



Sermon, October 22, 2017
Rev. Dr. Craig S. Pesti-Strobel
Coburg and Junction City United Methodist Churches

Sermon Series: Tending the Path
“Cracks Begin to Show”

Scripture: Revelation 2:1-7 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

2:1 “To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands:

² “I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance. I know that you cannot tolerate evildoers; you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them to be false. ³ I also know that you are enduring patiently and bearing up for the sake of my name, and that you have not grown weary. ⁴ But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. ⁵ Remember then from what you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. ⁶ Yet this is to your credit: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. ⁷ Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. To everyone who conquers, I will give permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God.

The letters that are part of the first few chapters of the book of Revelation were written possibly near the end of the first Century CE. Although they don't pertain specifically to the second 500 years of Christian history, they contain an interesting statement that guides my reflections: “You have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember, then, from what you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.”

If you have ever sat down and read through the Gospels, it should be obvious that we have lost something of what that itinerant healer, teacher, and spiritual man who wandered for three years the length and breadth of Galilee and Judea. None of his teachings could ever be construed to be in support of great political empires, yet by the end of the 4th century, which was later measured roughly from his birth, Christianity had become the de facto official religion of the Roman Empire. Christian missionaries had spread out along the roads laid down

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by the Romans to carry troops out to distant lands in order to conquer them, and then for use by traders and merchants to bring goods and materials back to Rome.

Sometime around **385-9** A son, named Patricius, was born to a Christian Roman couple who were stationed in the far colony of Briton. Around the year 400, he was captured and taken captive by pirates to Ireland. As a slave, he was made to tend the sheep of the tribal warlord who had captured him. It was while tending sheep that Patrick began to pray and to meditate upon the teachings about Jesus his mother had tried to instill in him. In 407 escaped, having heard a voice that directed him to leave the sheep and head towards a boat. He returned to his home, but studied to become a cleric. In 430 (?) ordained; 432 (?) he had a vision of Irish voices calling to him to return back to Ireland and to bring the Gospel. He became a missionary bishop (about 47 years old). 461 Patrick died.

Patrick introduced “green martyrdom to replace the red martyrdom of the Irish battles and myths. Young converts would move into a craggy rock or remote hill and live a subsistence life of begging and simply farming and gathering. Their martyrdom was one of leaving society, not killing enemies or being killed. They also dispense spiritual advice and many people not only sought them out their advice, but began to come out and live with or near them.

This “green martyrdom” quickly led to the monastic tradition.

“Since Ireland had no cities, these monastic establishments grew rapidly into the first population centers, hubs of unprecedented prosperity, art, and learning.”

From the monastic tradition established in Ireland, some monks were sent out to the Frankish lands in Western Europe. Preeminent among them was Columbanus. He was born about 540, and in 590 went to Gaul as a missionary. Died in 615, and in the 25 years between 590 and 615, he founded between 60 and 100 monasteries.

Stepping for a moment back in time, **410** The Fall of Rome to Alaric and the Visigoths, which were a Germanic tribe, originally north of the Rhine

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and Danube rivers. Visigoths sack Rome, but they had been converted earlier by Arian Christian missionaries, so they respected property held by Christians and by the church. This is generally depicted as the end of the Classical Roman Empire, and led to a breakdown of the structures of trade, education and political administration that had held together an empire that once stretched from the British Isles around the Mediterranean to Egypt, and up to the middle of Europe. The main institution left to carry on any vestige of Roman Civilization was the Church, which quickly adopted the practices and structure of the Roman political administration.

The adoption of the model of Roman Law by the Western Church led to the development of the vast edifice of Canon Law, which still exists today, and to the inexorable conclusion that the place of the church and its officials was as enforcers of that canon law, and to the strong parallels of power between the church and the empire.

Monasteries became the centers of Christian life and of learning and literacy. Classical culture and learning was preserved in two directions: in monasteries, beginning in Ireland and spreading into Frankish lands with establishment of monasteries under missionary work of Columbanus, and via Muslim centers of learning in cities like Baghdad and Cordoba, Al-Andalus. Many lands and tribes became Christianized during this period.

Now, while the Western regions of the former Roman Empire were struggling under the various invasions of Germanic tribes, the Eastern portion of the Empire actually flourished with its capital of Constantinople, and became known as the Byzantine Empire. This empire almost entirely spoke Greek, and it cultivated a continuation of the Greek philosophical and educational traditions, which were lost in much of the Latin-influenced West, with the exception of the monasteries.

The cracks between Eastern and Western forms of Christianity began to show in various ways. One example regarded the use of images in worship. **726 – 787** The iconoclastic controversy. Emperor Leo III attacked the use of images, arguing that they too easily became objects of worship, which leads to idolatry, which is condemned by the Bible.

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John of Damascus defended the use of icons in worship by differentiating between veneration and worship. He also argued that the use of images is an affirmation of Christ's humanity, because a real person can be depicted. The opposition responded that images of Christ are not valid depictions because they can only represent his humanity, but not his divinity.

787 Council of Nicea supports the decision of John of Damascus concerning icons. This decision was not well-received in the West because John's words for veneration and worship were difficult to translate.

800 Pope Leo III crowns Charlemagne head of the Holy Roman Empire. His dynasty is called the Carolingian Empire. His reign is the cultural high point of the Early Middle Ages. In fact, it is Charlemagne who revives the title of “Emperor.”

From the Encyclopedia Britannica: “The theological genius of the East was different from that of the West. The Eastern theology had its roots in Greek philosophy, whereas a great deal of Western theology was based on Roman law. This gave rise to misunderstandings and at last led to two widely separate ways of regarding and defining one important doctrine—the procession of the Holy Spirit from the Father or from the Father and the Son. The Roman churches, without consulting the East, added “and from the Son” (Latin: Filioque) to the Nicene Creed. Also, the Eastern churches resented the Roman enforcement of clerical celibacy, the limitation of the right of confirmation to the bishop, and the use of unleavened bread in the Eucharist. Political jealousies and interests intensified the disputes, and, at last, after many premonitory symptoms, the final break came in 1054, when Pope Leo IX struck at Michael Cerularius, the Patriarch of Constantinople, and his followers with an excommunication and the patriarch retaliated with a similar excommunication.”

Do you remember those words from the book of Revelation: “You have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember, then, from what you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first?” What else had the church abandoned?

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One of the ways in which the church got lost was in the series of controversies that ended up in the formal split between Eastern and Western expressions of Christianity. Much of the source of the controversies had to do with the status of Rome, and its bishop (later, the Pope), and the bishops and patriarchs in other ancient centers of Christianity, such as Antioch and Alexandria, as well as Constantinople. What was lost in this process? How about these words from Jesus: ““You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. ²⁶ It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, ²⁷ and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; ²⁸ just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:25-28).

The church divided itself in various ways in regard to this admonition of Jesus. In one way, by stepping into the political vacuum left by the fall of the empire in the West, the Western branch of the Church adopted that very action of “lording it over others.” However, there were those missionaries and monastics who sought to live out the teachings of Jesus through prayer, learning, and service to others through the monastic communities. And the vast majority of peasants simply tried to survive, oblivious to theological controversies and political intrigues, until they were called into service fighting for some lord or king on whose land they tried to eke out their livelihoods.

“But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember then from what you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first.” This seems to be the constant struggle of faith: between the message of transformational love that Jesus brought, and its abandonment by his followers as they pursue instead the love of power.

What about us today? How will historians in 500 years look back on our time? Where will we be in their evaluation of what happened to the Church, and what Christians did with Gospel of love and human transformation that Jesus brought? Will we abandon the love we had at first, or will we repent and do the works we did at first?