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Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church
Mark James Toone

You've Got Mail: Overcoming Hypocrisy Revelation 3:1-6

Cyndi and I returned yesterday from Spokane where we were attending the fall board meeting of Whitworth College. We announced the launching of a \$50 million capital campaign. Among other things, it will build a state of the art classroom building and grow our endowment to allow any qualified student the chance to receive a wonderful Whitworth education of the mind and heart. The amazing news is that they have already raised \$33 million towards that goal! I got a chance to see our three Chapel Hill kids. Every one of them said the same thing: Whitworth is unbelievable, they are having a ball and they are going to make all their friends go there next year. In fact, I think all of them are home this weekend for autumn break.

As Cyndi and I were sitting there for the festivities, I leaned over and said, "You realize, don't you, that eleven years from now we will be sitting here as parents of a Whitworth student!" Kind of ruined the rest of the evening for us.

We continue with our series "You've Got Mail." Today we come to the city of Sardis, situated about 40 miles southeast of Thyatira, last week's church.

There are some things you ought to know about the city of Sardis to appreciate the nuances of this morning's text. First, her best days were behind her. Way behind her. Sardis was situated on a hill with steep cliffs on three sides. In ancient times, she was a prominent and well-defended city. She was once the capital of the Lydian kingdom which was ruled by the ultra-rich King Croesus. In fact, they mined much gold out of a nearby river. Not once, but twice, Sardis was taken and utterly humiliated by her enemies. Though it was thought to be impregnable, Cyrus took it in 549 BC and Antiochus again in 218 BC.

But not only was Sardis defeated, it was the way in which Sardis was defeated that is even more noteworthy. In both cases, the city was taken completely by surprise. Cyrus captured it by deploying a climber to work his way up a crevice on one of the nearly vertical cliff faces that protected the city. Antiochus accomplished the same thing in the third century BC. A man from Crete named Lagoras led fifteen men in a daring assault up the mountain face. They got inside, opened the gates and let the enemy in. So, in both cases, the city of Sardis fell because they were not vigilant.

Finally, Sardis was renowned as a center for the dyeing of wool. They were said to have invented the art and it was the centerpiece of their newfound

prosperity. Now, listen to the words of Jesus spoken to the church of Sardis.

There's no letting up, is there? Jesus has had some severe things to say to most of the churches so far. But none exceed what he says to the church of Sardis. He doesn't even start with words of praise as he usually does. He just dives right in: "I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead."

Wow! Don't sugar coat it, Jesus. How do you really feel? Even at his most severe, Jesus found something good to say to the other churches. To the blasé Ephesians he said, "I know you are hard workers and don't tolerate apostasy." To the idolatrous Pergamites he said, "I'm proud of you for hanging in there even when your friend Antipas was martyred." To the immoral Thyatirans he commends them for their love and faith, for their service and perseverance.

And how does he sweet-talk the Sardisian church? "I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but YOU---ARE---DEAD!" That about says it, doesn't it? No problem understanding where he is going with this one. You have a reputation for being one thing but, in fact, you are just the opposite. You are dead.

What do we call someone who portrays himself as one thing on the outside but, on the inside, he is something else entirely--a Hypocrite. Jesus used this biting word against the religious leaders. What does it mean? It was a word from the stage. A hypocrite was a speaker on stage, one who read or acted a part. And often, he was the speaker behind a mask. A hypocrite was one who played a part, all the while hiding their real selves from the audience.

John never uses the word "hypocrite" in this text. But it fits, don't you think? Look again: "You have a reputation for being alive." What was the mask they wore? It was a mask of spiritual life. It was a mask of spiritual health and vitality. To those looking in from the outside, they appeared to have it all together. Perhaps they had great worship services. Perhaps they did a lot of acts of charity. On the face, they looked good. But inside, they were dead.

Eight years ago, Cyndi and I were adding on to our house. We had a house of 1300 square feet. We added 2000 square feet. I had no idea what I was getting into. But with the help of lots of wonderful Chapel Hill men, we made it. One of the things I did on my own, however, was the tile work in our new shower. I did not know that you were supposed to put up concrete backer board. So, when the ceiling of our basement started to leak, I was sick at the thought of what was going on behind those walls. The tile in the shower was beautiful. But when I finally took a deep breath and smashed at it with a hammer, my worst fears were realized. It was soaking behind the wall. The sheetrock was a soggy mess. The studs were

rotting away because of water damage. A nest of ants had taken up residence inside the wall. The outside paneling was curling.

On the face of it, our shower looked just fine. But if you got just below the surface, you discovered that it was rotten, rotten, rotten.

What is one of the favorite excuses for unbelievers not do attend church? "It's just full of hypocrites." It's about the worst thing that people can think to say about the Church. They pretend they are one thing but inside, they are something entirely different. That's the way most movies portray us, especially those of us who are clergy. We put on the air of being holy and pious but really, at our core, we are money grubbing, manipulative phonies. It's the reason that the media enjoys trumpeting the moral failures of Christian leaders. When a Jim Bakker or a Jimmy Swaggert are found out, it just delights the media. Behind every article and interview you can hear them saying to themselves, "We knew, we knew, we knew it all along."

The poor Sardisian church. They were living on past glories. Just like their city, their best was behind them. There was a time when they were real, when their faith was genuine, when their church was healthy. But those days were behind them. They were dead. How many American churches would be the recipients of this awful letter?

I'll be honest with you, Jesus' words to the church at Sardis strike painfully close to home because I believe that we Presbyterians live in Sardis. We are a denomination whose best is behind it. Our days of effective ministry and mission as an institution are past. In fact, I don't even know if it could be truthfully said of us that we have a "reputation of being alive." Our denominational structures...many of them...are dead. Our churches...thousands of them ...are dead. Our presbyterian brothers and sisters...perhaps tens of thousands of them...are spiritually dead. We are living in our past glories and unable to see or admit the terrible condition in which we find ourselves.

Of course there are exceptions. Many, many wonderful exceptions. I believe Chapel Hill is one of those exceptions. But then...before I become to cocky...I find myself feeling very nervous. Because it was just when the city of Sardis felt they were impregnable that Cyrus attacked and defeated them. And three hundred years later, when the memory of that first humiliating defeat was dim, just at a time when **they** thought themselves again to be unbeatable, they were again humiliated by the Seleucids.

The very next words from Jesus are striking when you remember that historical context: "Wake up!" Literally the word means "be vigilant...be watchful." Don't get caught sleeping on your watch. Don't become lackadaisical. Don't let down your guard. Don't worry about preserving and projecting your image. Worry about what is going on inside of you. And strengthen what is left before it dies away, too.

Ah, so there is hope. The church of Sardis is dying...dead...yet there are some signs of life. So, what is the spiritual antidote to hypocrisy? How do we overcome it? Humility. Again, that is not a word that is used in the text but it is a word that describes what Jesus is calling for. He tells them to **remember** what they had received and to **repent** of what they had become.

There was a time when their relationship with Jesus was fresh and genuine. There was a time when they understood what Jesus had done for them on the cross. There was a time when they felt their total inadequacy before God and then experienced the glorious forgiveness that is in Jesus. There was a time when they repented...when they did a 180 degree turn and headed the other direction. And Jesus says, "Remember those times. Remember when you were soft and gentle and broken before me. Build up those good parts of yourself."

It is only the humble man who can do so. It is only the humble woman who can offer such prayers. Hypocrisy is born of hubris. It is the prideful pretense that we have it all together spiritually. The truly humble person cannot be a hypocrite because they are so aware of their dependency upon Jesus that they have nothing to fake.

There is a paradox in this passage: Even though Jesus pronounces the church "dead," there is hope. This is, after all, the living one, the resurrected one. He is in the business of raising the dead to life. Jesus looks into the midst of even this phony-baloney church and finds hope. Finds a few who still have some life in them. And did you notice how he describes them? Here in the midst of a city that prides itself on its beautiful, colorful woolen garments, how does Jesus describe them? Verse 4: "Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes."

I think that is great. These people who make their living by selling beautiful woolen goods would know exactly what Jesus was saying, just like my father-in-law who owns a chain of dry cleaners in Salt Lake City. But notice what he promises those who don't fall into the hypocrisy trap. Not the richly colored garments of Sardis. No, Jesus promises to dress them in simple garments of white. Could it be that once again Jesus is saying, "You've got to get this. It is not what you wear on the outside...it is not the façade you put up that counts. I don't look at the fancy clothes that cover you. I look at the humble hearts within. Those are the ones with whom I walk. Those are the ones with whom I will spend eternity."

Jesse "The Mouth" Ventura really has managed to step in it in his short tenure as governor of Minnesota, hasn't he? He is doing a pretty good job of offending just about everyone in America. He certainly managed to frost every religious person in America with his remarks a few weeks ago. What was it he said? Something along the lines that he doesn't need organized religion. Only the weak need religion. Man did that get a response. Then he held another press conference to explain what he said the first time...and only managed to dig himself in deeper.

I can't speak for the other religious groups he managed to offend. I can't even speak for the rest of you Christians. But speaking for myself I would say to Jesse Ventura ---you're right. I am weak. That is exactly why I need Jesus. And why I need Jesus' church. Because I am weak. And left to my own devices, I make bad decisions and do bad things. I am not able...I am not strong enough...to do the thing I want to do which is, be good enough to get God's attention and earn his favor. I can't do it. Only Jesus can. That's why I need him. That's why you need him. And that's why you are right about me, Governor Ventura.

It is when we have the humility to admit what we really are...to admit how needy we really are...it is then that we are the most genuine, the most real, the most honest and honorable before the Lord and before the world that looks on. I don't want Chapel Hill to be another Sardis. We are a church with a reputation. A great reputation, I believe. The community speaks well of us. We have a reputation for being alive, vital, innovative.

Man, I don't want to be blindsided by the enemy as we are enjoying our reputation. I don't want to be sailing along, comfortable with the façade we place before the community all the while, growing deader and deader inside! We are **precisely** the kind of church that needs to listen to these words because we don't think they apply to us. Because we look at our parking lot and see scads of cars and hundreds of bodies. Because we look at our calendar and see scores of activities. Because we DO have the reputation for being alive...we must be vigilant. We must be watchful. We must be doubly cautious to make sure that what we present ourselves to be on the outside is, in fact, what we are through and through.

And you know where that begins, don't you? A church that would repudiate hypocrisy must begin with people that would repudiate hypocrisy. One by one by one. You and you and you...we begin by saying, "No more games. No more show. No more religious pretensions. I am not going to present myself as one thing on Sunday morning and go back to being the same ruthless cutthroat that I am the rest of the time. By God's grace I am going to bring all of my life into the purifying light of God's love and, in humility, surrender all I have and am to Jesus."

Many of you already know about my three-year-old Cooper's beloved friend, Bear Bear. I spent a good deal of one vacation day tearing apart a Safeway store where Cooper lost his Bear Bear because he was inconsolable. And now, believe it or not, Cooper is approaching his fourth birthday. He has many other good friends. But when push comes to shove, there is no one like Bear Bear.

The other day he was sitting there holding Bear Bear, sucking his thumb, getting sleepy enough to be hauled off to bed. Cyndi looked and said, "Oh Cooper, Bear Bear is dirty. He's just dirty. We've got to wash him." Without a pause, he pulled his thumb out of his mouth and said, "He's not

duhty. He's puhfect." And then he popped his thumb back in his mouth and pulled Bear Bear even closer to his cheek.

If we are willing to pull down the façade and throw away the masks; if we are willing to set aside hypocrisy and admit that, in fact, we really are pretty dirty and need cleaning up and only Jesus can do it, we will be surprised to hear Jesus saying, "You're not dirty; you're perfect." And he pulls us even closer to himself.

Wouldn't it be great if it could be said of the believers here at Chapel Hill that we are genuine? That we are devoted to tearing down religious pretense? That we welcome sinners into our midst because we know that we too are sinners and we are happy for the company of like folks. And that together, in humility, we are present ourselves before the only one who is able to take our dirty rags and exchange them for pure white garments.

SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS OVERCOMING HYPOCRISY

Revelation 3:1-6

Pastor Mark Toone

October 24, 1999

- Read the text. How does this letter strike you compared with the other four we have studied? How is the tone different?
- Pastor Mark chose "hypocrisy" as the theme for this church. Can you see why? Define hypocrisy. How have you heard it used against the church? Against yourself? In what way was the Sardis church guilty of hypocrisy?
- What does Jesus suggest they do in order to revive what little life remains? Pastor Mark suggests that the word "humility" might sum up their hoped for response. Do you agree? Discuss.
- Jesus threatens to "come like a thief." What does he mean by that? Is that similar to others of his teachings? And what does it mean for a person's name to be blotted out of the book of life? Can we lose our salvation?
- Pray. Please pray for the upcoming stewardship dinners, that the fellowship will be great, the message inspiring and the response generous and joyful.