



Westminster
Presbyterian Church
NACOGDOCHES, TEXAS

The Letter to Smyrna
The Church that Knew Its Place
Revelation 2:8-11

Just off the western shore of southern Turkey is the small island of Patmos. I looked it up on Wikipedia to see photos of the island's sandy beaches and rolling hills. It seemed nice enough, and it was there that John was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day. While in the Spirit, John was commanded by the Lord to write down what he saw in a vision, and the result is what we know as the last book of the Bible – The Revelation of Jesus Christ to John.

John was on Patmos **“on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.”** Tradition tells us that it was because of John's preaching and testimony that he was exiled on the island.

One ancient writer tells us that John was put into a cauldron of burning oil, but he was unharmed. Since the Romans could not kill him, they exiled him to the island. That could be. It is the tradition. It also could be that John was simply on Patmos in order to preach and bear witness to the grace of God to the people who lived on the island.

It was on the Lord's Day that John had a vision. In the vision the Lord dictated seven different letters to seven churches in Asia Minor or present day Turkey.

I hope you noticed the map on the front of the bulletin this morning that indicates the location of these seven churches. It is thought that these churches made up a preaching circuit for John and other Christian preachers.

The preacher would start in Ephesus then travel 35 miles north to Smyrna. After preaching the word in Smyrna he or she would continue north to Pergamum. After visiting that church they would travel south to Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and finish the circuit in Laodicea. When you read the seven letters in Revelation, you will notice they are written in the order of the circuit.

Last week, we read the first letter written to the church in Ephesus. In that letter the Lord reminds the Ephesians to remember the way they used to love, and that without love as the motivation for our Christian service, we will lose our light. Don't serve Christ if it is simply a duty, or because you feel guilty, but serve Christ because you love him. That is the only legitimate motivation for Christian service, which may be the most important lesson we will learn from these seven letters.

The second letter is written to the church in Smyrna. Smyrna was a wealthy Roman city where the philosopher Homer was born. It was filled with temples, including the Temple of Zeus. It is said that Smyrna was first in beauty and first in Caesar worship. As part of the worship of Caesar, the citizens of the city were required each year to burn incense to Caesar. This was not so much an act of worship or orthodoxy, but a display of loyalty to Caesar.

With this background listen to the Word as I read Revelation 2:8-11 which is our Lord's letter to the angel of the church in Smyrna:

To the angel of the church in Smyrna write:

These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again. I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich! I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of 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 will not be hurt at all by the second death.

A middle class to wealthy Presbyterian Church in Texas will have difficulty understanding what life was like for our brothers and sisters who lived in Smyrna. During the late first century and early second century the church in Smyrna experienced persecution from the established Jews in the city which appears to take the form of economic persecution; and economic persecution will eventually escalate into more severe suffering. You notice that John referred to the "Synagogue of Satan." It's not that John was anti-semitic. He was a Jew himself, but in Smyrna there were wealthy and influential Jews who were the cause of suffering for the little church there.

In many parts of Rome the Jews were held in high regard. During Nero's reign his favorite actor and actress were Jewish proselytes. The women of Rome especially were drawn to the high moral tone of sexual purity in Judaism.

Referring to the Jews who persecuted Christians, the Synagogue of Satan, John wrote, **“The Devil will throw some of you into prison and put you to the test.”**

Preparing this sermon, I was particularly drawn to verse 9, where in the letter we read, **“I know about your suffering and your poverty -- but you are rich!”** The Christians in Smyrna were destitute or close to it. They were outcasts. They were looked down upon. They were the bottom rung of society. You did not want them as neighbors for they would affect the property values. Yet they were rich because of their faith, which filled them with love and joy; or as the Beatles remind us, “Money can’t buy me love.” Money cannot buy love, and wealth cannot buy fulfillment. Money in and of itself does not bring the satisfaction of a life well lived. The church in Smyrna was rich, because they were doing that which gives value to humanity.

Tony Campolo wrote that when he was a youth he pulled off a Halloween prank with his buddies that caused a great amount of grief for a certain shop owner. They broke into a Five and Dime Store, which today would be the Dollar Store. They didn’t steal or vandalize anything. What they did was far more devious. They went around and changed the price tags on everything. In the morning when costumers came into the store, they found televisions on sale for a quarter, and cheap ball point pens selling for \$200.

The forces of darkness have pulled off the same trick on our society. Someone has broken into our lives and changed the price tags on things. Too often, under the influence of a malicious ploy, we treat what deserves to be treated with loving care as though it were of little value. On the other hand, we find ourselves tempted to make great sacrifices for that which in the long run has no lasting value and delivers a limited amount of gratification. Sometimes I think one of the worst consequences of being fallen creatures is our failure to understand what is most important in life.

What is most important in life? Let me answer this way: what is most important in life is knowing one’s place. That is why these poor Christians in Smyrna were rich - they knew their place.

Let me explain. A daughter, after attending her father’s funeral, said to her mother, “Now Mother, get your things together. You’re going home with us.”

And the mother said, “No.”

The daughter said, “Well, now that Dad is dead, there’s nothing holding you here. We’ve all moved away, and I don’t want you staying by yourself.”

“I’m not by myself.”

“Mother, I don’t want to hear anything about it. Get your stuff together. We’ll arrange for the furniture later, but you’re coming home with us.”

“No, no, no. I’ll stay here. I have my church, and I have my friends, and I have my memories, and this is my place.”

I am still trying to catch my first trout with a fly rod. I just spent a week in Colorado and still could not catch a trout. I have even been on the Gallatin River in Montana, one of the premiere trout fishing rivers in the world, and came away with nothing. Others are pretty good at it, but I seem to just get my line caught up in the trees, and they tell me, “There are no fish in the trees.”

After one trip I was getting out of the water. I was wet and the hook was wet so I guess I was making progress. There was a man and woman getting out of their car with a couple of folding chairs. I said, “I hope you have better luck than I did.”

They said, “We are not here to fish.”

“Oh, are you having a picnic?”

“No.”

“Then why are you here sitting in your chairs?”

He said, “I’m a minister in the United Methodist Church and I am about to retire. We’ve lived over forty years in houses owned by the church, so we bought an acre here along this river, and we’re going to have a place of our own.” I’m talking about place. You have to know that word to understand the Christians in Smyrna.

There was a Jewish scholar at Vanderbilt **University**. His name was Rabbi Siberman. The interesting thing about him was that he never used the word “God.” Once he was asked, “Rabbi, since you will not use the word God, what word do you use to describe the Almighty?”

He said without hesitation, “Of all the names, my favorite is one of the oldest – ‘The Place.’ God is the place.

We have our place. We have our homes. We have places we have to be and places we have to go, but our place is in God. And knowing your place makes all the difference in the world.

For the Christians in Smyrna who were so poor in the eyes of their fellow citizens, they were rich in living, because they knew their place and that made them wealthy.

Few people have been wealthier in life than Mother Teresa. She died 21 years ago - how time flies! We have a generation who has never heard of her. Her life was rich for she sacrificed dearly so she could care for people. Once a television commentator interviewed her in Calcutta, and he said, "Mother Teresa, I wouldn't do what you're doing for all the money in the world."

She replied, "Neither would I." She knew her place.

The concept is a paradox. Paul says in the Letter to the Philippians, **"I count all things as loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus, my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ."** You see Christ was Paul's place.

The Christians in Smyrna who lived in poverty were rich. Do you understand how that can be? They knew their place was in Jesus Christ.

Fred Craddock told the story that during the waning years of the depression in a small southeastern Idaho community, a young minister used to stop by Mr. Miller's roadside stand for farm-fresh produce as the season made it available. Food and money were scarce and bartering was used extensively.

One particular day Mr. Miller was bagging some early potatoes when this minister noticed a small boy, delicate of bone and feature, ragged but clean, hungrily appraising a basket of freshly picked green peas. The minister paid for the potatoes but was also drawn to the display of fresh green peas. Pondering those peas, he couldn't help overhearing the conversation between Mr. Miller and the ragged boy next to him.

Mr. Miller said, "Hello, Barry, how are you today?"

"H'lo, Mr. Miller. Fine, thank ya. Jus' admirin' them peas ... sure look good."

"They are good, Barry. How's your Ma?"

"Gittin' stronger alla' time."

"Good. Anything I can help you with?"

"No, sir. Jus' admirin' them peas."

"Would you like to take some home?"

"No, sir. Got nuthin' to pay for 'em with."

"Well, what have you to trade me for some of those peas?"

"All I got's my prize marble here."

"Is that right? Let me see it."

"Here 'tis. She's a dandy."

"I can see that. Hmmmm . . . only thing is this one is blue and I sort of go for red. Do you have a red one like this at home?"

"Not 'zackleybut almost."

"Tell you what. Take this sack of peas home with you and next trip this way let me look at that red marble."

"Sure will. Thanks, Mr. Miller."

Mrs. Miller, who had been standing nearby, came over to help the minister and with a smile she said, "There are two other boys like him in our community. All three are in very poor circumstances. Jim just loves to bargain with them for peas, apples, tomatoes or whatever. When they come back with their red marbles, and they always do, he decides he doesn't like red after all and he sends them home with a bag of produce for a green marble or an orange one."

The minister left the stand, smiling to himself, impressed with this man who knew his place. A short time later the minister moved to Colorado but he never forgot the story of Mr. Miller, his produce stand, the boys and their bartering. Several years went by, each more rapid than the previous one.

Years later the minister had occasion to visit some old friends in that Idaho community, and while he was there, he learned that Mr. Miller had died the day before. They were having a viewing that evening, and knowing his friends wanted to go, he agreed to accompany them.

Upon arrival at the mortuary they fell into line to meet the relatives of the deceased and to offer whatever words of comfort they could. Ahead of them in line were three young men. One was in an army uniform and the other two wore nice haircuts, dark suits and white shirts . . . very professional looking. They approached Mrs. Miller, standing smiling and composed beside her husband's casket. Each of the young men hugged her, kissed her on the cheek, spoke briefly with her and moved on to the casket.

Her misty light blue eyes followed them as, one by one; each young man stopped briefly and placed his own warm hand over the cold pale hand in the casket. Each left the mortuary, awkwardly, wiping his eyes.

The minister and his friends' turn came to meet Mrs. Miller. The minister told her who he was and mentioned the occasion at their stand and the marbles.

Eyes glistening, she took his hand and led him to the casket.

"Those three young men who just left were the boys I told you about. They just told me how they appreciated the things Jim 'traded' them. Now, at last, when Jim could not change his mind about color or size... they came to pay their debt. We've never had a great deal of the wealth in this world," she confided, "but right now Jim would consider himself the richest man in Idaho."

What did John write to the Christians in Smyrna? "Though you are poor, you are rich."

Mrs. Miller, with loving gentleness, lifted the lifeless fingers of her deceased husband. Resting underneath were three, magnificently shiny, red marbles.

We will not be remembered so much by our wealth, but by our kind deeds. The Christians in Smyrna were poor, yet they were extremely rich, and I think I know why. They knew their place in Christ and in Christ's service. Do you know your place? Amen.