

"To Him Who Overcomes"

"Look Into the Magnifying Glass and What Do You See?"

Isaiah 64:1-9; Mark 13:32-33; Revelation 2:1-7

Before we get to the substance of today's sermon I want to note that one part of my job is aptly described as "equipping the saints." I have here a variety of objects that would seem to have no real connection or correlation. However that depends on what one is looking for. I have a magnifying glass, a completed Nativity scene jigsaw puzzle, a Christmas CD, and a couple of wrenches from my tool box. Today is the first Sunday of Advent, the day we begin our journey to the day we celebrate the birth of Jesus, represented here in this jigsaw puzzle. As noted in our Advent Candle reading, the magnifying glass symbolizes what we are supposed to be about during this season - peering deeply within ourselves as a major part of this season's emphasis and effort. The Christmas CD is titled "A Toolbox Christmas". However strange the concept sounds, someone had the idea to perform some familiar Christmas songs by the use of tools found in many workshops, particularly woodworking shops. One of the interesting ones is the common hand saw. And lastly, I have two 9/16" combination, open/box wrenches. One of them is a standard 9/16" wrench while the other is specialty wrench, though homemade. The open end that originally extended from the end I cut off but then welded it extending to the side so that it resembles the number 7. This was for a special application, one of which I rarely used it for. But where it was useful, it was truly useful (for one of the 2 nuts bolting down the injector pump on my JD 4020). This Advent season I'm going to use a variety of tools as object lessons.

It is interesting that Isaiah pleaded with God to come down to earth from heaven in a manner signified by fire so hot twigs are set blaze by fire, fire so hot that water boils. God of course came down from heaven in due time, however in a manner quite different than the one requested. God came to earth in the silence of the night, unobserved by the world at large, known only to a handful of shepherds, Magi, and a variety of animals. This jigsaw puzzle stands as a metaphor for that which stands at the far side of this Advent journey. This is a time of active waiting, not passively as some think. We call upon your name, O God, enlisting your help every step of the way.

My job as pastor consists not only in reading, researching, and then conveying information to you. One lesson I've learned from assembling jigsaw puzzles is that you have to use different strategies and different mental tools depending upon the particular puzzle you are attempting. Related to that, my job consists in equipping you the saints of the church to fulfill the mission Jesus has for you and to equip you for the various spiritual battles and works you will be involved in. One element of "equipping the saints" that is often overlooked is in the realm of helping you find and use the spiritual tools that are available to us. As part of my job I can select the Scriptures we will use on a given Sunday, and I can study, research, and regurgitate all that arises therein to you in a sermon. I do this regularly. On the one hand I can tell you what a passage is all about, and what portends for us by way of application. But on the other hand, that is not equipping the saints in the same way as giving you, or if you'd rather, helping you

find, the tools for yourself. I decided that for today we are going to employ a different strategy. Next week we will return to a typical worship service and sermon.

As noted last Sunday, Advent is a season of preparation by which we are called to this specified period of self-examination, self-reflection, and self-inspection by which we are brought to a more proper state of readiness for the birth of Jesus.

I have here a magnifying glass for purpose of a simple illustration. The magnifying glass typically is detached from the base and sitting on my desk in the house. Cora, from time to time, asks if she can go get the magnifying glass for whatever purpose she has in mind. Actually, it seems to be quite intriguing to her, for I've seen her hold it over various objects, intently peering at the enlarged objects underneath as she scans an object,, slowly and with deep interest and purpose. "Granddad? Can I get the magnifying glass? I have some things I want to see closer." Shouldn't I want to reward her interest in such things? This magnifying glass is in this sense a metaphor. Speaking of metaphors.....

Last week I used the metaphor of in-ranks inspection such as done in the Army whereby an officer moves up and down each row of soldiers pausing to "inspect" each soldier's appearance. The uniform of the day, whether fatigues or dress uniform, are inspected to see if they comport with established military standard. Every inspecting officer has not only the duty to inspect the uniform and personal presentation but also the prerogative to ask certain questions, such as, "Soldier, what is the first general order?" In some alignment with this, Christians are expected to know some of the basic tenets of the faith, what we are expected to know and believe. But the analogy soon begins to break down. One thing the officer really has less prerogative over are matters of faith and questions of ethics or morality, matters of which are particularly appropriate and pertinent during Advent.

Advent is the season during which we are to look within ourselves to inspect and see what there is to see and then to respond accordingly. The better we are quipped with the requisite and necessary spiritual tools the better of a job we will do.

Let me remind us that any "proper and accurate" inspection and assessment will involve both positive and negative features of what is there to be seen. One of the fascinating things about the 7 letters to the 7 churches as memorialized in Revelation is the dual feature I refer to as "'for this I commend you' but 'this I have against you.'" All 7 letters except 1 feature a segment whereby the particular church is commended for something. But all 7 letters, excepting none, tell the particular church of the things God has against them, that is, the things for which they are being criticized and even condemned. Using an accounting metaphor, I often refer to this 2-fold structure in terms of credit and debit, though worded slightly differently. "This you have to your credit" is complemented by its antithesis "this I have against you."

For example in terms of the credit side of the ledger, in the letter to the church at Ephesus we read: "I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested

those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary." (Revelation 2:2-3, NIV)

One of the tools I want to pass on to you by way of application is to ponder for yourself the value and nature of the things for which the church in Ephesus is credited and commended by the Lord Jesus. Then adapt those values and commendations to our church.

I hope it is beneficial to point out that the credit side of the ledger is listed first. It would seem more helpful to lead off with what we've got right and for which we are commended rather than leading off with those things which are worthy of condemnation. It is a sign of the grace of God. Let us not forget that, no matter how much we have failed, and no matter how "filthy our rags" of works in some true sense are, we still have things going for us.

In terms of the credit side, as you read what a particular church has going for them, don't stop with that reading and consideration. Remember, this is a self-inspection. Think honestly, foregoing pride as much as you can, about the things that are to our credit, your credit. Do you love the things God loves? Do you hate the things God hates? Do you love peace and harmony, kindness and generosity? Do you hate dishonesty and a lying tongue? Do you hate gossip and dissention? And if you hate gossip and dissention, how is that reflected, or not, in your life? What are the fruits of the Spirit? And how are they reflected in your life, or not? As honestly and with as much integrity as you can muster, note the things that you believe Jesus would agree stand on the credit side of your ledger. Galatians 5:16-26 is a great resource and aid in this assessment.

Then with something of this over all framework in mind, let's consider the debit side of the ledger in the letter to the particular church: "but this I have against you." Consider the debits listed in the text, and then consider why and how they are debits that point to condemnation. Consider briefly how they pertain to you, or not. But then move on beyond the items listed. Pray for the Holy Spirit's guidance as to the things that are not listed in the text but of which the Lord might, or even does, have against you. One of the tools with which I'm attempting to equip you is to let the text of Scripture speak to you in terms of the church so described, but then let that point you to where it applies to you.

It is a helpful tool to avoid becoming bogged down or sidelined by things we cannot or do not know. We have an excellent example in the letter to the Ephesians as found in verse 6: "But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate." (NIV) As already noted, there is little information regarding the Nicolaitans. There is no certainty as to "who" the Nicolaitans actually were. About the most we know about them is that they were denounced for eating food offered to idols and sexual license. With little more than that to go on it would perhaps be beneficial, as suggested a few moments ago, simply to think about the things we know God condemns. Sexual license is inferred but let us also think about the many things God hates: bitterness, anger, hatred, envy, etc.

Also another point on the debit side: "Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love." Here, again, there is no scholarly consensus on

what is meant in terms of the church at Ephesus. Was it their initial love for Jesus that they had forsaken? Was it their initial joy they experienced at the moment of coming to faith in Jesus? Was their first love in terms of the Scriptures? Was "their first love" a reference to the church itself?

This particular tool involves avoiding a fixation on the things we do not know. The application here is to ask what was it that **you** used to love about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the Trinity, the nature of salvation, the central and thus essential doctrines (or points) of the Christian faith? Is there something that used to be a "first love" of yours that has grown cold or stale?

Thus, the point is clearly made. If you can't know what a given church was commended or condemned for in terms of specifics, don't worry about not having that knowledge. Just do 2 things. First, note that God in fact "does" have things for which churches and individuals are either commended or condemned. But then, again, employ the spiritual tools of inspection and assessment on both sides of the ledger.

It is typical, even expected, that a person's newly found life of discipleship will be embraced eagerly and joyfully. This is often the case, for example, in coming to understand the meaning and implication of salvation. As another example it might be in terms of a growing love for the Scriptures. But over time it is not unheard of for earlier eagerness and enthusiasm to wane and cool down. In fact, in some instances individuals have come to reject in disgust the very same but essential doctrines with which they earlier were infatuated. This should not be surprising to us, however, for Satan is at work in our world, seeking at every turn to sour us on what should be so pleasing to us - the full scope of the love of God.

I want to close out what I've prepared for this morning with the following observations in terms of the letter to the church at Ephesus.

The Lord Jesus was very pleased with them for the things listed in their love letter from God. Let us rejoice and give thanks for their fidelity and hard work in terms of those things. My prayer is that in an honest and fair assessment you will give thanks to God for the things you've been faithful in. The Ephesians also had some very serious problems to address. As already noted, though we really don't know what they amounted to, we do know their deficiencies were very serious. The full scope of those deficiencies are shrouded in secrecy.

However shrouded in secrecy our own deficiencies are or are not, with the help of the Holy Spirit, we also are to called to "repent." Those who have served in the military will appreciate the following illustration. The military command is "About face!" This is the command by which the soldier does a sharp turn around, a 180 degree turn, facing in the opposite direction. This is precisely one of the remedies called for in each of the 7 letters - "repent".

Lastly, consider the last part of this first of 7 letters as an inducement, as an enticement, to remain, or become firm once again, in your commitment. "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God. (Revelation 2:7, NIV) It is not accidental that the conclusion of this letter cleverly brings to mind the paradise we know as the Garden of Eden and the

story where Adam and Eve broke covenant with God and ate from the tree of which they were forbidden to eat, and the consequence of which they were expelled. Only by the grace of God will relationship and peace be perfectly and fully restored. Our hope and trust in God in this life will be shown to not have been in vain. All this, and more, awaits those who overcome.

As a reminder, I will not pronounce a benediction after our final hymn this morning but simply dismiss us. You are urged to take the remainder of what would be our typical worship time here and, at home or wherever, use this fascinating letter to the Ephesians as a basis to do your own inner inspection and reflection. I know this is something quite new, but hopefully it will be a helpful strategy, a new way of doing things. When you are finished, go to Numbers 6:22-27, receive the benediction and pray over it in joyful thanksgiving. Then you will have received the benediction for today's worship. May the Lord bless this our Advent endeavor. Amen.