, Rhonda and I love to go to the Sharing House and drop off a check as an act of thanks, We receive the beauty of those mountains trying to love back those who live in the beauty but yet lack necessities.

Some people prefer the love language of *touch*, You find your first love when you go and put your hands on Jesus. How do you do that? When you touch his little ones and his loved ones. I feel my love for Christ when I give a hug to a student at Gardere. Or when I can take someone's hands and pray with them, Or even bop some church kid on the back so he knows I see him, In Louisiana, people

hug, and we can receive the love of Christ when we let in what just comes naturally around here. We touch Christ in touching each other in his name.

Some people prefer *acts of service* to receive and give love, Anything that we do for another can be a gift of love unto the Lord. *I do this for you Lord, in gratitude for all you've done for me*, You can say that when you wash a dish, run an errand, take a shift for a coworker, cover someone's mistake, drop off a meal, change a lightbulb or do home communion. By repenting—elevating your mind—each act can be a gift to the Lord. And therefore a channel back to first love.

Finally, of course, is the love language that's hardest to express in these busy days. *Time spent*, Time to be in Christ's presence, No phone. No computer. No lists, You can sit. Or you can be walking. Or you can ride a bike. Or you can lie on your bed. But you give the gift of this time to say, "Lord Jesus, here I am. I am yours, I am with you and I know you are with me. I await your pleasure." Sure, maybe you read a story of Jesus and imagine yourself there. Maybe you read aloud some psalms and ride the words up to his presence. Maybe you list some thanks or describe the beauty of the Lord back to him in praise. But the point is, you are with him. Just with him. Maybe you remember your story of first love, or renewed love, and open a channel to those days, You do what you did at first, when you couldn't get enough. And over time, the flame of love will burn brightly again.

"You're a great church," said Jesus to the Ephesians, "But. I have this against you. You have abandoned the love you had at first. *Remember*. Remember from where you have fallen. *Repent*. And *do* the works you did at first. For I have so much more for you: I want to take you all the way back to the original purpose of mankind. To be in the garden of paradise with me and one another. To eat of the tree of life. To be filled with everlasting life and to be together into eternity. Remember your first love."