

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
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“Love Amidst Certainty”
[Revelation 2:1-7](#), [Genesis 3](#)

Resistance is futile. You will be assimilated. For any of you who are Star Trek fans you will recognize those as the words of the Borg, the machine like species that defeats and assimilates every life form they encounter. But if you were a first century Christian, you would recognize it as well. It was the mantra of the Roman Empire. What we need to understand about the Roman Empire was that it had learned some lessons from the Empires before it. One of those lessons was that you do not try and annihilate your enemies...you absorb them. You absorb some of their customs. You absorb their religious inclinations and the pantheon of their gods and goddesses. You absorb them so that they will want to be part of your empire and will not be continually striving for freedom. The problem this posed for early Christians was that assimilation was not an option. To be a Christian meant that you worshipped one God and not many. To be a Christian meant that you had one Lord who was Jesus Christ and not Caesar. Being a Christian meant living according to a very different set of ethical norms which prevented you from participating in much of Roman life. The question became, was it possible to not be absorbed.

The Ephesians demonstrated that it was indeed possible. The Ephesians, at least up to the end of the first century had been able to maintain their identity as followers of Jesus. To maintain their freedom was not easy. The words coming to the angel of Ephesus speak this difficulty by referring to the Ephesians struggle and non-violent resistance to assimilation. They speak of enduring patiently and bearing up for the sake of Christ. So how did they do it? What was it that gave the Ephesians the ability to survive? Simply put, it was right-believing; right doctrine. What I mean by that is that the Ephesians were very clear about who they were, what they believed and what that meant for living lives as resistors to assimilation. We hear this again in the words to the angel. “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...Yet this is to your credit; you hate the work of the Nicolaitans...” In other words the Ephesians survived by being clear about their faith. Such faithfulness and resistance would seem to be all one needed...yet as we discovered it was not...there was something missing.

What was missing was love. “But I have this against you that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember from what you have fallen; repent; and do the works you did at first.” Evidently what had happened to the Ephesians is what often happens with religious people...they lose love and become intolerant. What had mattered to them at first, was loving one another. What mattered most now was doctrinal purity...which brought with it intolerance and prejudice against those who did not measure up. And this is the temptation of every religion. It is to use doctrine and rules as the final measure of who is good and who is not. And I know that our temptation is assign this kind of intolerance to our opponents...those on the other side.

The trouble is, is that this kind of intolerance knows no bounds...right or left. This became clear to me about four or five years ago. I was invited to attend what was labeled as an educational event about ordination in the PCUSA. This was an event put on by those who are in favor of a more inclusive and expansive view of ordination. This was one of the first events of its kind in San Antonio which tended to be a city dominated by those who desired a more narrow and less inclusive view of ordination. I was hopeful that this event would not be one which consisted of the kind of name calling that I had found in the more conservative side of the debate. Unfortunately I was to be disappointed. By the time the meeting was over it was obvious that those who hosted it, including the leaders of the national movement, believed that anyone who disagreed with them were blind, arrogant, mean spirited, ignorant, knuckle dragging Neanderthals.

Where this leaves us as followers of the Christ who came to show God's love to the world, is that we are called to a delicate, yet vital balancing act. We are called to be clear about who we are, what we believe and why we follow the risen Christ, while at the same time showing unconditional love for all...both friend and enemy. We are called to this balancing act because without theological boundaries we will be assimilated into a world that does not always live as Christ would have us live. In the same manner, without love, we have lost the heart and soul of who we are, and of whose we are. And there is no better example of what that balancing act looks like than this communion table. For at this table we reaffirm that we are followers of the one who came from God to give his life to give us life...and we see the kind of love we are to have. So this morning as you come to the table I challenge you to ask this question, how is my balance? How well am I holding to Christ and loving others?