

INI - SDG

1st Sunday a. Trinity

June 6, 2010

Prince of Peace Lutheran Church

Hecla, SD

Text: Revelation 2:8-11 “*And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write, ‘These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life; ‘I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich); and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death.’”*”

Theme: Anniversary Letters from Jesus -

“You Are Rich!”

Dear fellow redeemed in Christ Jesus who was dead, and came to life, grace and peace be multiplied unto you.

How do you know if someone is rich? Are you rich? Is your family rich? If you have ever talked to someone who lived through the Great Depression, you will often hear stories of families just barely making it. There was not much excess. When socks got a hole in them, Mom would darn them. When Dad’s overalls got a tear, Mom would patch it up. When the machinery broke down, Dad would go to great lengths to repair it using only the material he had. Toys often consisted of only those things that the kids or the parents could make. Girls would take corn cobs and make them into dolls. Boys would use branches and a piece of string to make bows and arrows. So, where these people rich?

Now, fast forward 80 years from the “dirty 30’s” to today. If you saw someone with patches on their jeans, little girls dressing up corn cobs, or little boys playing with sticks we would assume that they were extremely poverty stricken. In fact, today when we see someone driving a car or combine more than 10 years old, we look down on them, don’t we, and wonder what they are doing wrong that they can’t afford nicer things. If a child does not have a cell phone by junior high, they are in the minority. Rather than repairing socks or jeans, we buy new ones and throw the old away. So are we rich if we have multiple cars, multiple TV’s, and multiple computers in our house? Are we rich today?

What about our congregation and our church body? Are we rich? We are in the midst of the 50th Anniversary celebration of the Church of the Lutheran Confession. 50 years ago the CLC wondered how it was going to scrape together \$85,000 to buy 75 acre Ingram Estate in Eau Claire, WI. Two years ago, on that same piece of property our church body authorized the construction of a building that cost over \$2,000,000. As a congregation the Lord gave us the piece of property our church sits on for \$1 and back taxes. Last week the Voter’s authorized the purchase of our neighbor’s property for \$2,500. Do these things make us a rich congregation and a rich church body?

As we thank and praise our God for the 50 years of blessing He has given us as the CLC we will be looking at the seven letters from Jesus to the seven churches in Asia-Minor, as recorded in Revelation chapters 2 and 3. Three Sundays ago, we took a look at the first letter of Jesus to the Church in Ephesus. In it Jesus commended them for their zeal for the truth. However, He scolded them for their lovelessness. In that Jesus reminds us to do the right thing, but to do it for the right reason - love.

This morning we turn to the second letter of Jesus, to be delivered to the Christian church in Smyrna. But this letter was not just for those Christian in Smyrna, but for all Christians to hear and apply to themselves, for, Jesus says in verse 11, ***“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”*** As Jesus has given us an ear to hear His Word, let us listen to the Holy Spirit in His Word and consider this anniversary letter from Jesus, as we what truly makes a congregation rich. May the Holy Spirit guide us, bless us, and strengthen us by His Word that we may remain faithful to Him unto death.

We don't have a great deal of information about the Christian church in Smyrna, we do learn quite a bit about them from the words of Jesus. Of the seven churches Jesus writes to, there are only two that He does not chastise - and Smyrna was one of them. It seems this congregation had been through a lot. As is the case with every Christian, Jesus, the Lord of the Church, is keenly aware of everything they are going through. It seems Jesus is writing to them to encourage them and bolster them in their faith.

But listen to what we hear from Jesus about this congregation. When describing them Jesus uses words like, “works, tribulations, poverty, suffering, prison, testing,” and once again, “tribulations.” Do these sound like words we would use to describe a “rich” church? To us a rich church seems like one that should have a full bank account, a large building for worship, and a huge membership roster. NOT the description Jesus gives of the church in Smyrna. And yet what do we hear from Jesus about this poverty stricken and suffering church? He says of them, ***“But you are rich!”*** Let's examine this Anniversary Letter from Jesus a little closer and learn what makes a congregation rich in Jesus' sight!

Jesus begins in verse 9 by saying, ***“I know your works.”*** Their labor for the Lord did not go unnoticed by the Lord of the Church. While men may have not given them recognition for their works as a congregation, Jesus knew. And as is so often the case, with diligent labor for the Lord also comes hardship. He tells the church in Smyrna, ***“I know your...tribulation.”*** The word tribulation carries with it the word picture of being pressed in on or something weighing heavily on the soul. That is what tribulation feels like for the Christian. It feels like the devil and the world around you is pressing in on you, trying to get you to fall away from the faith. Those who work hard for the Lord should expect such pressure or tribulation to press down on them. Jesus has told us as much when He said, ***“Remember the word that I said to you, 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. If they kept My word, they will keep yours also.”*** (John 15:20) Those who are not of Jesus' word will persecute the followers of Jesus.

Yet what comforting words from Jesus, who is the First and the Last, the One whose persecution led to Him being crucified and dying, but who rose to life again, to hear Him say, “I know. I know the tribulations you are facing.” Jesus tells them in verse 10 that the tribulations were about to get worse. ***“Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison that you may be tested, and you***

have tribulation ten days.” The devil, working in the son of disobedience, would press down even harder on these Christians. Some would be thrown into prison for their faith. History tells us of some of the tribulation that these Christians faced. Roughly 60 years after Revelation was written, Polycarp, who was a student of the Apostle John and the Bishop of the Church in Smyrna, was burned at the stake because he was a Christian.

Jesus speaks of this as a “testing.” That is the same word that is used of checking the purity of precious metals. Gold is tested in an intense flame of fire to remove any impurities and to purify it. What was about to happen to the Christians in Smyrna would test their faith. The devil applies an intense pressure in hopes of making us wither and fall from the faith. But God intends it to strengthen and purify our faith - to remove weakness and impurity. God would allow this tribulation to come upon these Christians, but God would limit it. Jesus speaks of the tribulation lasting ten days. This is symbolic for a set period of time. God would allow the tribulation to go on for only so long.

What a comfort in the face of tribulation to know that Jesus knows what you are going through, that Jesus knew about it before it would happen, that Jesus intends it for the good of our faith, and that Jesus is in control and has set boundaries. For that reason Jesus tells them, **“Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer.”** Jesus is the First and the Last. He is the Author and Perfecter of our faith. He can and will see us through. He was dead, and came to life to rule over and protect His church. Therefore do not be afraid of those things which we may be about to suffer.

His words to us in the face of tribulation are “Do not fear, but be faithful.” **“Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.”** Remain faithful, He says. In the Gospels He says, **“If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”** (Jn 8:31-32) Likewise Jesus says, **“I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.”** (Jn 15:5) The only way we can remain faithful until death is by abiding in Jesus and His Word. And through His Word He works in us and keeps us faithful to Him and promises the crown of life as a reward of grace. Like a victorious athlete who won his race, Jesus will crown all victorious Christians with Eternal Life. Jesus encourages us to remain faithful and keeps us faithful through His Word and Sacrament.

Another part of the hardships that the Christians in Smyrna were facing was poverty. Whether it was general poverty or their persecution led their property to being seized, poverty was their current condition. Today we are told that if God loves you He will make you prosperous. “Good things happen to good people.” In fact, whole churches and preachers found their ministry on this “Prosperity Gospel.” They teach that God wants to bless you materially and if you are poor it is because you haven’t asked for it or your faith is weak. This message is very appealing to the flesh, but not at all Scriptural. We know God loved Jesus very much, yet Jesus was poor and did not even have a place to call home.

Was this church in Smyrna rich? Not according to the World. They didn’t have much money and they were suffering a great deal. But listen to what Jesus says to them, **“I know your works, tribulations, and poverty (but you are rich).”** The richness of a Christian or of a Christian congregation is not based at all in dollar amounts or in possessions. The Christians in Smyrna was rich because it had the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Those Christians had as their Lord and Savior the One who is the First and the Last. They had been redeemed by the one who was dead because of their sins and came to life for their justification. They had Jesus and that made

them more rich than the world would ever know. They had the richness of God's forgiveness, the richness of God's grace, and the riches of eternal life in heaven promised to them because of Jesus.

Is the CLC rich? Is Prince of Peace rich? Not in the world's eyes. Our Synod is small and our congregation is small. Our churches are far from being a mega-church. Most of our congregations are rural with a membership under one hundred. For the first time in a long time, the CLC is budgeting a \$40,000 deficit for our next fiscal year. The CLC would like to call a 13th Professor to teach at ILC but we can't afford it right now. The CLC would like to send a third missionary to help out in India or Africa, but we can't afford it right now. When the world looks at us, it does not see a rich church.

But you know what? If we have the Gospel we are rich beyond anything this world can imagine. Not rich in earthly possessions or dollar amounts. We are rich because we have Jesus. ***"For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich."*** (2 Cor 8:9) We have the richness of Jesus righteousness. We have the richness of God's grace as He forgives all our sins for Jesus' sake. ***"But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more."*** (Rom 5:20) We have the richness of Jesus body and blood in the Sacrament. And through the Word and Sacrament Jesus keeps us faithful until the end and promises us of His rich grace the crown of eternal life in heaven. Indeed, dear Christians, you are rich in Christ Jesus! Amen.