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6th Sunday a. Trinity
July 11, 2010
Prince of Peace Lutheran Church
Hecla, SD

Text: Revelation 3:1-6 *“And to the angel of the church in Sardis write, ‘These things says He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars: “I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead. Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God. Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent. Therefore if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you. You have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy. He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.””*

Sermon Series: *Anniversary Letters from Jesus:*
“I LOOK AT THE HEART”

Dear fellow redeemed in Christ Jesus,

What if I told you that this morning, under my black gown, I decided to wear all authentic Major League Baseball clothing. A Twins jersey and pants, Twins stirrup socks, with my cleats and glove in the sacristy. Now, even if I would be wearing that kind of clothes, you know that would not mean Twins manager Ron Gardenhire would put me in the starting line-up against the Tigers this afternoon. It would take more, MUCH more, than an authentic jersey for me to be able to play in the pros. What would be lacking would be skill. The pros are pros because they have the ability and talent that few of us have. Just wearing the uniform does not a professional make.

It seems that for most in the congregation at Saris, just wearing the uniform of a Christian was enough. They looked like Christians, they talked like Christians, they behaved like Christians. Maybe they were even a staunch defender of the truth. That is, they held all the correct doctrinal positions. Now, to the average on-looker and to the surrounding Christian churches, the Sardisian congregation probably looked like the model Christian congregation. *“You have a name that you are alive, BUT,”* Jesus says, *“you are dead.”* While man looked at the outward appearance of this congregation and saw much to admire, the LORD looks at the heart and saw no spiritual life. Jesus saw a zombie-church. People who were outwardly alive, but inwardly, spiritually dead.

As with each of these seven letters to the seven churches in Asia-minor, this letter was not written for the Sardisian congregation alone. Jesus directs all Christians with ears to hear what the Holy Spirit says to this church. Jesus wants us to hear His word and apply it to our lives individually, as a congregation, and as a synod. As we continue to mark the 50th anniversary of the CLC, let us consider how Jesus looks at the heart. May the seven-fold Spirit of God help us

to hear and apply His Word to our lives.

The city of Sardis had a wealthy history. Prior to the rise of the Roman empire it served as the capital of the ancient and powerful kingdom of Lydia. Sardis was a center of agriculture, commerce and industry for the region. Some of the first coins of the ancient world are said to have been minted in the city of Sardis. But as is so often the case in history with rich societies, Sardis too became soft and weak. Throughout the years many enemies came through and defeated the Sardisians. They were not alert and watchful as a people and it seems that this lackadaisical attitude existed in the congregation there as well.

Unlike the previous four letters we have considered, Jesus has no words of praise for this congregation. He begins by telling the pastor of the church in Sardis, ***“These things says He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars: ‘I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead.’”*** The seven Spirits of God is the Holy Spirit which proceeds from the Father and the Son. This is the Holy Spirit that is at work in each of the seven churches which Jesus is writing to. The seven stars are each of the pastors of these seven congregations.

As I pastor, I tremble to think of having to bring this message from Jesus to my congregation on Sunday morning. *“This is what all-knowing and all-powerful Jesus has to say about you, ‘I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead.’”* I can hardly imagine telling you that Jesus says when He looks into your hearts He sees a dead congregation - a spiritually lifeless church. But that is precisely what Jesus saw when He looked at the heart of the church in Sardis. Sure, they probably had regular Sunday services, sermons delivered from the pulpit, and the Sacrament administered. After all, they were known as a living, vibrant congregation. Yet in their heart, they were dead.

Was all hope lost for this congregation? Well, no, or Jesus would not be speaking to them. This is a call for them to wake up from their spiritual slumber. ***“Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are about to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God. Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent.”*** What remained was the Gospel. The message they had at one time received with joy, their ears had now become dull to. Now they were like a lifeless branch in the Vine that was about to be cut off. Therefore Jesus calls on them to be watchful and remember. Remember how they first received and heard the Gospel message. Hold onto the Gospel and repent. Repent that you have taken the Gospel for granted. Repent that you honored Jesus with your lips, but your hearts were far from Him.

The warning of Jesus continues, ***“Therefore if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you.”*** The warnings which we have throughout the New Testament are repeated here. Jesus warns this zombie church that if they are not spiritually alert and watchful, He will come upon them like an unexpected thief. While we do not know the effect this letter had on the Sardisian congregation, we do know that if today you were to go to modern day Turkey, you would find only the ruins of the city of Sardis and no Christian congregation. They did not remain spiritually watchful. So Jesus came upon them and the congregation no longer exists.

In spite of all this, there was still a flicker of life ***“even in Sardis,”*** Jesus says. Just as God knew how many righteous there were in Sodom and Gomorrah, and as He told Elijah that there were still 7,000 in Israel who had not bowed the knee to Baal, so too Jesus knew there were

still some faithful in Sardis. ***“You have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy.”*** To those faithful, Jesus had the glorious promise of walking with Him in heaven.

What do we have to learn from this fifth letter of Jesus to the dead church in Sardis? Jesus command is that we who have ears to hear what the Spirit is telling the churches. It is very easy to fall into a routine with our church-lives. We confess to be Christian, Lutheran, and orthodox. We deplore and avoid those who add to or take away from God’s word. We too have a name that is alive. But do we run the risk of wearing the uniform and yet having our heart in the game?

Let’s explore this together by first asking ourselves why we came to church this morning? What are you doing here? As children, God wants us to obey our father and our mother. They are entrusted with our spiritual soul care, and so they make sure to bring us to a church that teaches God’s Word. But do you want to be here? Do you want to hear about Jesus? Do you want to hear and learn God’s Word?

As we get older, our faith goes from being that of our parent’s to our own. That spiritual transition is one we need to make. Our parents cannot believe for us, nor can their bear fruit for us. And so here we are. Do you want to be here? Do you want to hear about Jesus? Do you want to hear and learn God’s Word?

It is so easy for us to get into a rut. We get up and go to church just because that’s what we do. We are church-going people. If we don’t go, we know pastor or our family will guilt us into coming. So we get dressed up, get in the car, and go to church. We recite and sing our way through the liturgy without giving it much thought, we know when to sit down and when to stand up, and we are glad to see the offering plate go around because that means we are almost done with church.

Then there is the sermon. After five years you know your pastor’s method of delivering the sermon pretty well. You know the tone of his voice. He uses some of the same phrases every Sunday. You know it’s a good time to write out your offering or balance your checkbook. Maybe even get a couple minutes of shut-eye. You know he’ll go on for about 20 minutes and then say amen.

Does any of this ring true for you? I know it does for me. People are often mistaken in thinking that since I am a pastor that I am somehow above all that. ***“No, you’re the pastor! You’re involved with every part of the worship service! How could you ever become un-involved?”*** I have a lazy sinful nature, just as the congregation in Sardis did, and just as you do. I struggle with just going through the motions and not worshiping Jesus in spirit and in truth. I struggle with just putting words on a page and not applying the Word to my heart. I take Jesus and the Gospel message for granted. I struggle with just being satisfied with simply wearing the Christian uniform and not having my heart in the game.

Jesus doesn’t look at the outward appearance, He looks at the heart. He is not just interested in the sounds and words of praise, He’s interested in hearts. ***“The hour is coming, and now is,”*** Jesus told the woman at the well, ***“when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him.”*** (Jn 4:23) The Pharisees praised God with their lips, but their hearts were far from Him. They had no care for the saving Gospel that Jesus was and that Jesus brought.

The Gospel is the good news that Jesus has done EVERYTHING to save us. It is the

good news that Jesus took the filth of our sin on Himself and gave us the riches of His righteousness. It is Jesus suffering separation from God, so that we could be united with Him eternally. It is Jesus being faithful to His God and Father even to the point of death, to rescue us from our unfaithfulness. Jesus did it ALL and He gives us eternal life as a free gift!

Let us repent of the times we have we have taken the good news about Jesus for granted! Let us repent of the times that we have simply gone through the motions, without gladly hearing and learning His Word. Repentance implies a turning away from what is bad to forgiveness in Jesus. Let us turn to Jesus seeking to be cleansed from our sin by His precious blood. Let us pray with David, ***“Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, And uphold me by Your generous Spirit.”*** (Ps 51:12)

The battle is hard and the road is difficult, but our Savior Jesus gives tremendous promises of grace to those who overcome. ***“He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels.”*** The Book of Life contains the names of the elect of God. Those chosen by the Father from eternity and called to faith in Jesus in time. Jesus promises that the names of the faithful will never be erased from that Book.

More than that, Jesus promises to confess their name before the Father and His angels. Think of that! Imagine Jesus, with His nail-printed hands, taking your hand, and walking together before the throne of God the Father and the legion of holy angels saying, “This is... (Mable or Titus or Deszirae or Mick) ...I shed my blood to save him/her and he/she believed in Me.” Jesus promises those that overcome, He will confess your name before the Father and the angels!

What is it Jesus sees when He looks at our hearts? Does He see people who are playing “dress-up” as Christians? May God forgive us for the times we have been like the Sardisian congregation. The times when we have neglected or taken for granted the blessed truths of the Gospel. Thanks be to Jesus that He purchased our forgiveness for such sins when He died on the cross. May the seven-fold Spirit of God ever enable us to overcome that we may walk with Jesus now and eternally! Amen.