

Keeping Faith

Revelation 2: 12-17

**First Presbyterian Church
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We're following the letters Christ spoke to the seven churches in the book of Revelation. Today we see that Jesus writes to the church at Pergamum. That's a place I never thought much about. But it's another city in the area that used to be called Roman Asia, but now known as Turkey. Pergamum was a culturally rich city. They had one of the greatest libraries in the world. They had a vibrant, if creepy healing center. I say creepy because part of your treatment included sleeping in a room of snakes! They had a great amphitheater carved into a hillside. And they had temples. Tons of temples. There was a temple for the Greek god Zeus and a temple to the spirit of Rome. There was a temple to the emperor Caesar Augustus and the goddess Athena. Shortly after Revelation was written, the city of Pergamum erected a temple to the emperor Trajan which included an inscription describing the emperor as "the lord of the land and sea." This was a religious town. But don't let that give you the impression that the people were particularly holy. Pagan life included a lot of misdirected worship, destructive sex and dissipation.

So the letter begins, "I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is." The church of Jesus Christ in Pergamum was in the middle of a city under the thumb of Satan. What does that mean? Do we think the city had a bunch of Satanists? People who openly worshipped evil? No, our adversary is much cleverer than that. Satan always comes in disguise as something good, something affirming, something desirable. Traditionally, God's people have understood Satan to be a fallen angel. Once he was Lucifer, an angel of light, who desired to take the throne of God. Lucifer wanted to be worshipped. He wanted to be exalted as the center, and so he fell from heaven. Now he is the active power that seeks to wreak havoc on all the good God creates. So they he may tantalize with what looks fulfilling, the word "Satan" means accuser. The "devil" means an adversary, a shredder, a liar and a destroyer.

How are we to understand this? What does this look like today? In essence, Satan proffers the attempts to live without needing or wanting or worshipping the

one true God. I am under the grip of Satan whenever I think, “I am enough in myself. I am glorious. I am the point. I can be enough for me. I can get the world to give me all I want and need, by my own wits or prowess.”

Now this assertion of Self comes in many forms. Cities can take on personalities where people pursuing the same idolatry have come together. Ask people how the great Self makes itself known in New York and you’ll get two main answers. One is money. It’s the power center for finance and people pursuing money as an end in itself because it makes us independent, powerful and complete. The second is art. Artistic expression as sufficient in itself to give meaning to life. Ask the personality of Washington DC and immediately people say political power. You can feel the pomposity on elevators. You can detect the hubris wherever you go. New Orleans is easy too. We market it with “Let the good times roll. What happens in NOLA stays in NOLA. Come here and do what you want.”

What fascinates me is that Christ plants his church right exactly where the throne of Satan is. He did it in Pergamum. He still does it. Who would have ever thought that in 2018 the most vibrant Presbyterian Church in the nation would be in the heart of Manhattan? But Redeemer Church now pulses throughout that city and into the world. Kasr El Dohara Church is even more vibrant: it’s located one block from Tahrir Square in Cairo. Mark Dever brings in thousands for two hours of solid Biblical teaching every Sunday: in Washington DC. And what do you know, we’re planting the Church of the Resurrection in the lower garden district of New Orleans. Jesus has no hesitation to locate his people right where the great Self of human pride seems strongest. He even planted a church here!

In his letter, Christ praised this little church for holding fast to his name. The church in Pergamum did not deny their faith in Christ even after one of their own was martyred. Knowing it could cost them social status, economic power and even life itself, the Pergamum church held fast. In the very place where the emperor was worshipped as the savior of the world and the ruler of the earth, the most basic Christian affirmation was simply this, “Jesus is Lord.” Now when you think about what the name Jesus means, you see how this causes such conflict. Jesus means “The LORD I AM saves.” The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God who intervened in the history of a tiny nation, he alone saves. And Jesus saves because he is the LORD. He is God come to us as a man. He is the eternal God shining on us through the face of a man. If Jesus is LORD, then I am not. If he is Savior, then to know him I have to admit that I cannot save myself. I cannot fulfill my own life by realizing what I think are my dreams. I cannot create my own destiny and escape death or accident or suffering. I cannot do enough good to cover over the

wrong I have done. I cannot manufacture sufficient joy to keep me from despair. I cannot fill in the emptiness in the center of me with more of myself.

Realizing this truth sets us up in direct conflict with the prevailing narrative of our culture. Because we eat, sleep and breathe the story that I have the right to be whatever I want to be. And that only by exercising that right can I be happy, and I *must* be happy. And woe to you if you try to stop me! The assertion of the right of the Self to be what it wants to be is in fundamental opposition to the declaration that Jesus is Lord. From singing with Disney princesses to comparing stacks of money, human beings are bustling factories of putting forward ourselves as the reason for everything. And it just won't work.

So many people I know and like have told me to watch the movie *The Greatest Showman*. So I finally did. It's a musical based on the circus promoter P.T. Barnum and his rags to riches to rags to riches again story. Sure, it was fun. The acrobatic dance numbers were spectacular. But I have to say at one point I just started to giggle. The earnestness of the self-exaltation got so absurd as to be funny. One song called "This is Me" starts slowly and builds to a rousing, angry blast of a conclusion. Listen to some of the lyrics,

I won't let them break me down to dust
I know that there's a place for us
For we are glorious...
I know that I deserve your love
Cause there's nothing I'm not worthy of
When the sharpest words wanna cut me down
I'm gonna send a flood, gonna drown them out
This is brave, this is proof
This is who I'm meant to be, this is me!

As a strategy for overcoming an inner sense of rejection, I have to say this is not ever going to work. When you feel rejected and excluded is the answer to shout all the louder, "We are glorious! I deserve love. There's nothing I'm not worthy of! This is me! Me me me!" The song was such a perfect illustration of the rage running through our culture. Terrific energy fueled by anger spinning around an inner core of nothingness. This is the essence of idolatry. This is Satan's big lie proclaimed without a filter. The deception is disguised only by the energy of the singers and dancers. An energy that will inevitably exhaust itself when the music stops and the curtains close. It leads to despair.

Is this not what Lucifer said before he fell from heaven: I am glorious! I deserve. There's nothing I'm not worthy of. This is me." This is the message guaranteed to send us spiraling away from the God who made us and loves us and longs to restore us.

In her book *The Drama of the Gifted Child*, psychologist Alice Miller asks the question, "Why are so many of the most successful people plagued by feelings of emptiness and alienation?" She describes the pattern whereby a destructive trade occurred in our lives: admiration for performance was substituted for deep accepting love. We got the two confused. She describes high achievers who are everywhere admired and *need* this admiration. "Such a one must excel brilliantly in everything he or she undertakes and indeed does so. But woe to them if beauty, cleverness or talents should fail, for then depression is sure to follow...The collapse of self-esteem in a [high achiever] will show how precariously that self-esteem has been hanging in the air....These [high achievers] will seek insatiably for admiration, of which they can never get enough because admiration is not the same thing as love."¹

Frankly I don't know what she's talking about, do you? ☺ What frightens me most, though, is that the substitution of admiration for love, of performance for acceptance, is not just out there in the big, bad world. It's in here. In me. In my parenting. In my church leadership. In the way I compose my thoughts. We feel the pressure of it. We have to keep up. We have to drive our kids to keep up. And so we end up driving, literally, all the time. Driving everywhere. Running around in order to fulfill what today is the single biggest marker of being a good parent: am I watching and admiring while my child performs? For I am terrified if I stop watching, they will not be admired and they will just wilt away. The Disney princess and the hero on the field, the spectacular science project and the most expensive adventure camp: we buy it all, and it's exhausting us. We also buy all the adult versions. And we are running, spinning, leaping and spending to keep up. Then we wonder how we tumble into affairs and addictions and all the other excesses these gods demand. If we are spinning around an inner core of emptiness, it will never, ever work. We will never do enough to feel admired enough.

Once again the word from Jesus is to *repent*. And again we must rescue "repent" from altar calls and tent revivals. At its roots, repent means to elevate your mind to something higher. To elevate our imaginations to see Christ in a way that will change us. Jesus actually makes three promises to the church at Pergamum. And all three undercut the throne of Satan, the great Self on the throne. For they go straight to the heart of our deepest longings.

First he promises “To the one who conquers [idolatry], I will give some of the hidden manna.” When God’s people wandered in the desert wilderness, where there was no food, he provided for them. Every morning on the ground they found a bread like substance called *manna*. It gave them enough strength for the day ahead. You couldn’t horde it or keep it. It was always just enough for the need. When Jesus arrived, he said that he himself is the true manna. He is the bread of heaven, the one who satisfies our deepest inner hunger. For he gives us accepting, welcoming, satisfying love. The God who made us embraces us in Christ. And so week by week, he gives that love to us under the sign of bread, the bread of the Lord’s Supper. He gives us this manna as we draw in faith on him, looking away from ourselves to Christ as the source of acceptance.

Second he promises those who stay true a *white stone*. That’s weird. Til we realize what white stones were used for. When athletic games were held, great banquets for the wealthy followed. White stones were given to the victors so they could come join the parties. White stones meant access to the feast. White stones were also used in courts of law. If you were found not guilty, the judge would put forth a white stone. The stones meant acquittal. Acquittal: your sins are forgiven and you are free. Access: you can come into the royal party. Jesus invites us into his royal presence because he has forgiven us sins. He reconnects us to the God who made us.

Third, he gives us a *new name* that is written on that white stone. This means that who we most deeply are is written right into his work of forgiveness and acceptance. This sounds like baptism: the minister names our name and then enfolds us into the name of the Father, Son and Spirit. You are included! This letter seems to say that the name is secret, known only to the recipient. This speaks of a deep intimacy. A special relationship. We can’t say what your name is, but from the Scriptures we know the kinds of names God likes to give his people. You will be called, Sought Out. You will be called My Delight. You will be called The LORD’s. I will be your God and you will be my people.

The clamoring to exalt the self as center is all around us. The evil one himself seduces us to believe we need no savior and we need no Lord. He tells us to say I am glorious in myself. I deserve it all. This is me. It’s then all on me to exhaust myself creating the worth that I assert. That makes for a desperate life.

But our tender Lord and Savior Jesus tells us a better story: “Find your glory when you are taken into my story. I am the Glorious One and unlike the Accuser, I share my glory with those who are mine.” The evil one drives us relentlessly to

work for admiration to fill in the emptiness. But the dear Lord Jesus tells us that he alone has already achieved our righteousness. He accepts us for the sake of his atoning love. When we admire him, he fills in our emptiness with beautiful accepting love. To the places where the great Self has his throne, we set up shop and declare: Jesus is Lord. He alone is the beginning and the end, the one who is, who was, and who always will be.

It comes down to this:

When I exalt myself, I will end up empty.

When I bow the knee, Christ lifts me up.

When I shout “This is Me!” I only diminish.

But when I sing, “Jesus is Lord,” I share in his fullness.

When I proclaim, “I have the power,” I can do nothing.

But when I pray, “For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory forever,” then I partake and share everlasting life.

Keep faith beloved, faith in Jesus the one Savior and Lord of heaven and earth.

¹ Alice Martin, *The Drama of the Gifted Child: The Search for the True Self* (NY: Basic Books, 1997), 33-36.