

Running Hot

Revelation 3: 14-22

**First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

**May 13, AD 2018
Gerrit Scott Dawson**

Did you hear that Starbuck's is bringing out two new products this summer? One is a new coffee drink and the other is an alternative tea. They're calling these drinks, *Tepid Tazo*—the tea that never burns. And the other will be *Latte Lukewarma*, made from fine coffee that has aged on the counter for hours. Sounds delicious, don't you think? Can't you just imagine ordering, "I'd like a *Venti Latte Lukewarma* please." Yech: tepid and lukewarm. Now I have it on good authority that these products were actually introduced to Starbucks by a double agent from Community Coffee. Our local coffee company wanted to cut into market share of the giant by baiting them to make a horrid product. Lukewarm coffee is the worst. You know you're desperate when midmorning you drink those last few sips left in the cup from 7am. It's just bad.

Lukewarm is the problem Christ Jesus found with the church in Laodicea. He wrote to them, "You are not hot. You are not cold. You're just tepid. Room temp. And that makes me want to spew you out of my mouth." You know the feeling when you pick up the wrong cup, expecting fresh, hot coffee and you get day old swill? That's what the Lord was feeling about the church in Laodicea. They had gone stale. Bland. Inoffensive and uninspiring.

Of course there are lots of ways to describe someone who is spiritually anemic. Why did Jesus use this image of lukewarm liquid? It had to do with the water supply to the city of Laodicea in what today is the country of Turkey.



The Lycus River ran through the town. But its waters were full of silt and virtually undrinkable. So the people of Laodicea utilized one of those great Roman inventions, the aqueduct. They had their water

piped in from nearby towns with a purer source. Nearby Colossae had cold water from mountain snow melt: it was refreshing. Nearby Hierapolis had natural hot springs that gave soothing warm water. But by the time water from either neighbor got to Laodicea, it wasn't hot and it wasn't cold. It was tepid and had picked up silt along the way. It could make you queasy. The church would have known exactly what Jesus was talking about. These were strong words. Hey, you're like the local water: just not worth drinking.

Why would the Lord say such things to a church? It sounds like the church had taken on the personality of the city. Laodicea was a wealthy and fiercely independent town. It had several local industries that created prosperity. The city was known for production of a textiles prized throughout the empire. Wool from Laodicea was black and soft, ideal for garments. The city also had a unique pharmaceutical product. They made a powder from local stone which proved to be soothing for people with eye ailments. Like with the wool, this eye powder was used throughout the Roman Empire. With all the trade in these products, Laodicea also became a strong banker center. There was much trade in gold. These three sources of commerce—textiles, pharmaceuticals and finance-- made Laodicea prosperous. When the city experienced an earthquake in AD 60, they refused any aid from the Imperial government. They rebuilt their city themselves. We don't need government help which means we don't want government interference. We'll take responsibility for ourselves. That appeals to me. We take care of ourselves and we take care of our own. So we won't be a burden to you, and in turn you don't mess with us.

Such independence of course generated not only the good pride of being responsible but the bad pride of needing no one, of not being challenged, of getting stuck in the complacency of having too much comfort.

When you know all of this, Jesus' words make a lot more sense. "For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked." If the lukewarm water image was stinging, these words were a smack in the jaw. You guys that make eye powder are actually blind. You guys that make wonderful wool are actually stark naked. You guys that are rich from the gold trade are actually dirt poor. You guys that are insulated from common human want are actually so vulnerable as to be pitiable. Yikes. Jesus seems very hard on this church. This is the only letter where he praises nothing about what the church is doing. And this is the one church that is not suffering persecution, combatting false teachers or dealing with lingering idol

worship. This church has it together by all appearances. But their passion has gone lukewarm.

And once again, Jesus says to one of his churches, *Repent*. Now we remember each week that we have to rescue the word repent from a shouting preacher in a sweaty tent demanding we stop listening to rock and roll. Repent means so much more. It means literally to change your life by changing your mind. By elevating your mind to a higher vision. To see the truth of who God is so that the working out of your day to day life flows from a better source.

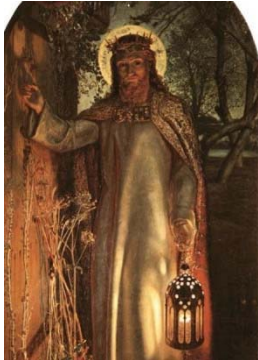
Specifically he says, “Be *zealous* and repent.” Start running hot. No more lukewarm. Get passionate again. Elevate your mind above tepid spirituality. Look up into my face which shines like the sun and let me heat you up. See that I am the architect of all that is. I was before you. I am the Amen, the final Yes, to all my Father wants to do with his creation. I am the one who remains after you have passed away. You will meet me in eternity. I am the faithful witness to who God really is. I show you the truth about your purpose for being alive. I am the one with whom your life has to do. Look up. Lift up your hearts. Let me get you simmering hot for my work again.

Then Jesus shows them how to do this. He shows them the better way. Once again, Jesus gives them a word that’s incredibly simple but deeply profound. He says, “Behold I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him and he with me.” In other words, Jesus says, “I have come down to where you are. I come to your life right where you are living it. For I have lived as one of you in the midst of the same world with the same struggles that you have. And I have overcome the sin of the world by costly love. I have conquered all this dying with my resurrection life. I have healed the deepest wounds done to me and I can heal the deepest wounds given to you. I want to give you my life flowing inside your life. *I have come all the way down to where you are right now. But I will not crash the door. I will not break in. I will knock. Will you open the door and invite me in?*”

It is just that simple and just that profound. So many people feel so alone. We feel like Sandra Bullock’s character in the movie *Gravity*. We are cut off from the world, from our ship, with life support failing. We are adrift in endless space. We feel infinitely small in the vast, indifferent universe. This seems like the way it will be until the end. But in a moment, we can go from isolated to connected. From lost to coming home. From floating away to anchored to what is real. He knocks. We open the door. He comes in. And then Christ Jesus says he dines with

us. He sits down at table. Not for a quick bite. Not a shot of espresso and then dash off. But for the meal that goes on into the night. The long conversation. The exchange of feelings and experiences. The filling up of someone knowing you and your knowing someone. Communion.

One of my favorite depictions of Jesus in art was painted by William Holman Hunt about 170 years ago. It's called "Christ the Light of the World."



Hunt's painting became an international sensation. Before we had mass media and easy reproductions, people came from all over to see this painting. Demand was so great that the painting actually went on tour so more people could gaze at it. It's been reproduced and reinterpreted by many other artists as well. In fact, our Dunham chapel has this image rendered in beautiful stained glass. I love to look at it each Sunday before I get up to preach the first sermon.

Let's look more closely. Light in the darkness is everywhere. Jesus is backlit with the glowing circle of his divinity upon his head. He carries a lantern that seems to be an extension of himself. It is his light that shines from the lantern. He wants to bring his light into the dark house and let it bring everything to life. Jesus stands at a door that is overgrown with vines. It has not often been opened. It is a long time since that lonely house received guests. He knocks. Not with the banging fist or the direct hard wrapping knuckles of an insistent visitor. He knocks gently with the back of his hand. A soft knock of one who means no harm. He awaits an answer. As he waits, we look more closely at him. He wears a crown, for he is the King. But this is not a circle of gold on his head. Jesus remains the one who took our thorns and wore them as a crown. He is still our suffering savior. His face is patient. Not urgent. Not angry. Perhaps more sad. Will the door open or will he be turned away? Greatly he desires admittance. But he will not force. In fact, we see that there is no handle on this outside door. It can only be opened from within. Only the occupant of this home can let in the patient savior who waits in the dark with his light.

Three hundred years ago, Spanish poet Lope de Vega, asked the question,

What have I that my friendship you should seek?
What wealth from it, my Jesus, could you gain
so that at my front door, bedecked with dew,
you spend dark winter nights in snow and sleet?

How hard was I within my deepest core
to never let you in! How strangely mad
if of my callousness the frigid ice
dried up the bleeding wounds of your pure feet!

How many times the [Spirit] said to me,
“Soul, come now to the window and look out:
you’ll see with how much love he knocks again!”

And oh, how many times, beauty divine,
“Tomorrow he may enter,” I’d respond,
only tomorrow to respond the same! (trans. Alex Ingber)

On our lonely doors he knocks. The originator of all creation, the architect of all there is, comes down humbly to the door of the life of each of his creatures. And though he created it all, owns it all and claims it all, he knocks. And waits upon us like a servant. His face tells it all, “Will you let me in?”

So very simple, but so very hard. For we know what this will mean. I have grown comfortable with my darkness and I am not at all sure I want the light. I have a routine of my aloneness and I am not at all sure I want company. I have my ways of coping, and not all of them are good, but I’m not sure I can give them up. I have a plan for my life that I want to enact. If I could just catch a break here or there, I think I can do it. I can get it together. I can do it on my own. I am not at all sure I want someone else to direct me.

Soul, come now to the window and look out: you’ll see with how much love he knocks again. I peep through the curtains to see if he is still standing there. Right now, he is. Should I let him in? I’m tired. I don’t have the emotional energy right now. I just don’t have the relational strength to know anyone else. I’ll think about that tomorrow. And tomorrow. And tomorrow.

Of course this image applies to those who have never let in Christ Jesus in the first place. The gospel message is urgent. Don't wait. There may not be another today. Tomorrow is not guaranteed.

But the letter of Christ to the Laodiceans was a letter to a church. To people who already belonged to Jesus. Because the truth is, we are never one and done with inviting Jesus in. We are never one hundred and done. Or one million and done. He doesn't ask to visit. He asks to live in us and for us to live in him. Christ's goal in entering the home of our heart is not to be the great new painting that hangs over the mantle for our guests to see. "Look at this piece of Jesus I have. Isn't it great? I've got it displayed prominently. I also keep it safely away from my bedroom, the desk where I do my finances, the room where I binge watch and the closet where I stuff all the junk." That's not really what he's after. He wants to transform the entire house of our lives to be according to his design. To look like a heavenly home so that the world can see a better way to live. So we can be formed and shaped by the Christ who made us and loves us.

The Laodiceans were strong. They had significance in the city where they lived. They had resources. They had right beliefs. But they had grown complacent. They had their comforts and their distractions and they really liked not needing anyone else. Sometimes they liked not needing a savior.

But Jesus was having none of that. "Apart from me you can do nothing," he had once said. It's still true. All the insulation we can create does not keep out the reality of suffering—but it can keep us from knowing the only one who can see us through our suffering. All the castles we can make may keep the world far away from us when we are home. But what a shock to discover that the purpose of our lives in Christ is to go out into the world to seek and to save the lost. Christ wants us to open the doors of our hearts and lives not just to let him in, but to let him *out!* To let him go forth from us to care for his little ones. To bring the gospel to the lost ones. To bring healing love to the broken ones. This door opens both ways and Jesus wants not only to come in, but then to lead us back out into the dawn of his kingdom as it rises across the globe.

Behold I stand at the door and knock. Shall we open that door? For the first time for salvation and new life. And for this very moment, even if we have known him for years, to what he wants for us right now. To what he asks for. To what he gives. To where he sends us. We peek out the curtains and see him waiting. Let's not let Christ stand there a second longer. No more *Lukewarma Latte* faith. Let's let him in so we can run hot with passion for our Savior and his work.