

PENTECOST 19 – October 3, 2010
Revelation 2:8-11 “BE FAITHFUL”
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Faithful followers of the Lord Jesus,

The key word in our sermon today is “faithful.” In our conversations we may speak of a faithful spouse, someone who is devoted in their marriage, in it for the long haul, as our Savior directed spouses to be toward each other. We may describe someone as a faithful employee. They are always on duty, get to work on time, carry out all their responsibilities, and the like. Or we may talk about having a faithful dog, one who greets us with a cheerful bark, a lick on the face and comes with tail wagging when we call. Being faithful is a trait that we admire.

It’s a trait that is vital when we are talking about our relationship with our Savior Jesus. He wants his followers to be loyal and true, devoted to him and his teachings. And he has promised wonderful blessings for those who do remain faithful to him, not just for a little while in life, but all the way through to the end of life.

It is that kind of faithfulness that Jesus himself is talking about in the words before us today. Here, Jesus was appearing in a vision to his apostle John. The year is about 95 AD and John was in exile, imprisoned on a small island in the Aegean Sea because he had been faithful in his work as a pastor and missionary. This book of Revelation is a message from Jesus through John to seven congregations in Asia Minor, in this particular section to the church at Smyrna. It was a city devoted to following the Roman emperor, the home to a cult that led the way in honoring the emperors as gods. It’s no wonder then, that being a faithful Christian was not the easiest thing in this city.

To give you an indication of that let me tell you about one of John’s students who later became the head of the congregation in Smyrna. His name was Polycarp and when he was 86 years old, in the year 155 AD he was arrested by the Romans for being the leader of the Christians. There he stood, trembling and tottering before the Roman judge. His old age apparently moved the judge to feel lenient. Rather than sentencing Polycarp to death by throwing him to the lions in the arena, or setting him on fire as a human torch, the judge gave Polycarp the opportunity to save his life. All he had to do was offer a pinch of incense before the statue of the emperor, disclaim his allegiance to Christ, then he would be released. To that invitation Polycarp gave the clear-cut reply, “Eighty-six years I have served him, and he never did me any wrong. How can I now blaspheme my king, who has saved me?” In anger the judge threatened to use fire, but old Polycarp answered, “Use it, if you want to. But be concerned about another fire which will eternally burn your spirit.” Rather than deny or compromise his Lord and Savior, Polycarp resisted. He remained faithful and sealed his testimony with a fiery martyr’s death.

That took place 60 years after John wrote these words to the church in Smyrna, but Polycarp followed them to the end. What a wonderful example of this short and sweet command from our Savior:

BE FAITHFUL!

Be faithful, even in the face of poverty and affliction. Be faithful, because the one who calls us, is faithful to the end.

I.

As I said a moment ago, the church of John’s day was in the midst of a persecution. Jesus warns here that some of them would end up in prison, arrested for the simple “crime” of believing in Jesus as their King, rather than worshipping the emperor as a god.

Part of their affliction also involved poverty. Apparently, part of the persecution involved losing their jobs or being boycotted in their businesses. They were losing out financially.

And yet, Jesus says, **You are rich!** They had a strong faith in Jesus, faith that showed so plainly that their enemies could see it and persecute them for it. They were rich in the things which help overcome and endure affliction, things like patience and perseverance. They were faithful! These were riches which could never be taken away from them no matter how poor they became. They had laid up for themselves treasures in heaven because they had Jesus on their side and they were remaining faithful to him.

They were also remaining faithful in the face of slander from the Jews of Smyrna. The Christians here seemed to be facing the same kind of attacks which Paul had often faced in his ministry. Christians were despised for supposedly deserting the religion of the OT. But it really was the Christians who had the right to now be called God's chosen people. That term no longer meant someone who was only physically descended from Abraham. Christians are Abraham's true children because they are the ones who cling to the promises given to Abraham, promises fulfilled in the coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. Since many Jews rejected the idea that Jesus was the Messiah, anyone who claimed to be his follower became a target.

And behind all the affliction and poverty, of course, is the devil himself. Whether his accomplices were the pagan Romans or the Messiah-rejecting Jews, it was still Satan who was the one who was really trying to destroy the faith of the Christians. He will use any and all means to get believers to forsake the Lord, using persecution, poverty, ridicule and insult, as we see here in Smyrna.

But it was all meant to test the Christians. More of the same was in store for them. Christ assures them here that it would only last a short time in the grand scheme of things. He wanted them to see for themselves just how strong and devoted they were to him. Sure it was going to be difficult. It would be painful. They would feel pressured in many different ways. But just like a flu shot from the doctor hurts and causes pain for awhile but then ultimately turns out for our good by protecting us from something much worse, so also Jesus uses these afflictions and troubles of life to harden us and make us better so that we do not suffer the ultimate affliction of eternal death in hell. With Christ on our side there is no real reason to be afraid. In the midst of affliction He gives us peace, comfort and confidence that in the end all will turn out well for his people.

And that promise keeps us going in the midst of our afflictions, keeps us faithful, as it did for the Christians in Smyrna. Our afflictions may not involve physical persecution as was the case for these people. But for Christians in other places around the world, especially in Muslim or communist countries, that is a very real possibility. Ours may show up as ridicule in the intellectual arena, especially in secular schools of higher learning. Our faith in the truths of Scripture when it comes to a very real God who created the world in 6 days, that's laughed at by many. Or people may consider us as ignorant bumpkins for believing in a Savior who performed miracles and rose from the dead. We are labeled as narrow-minded and unenlightened because we speak out against abortion and homosexuality. Maybe someone loses a job because they refuse to go along with the shady business practices of an employer, or because they insist on a schedule that allows them to worship every week in church. Some Christian businesses might not become as prosperous because they won't cater to the immoral tastes of our society. The slander and ridicule will certainly be there for our college students especially on secular campuses. Classmates, teachers and professors will attack your faith, label you as a prude, an anti-intellectual if you are living up to your beliefs, being faithful to your Savior and his word. Satan is still very hard at work in our day and age, finding ways to destroy our faith, hoping that we will give up on Jesus.

So the encouragement for each one of us is still in place, BE FAITHFUL. That's a command laid on each one of us by our Lord who has called us into his heavenly kingdom. He faithfully gave his life so that we might be part of his family, enjoying the forgiveness of our sins and the sure hope of eternal life with him in heaven.

Remember, he is the one who says here that he knows. He knows our troubles. As the eternal Son of God he knows when we are hurting, when the afflictions and ridicule are starting to wear on us. He knows how to lift our spirits with the comfort of the gospel as we hear it in church or from a friend, as we study it in our personal Bible reading. That's why the call to be faithful is a call to stay close to him. He's the source of the good things that we need - forgiveness, peace, hope and strength. Be faithful to him by staying close to his word.

So many people think that once they are confirmed, finish the course of study to become members of the congregation, they think there's nothing more for them to learn. But remaining faithful means continuing to dig into that word by being here for worship every week to hear the word explained and to partake of the Sacrament, taking one of the Bible classes we offer, having daily devotions and private Bible study at home. Participating in those things will help us face those afflictions that will most certainly come our way, if not right now, then definitely in the future. The faith that lives in our hearts needs to be shielded and protected from the harsh winds of sin and Satan and the world around us which want to snuff that flame out. Using the word is the only way to keep it burning brightly, keep us faithful to our Lord.

II.

And that means being faithful to Jesus to the very end of our lives. Maybe we won't be threatened with the loss of our lives because of our faith in Jesus, as Polycarp was and as John and the other apostles were. For the Christians at Smyrna that was a very real possibility for the next two centuries and more. But it was a sacrifice they were ready to make, to be faithful even to the point of death. Just as Jesus gave up his life for them and for us, that's what we are to be willing to do for him. Every one of you who has been confirmed at a Lutheran altar should have made that promise, that you would be willing to face all, even death, rather than deny your Lord and Savior. Some people in our world today are making that ultimate sacrifice for Christ. Thankfully, right now for you and me, we aren't faced with that decision. But we should be ready to act on it at any time.

The reason is because of the one who did it all for us, who did give up his life on the cross. That perfect sacrifice was not forced on him. He did it willingly. He did it out of his love for us sinners. It was because of us that he had to go through with it in the first place. Our sins separated us from God. Only the holy Son of God could pay the penalty owed because of sin. He freed the whole world from the sure and certain fate of eternity in hell.

Now there is an alternative, a wonderful, blessed alternative. There is a crown of life. His rising from the dead on Easter assures us that sin was paid for and that death and hell and Satan are conquered. It was a complete victory. And to the victor belong the spoils. And our victorious king shares them with us. We are victors through faith in him. He bestows on his faithful people a crown, not a crown of laurel which the winners in the Olympic games of old received, not even a crown of gold or silver studded with diamonds and jewels, but a crown of life. Our victory crown assures us of salvation and eternal life with our King in heaven. That's the crown waiting for us as we run the race of this life, as we fight the good fight of faith. BY finishing the race, carrying through in the fight, remaining faithful in life, we are assured of this crown that does not fade away, that does not decay or rust. It lasts forever and it is a free gift to us from our Savior. With that crown we are protected from the second death.

We know we are all going to die here on this earth. That's the first death which comes as a result of the sin with which we are born and which infects our lives even as Christians. But there is a second death, actually a fate worse than death, as we heard in our gospel reading. That is eternal separation from God in hell. That endless pain and torment and agony are reserved for those who don't believe in Jesus as Savior, and who don't remain faithful to him to the end. But for those who do, who overcome the afflictions and slander and obstacles of Satan, who stay close to their Savior, that second death won't touch them at all.

So listen to what the Spirit is saying to you in these words of Christ to the church at Smyrna. This is God talking to us, the God who saved us through his Son and brought us to faith by the working of the Spirit. We dare not close our ears to his words of warning and his words of encouragement to be faithful, even to the point of death. We dare not give up or slack off once we are confirmed, just because the going gets a little tough and our faith is challenged. Be faithful, like the Christians in Smyrna, like John and Polycarp. That's the encouragement of our Lord. His promise – I will give you the crown of life. So, dear friends, be faithful! AMEN.