

On Losing Our First Love Revelation 2:4

I have been thinking lately again about the seven churches of Asia that were the direct recipients of John's vision on Patmos. As almost everyone knows, in the first chapter of Revelation, Jesus appears to John as a heavenly royal figure. And then something happens that gets our immediate attention. Jesus begins to give a critique of the seven churches; and, of course, for the reader the number seven stands for the complete universal church – not just assemblies in the province of Asia, in the first century. So this word from our Lord – the living Jesus should get our attention.

In many ways, many of the evaluations at first reading appear to be discreet and somewhat pedestrian. “Do not fear what you are about to suffer” (2:10). “I know that you have but little power and yet you have kept my word” (3:8); some have more bite. “For you say, I am rich, I have prospered and I need nothing; not knowing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked” (3:17).

This morning I wish to focus on one evaluation that appears to be something of a puzzle. It occurs in Rev. 2:2-4. Here the church at Ephesus is addressed. The puzzle is that, at first, the believers are complimented profusely for the quality and persisting endurance of their faith.

I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear evil men but have tested those who call themselves apostles but are not, and found them to be false; I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary (2:2-3).

Sounds like the model church, doesn't it? They have not only “talked the talk” but continue to “walk the walk.” But then, almost like a fist in the stomach we get hit with these words:

But I have this against you that you have abandoned the love you had at first.

What is going on here? What does it mean to say that a solid church, orthodox in doctrine, continuing in the faith has abandoned the love they had at first?

Now, a word of caution. So often in Bible classes this text is read as a statement about the spiritual temperature of the believer or the church: A need to get up to a level of great enthusiasm for the Lord. How often do we hear people say, “My tank is empty. I am looking for a service or a community to fill me!” And so assuming that spirituality can be equated with something like a sense of appreciation for a great performance, the depth of our “love for the Lord” is measured by our full participation in expressive and spontaneous worship; and whether one, upon leaving the service, has a buzz in his or her heart. And yet nowhere does the Bible equate our love for God with emotions, passions or feelings. We are only built up in the love of God when the truth of God's word is lodged and grows in our hearts. Since God's word is truth – as dull as it may sound – it is only through the thoughtful contemplation and appropriation of scripture in our lives by submitting to God's will, that we grow in love. And so I doubt very much that Jesus was telling the Ephesian church, “Now you have lost your first flush of enthusiasm and excitement and instead have settled down into a cold orthodoxy. Consequently you need to do more evangelistic studies and you need to make your services more interesting!” I do not think so.

Well, if the rebuke on “abandoning your first love” does not refer to the level of our feelings, to what does it refer?

I think the answer is disarmingly simple; and what is more, it may have special meaning for us today. Simply stated, the Ephesians needed to rekindle a lost love for one another. In all the writings in the Johannine tradition, at their core is the idea that God is love and truth and this true reality was expressed in the life of Jesus Christ; and the deeper logic of this claim is expressed in such texts as 2 John 5 where we learn that to be a follower of Jesus Christ first and foundational is to love one another (i.e. our brethren). That was what it was about in Jesus’ ministry; it remained the source for the church at Ephesus and the brotherhood in Texas today.

And why do we need to hear this word especially now? For the past fifteen years or so, the churches have been engaged in the worship wars. While it is true that in many places people have agreed to disagree and some kind of *modus vivendi* has emerged, the scars of the battles are scarcely healed. Like the struggles in the earlier years of the Ephesian church, events have taken their toll. We say we are brothers and sisters but the “real music” is not there. The love we had at first is gone. Moffat translates this verse “You have given up loving one another as you did at first.” Let me ask you, “Regardless of where you stand in the worship wars, what is your connection with those on the other side of the divide?” What do you really think of them? Tertullian records the pagans incredulous observations of some Christians they met, “See how they love another!” Is that true today?

And so we come back to our original puzzle. Why were orthodox believers in Ephesus, still active in the faith, chastised for forfeiting their first love? I hope, by now, we have the answer.

Some of you may be surprised to know that some of my earliest writing was as movie critic for the old *Mission* magazine in the seventies of the last decade. The movies today have passed me by, but some years ago there was one that struck me as being very good. It was called *Places in the Heart*. Set in the Texas black-land prairie it told of a family struggle with everything from drought, difficult people on to the Depression. At the end there is a riveting scene when, like at the end of a play, the actors all come back on stage – only here, they are together taking communion in a little country church. Some of these people hated one another with considerable intensity. But, somehow, around the table, they came together.

The analogy is not perfect. But this is something like what our text is trying to tell us. We may be coming from very different places with church issues, and we may get on the nerves of each other from time to time. But at the Table, we are called into the presence of the One who says, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another” (John 13:34). That is our first love.

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