

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
The Reverend John Judson
“The Church of the Living Dead”
May 9, 2010

[Revelation 3:1-6, Micah 6](#)

It was supposed to be an easy walk. I was 13 and my family was taking their very first vacation to Colorado. We had been there a couple of days when my father asked the Park ranger what would be an easy hike. After a few moments the Ranger said, “Flattop.” It was only about four and half miles and only about a 3,000 foot elevation rise. Great my father said, and he packed up my older brother, my mom, me and himself for the hike. When we arrived at the trail head I said, “This is great,” because we were surrounded by lakes, aspen trees and animals of every kind. What only dawned on me later was that this short walk began at 9,500 feet and ended at 12,500 feet. So about half way through the hike, when we had cleared the tree line and all you could see was rocks and I was sucking wind big time, I said to my mom, “Are we there yet?” Smiling she said, “John see those tiny specks way up on the mountain?” “Yes,” I replied. “Those are people and that is where we are going.” It did not take me long to process that information and I said, “This is too hard,” sat down and told my mom that I was done.

Have you ever been there? Have you ever done that? Have you ever started something and far too soon discovered that it was not as easy as it looked and said, “This is too hard.” Maybe it was playing an instrument; you got to chop sticks and then just gave it up. Maybe it was golf and after a few lessons and shooting a two hundred...on nine holes...said, “This is too hard.” Or perhaps it was calculus, or bio-mechanics...or it does not matter. Most of us have probably come up against that moment when something is simply too hard to want to continue. If you have then you know how the people at Sardis thought about following Jesus. From what we can gather about this church the people began their relationship with Jesus in a very positive way. When they discovered that there was a God who loved them they said, “This is great.” When they learned that God’s son Jesus had come to give them eternal life they said, “This is great.” When they discovered the joy of living in a caring family they said, “This is great.” Everything was great and so they got a reputation for being alive. But then something happened. Something made them change, “This is great” into “This is too hard.”

What the church at Sardis discovered was that while following Jesus was great, it was also very hard. When they discovered that their friends no longer liked them because they were different, the Sardis believers said, “This is hard.” When they were expelled from their trade guilds, meaning they could not longer earn a living, they said, “This is hard.” When the government began to see them as threats, they said, “This is hard.” What happened then is that they gave up. Like me on the trail to Flattop the members of the church in Sardis quit working at being believers. While they had started strong they chose not to finish the life of Christ. We know this because in verse two we hear Jesus telling them, “Wake up and strengthen what remains and is on the point of death, for I have not found your works perfect in my sight.” And

the word “perfect” does not mean without flaws, it means incomplete. In other words the works that they had once done as Jesus followers they were doing less and less, rather than more and more. Like a plant that is not being fed they were dying. They were the church of the living dead because they said, “This is too hard.”

This letter is a powerful reminder that the church was never intended to be one more self-sustaining social institution. We were created, called out to be a living community in which people were trained, equipped and sent out as Jesus people, living a particular kind of life which reflected the love and grace of God in Christ. We were to be a people who worked at releasing, renewing and restoring God’s world. We become the church of the living dead when we forget our purpose and become more interested in the institution than in the mission. So how then does a church regain its life? Can a church be resurrected? Can a church once again say, “This is great”?

The answers are yes, yes and yes. Jesus tells the church at Sardis how to do it. We begin by remembering the stories we have already been told. “Remember then what you have received.” What they have received are the stories about the life and work of Jesus. They know what it is that Jesus has done for them and what it is that Jesus expects of them. These were the stories that they first heard that made them say, “This is great.” In fact how many of you have a favorite Jesus story? What Jesus asks of us is that we remember those stories and let them inform us as to how we are to live and love others. The second piece of this is that we are not only to remember but that we are to do what it is that we remember. When we think of how Jesus lived...he fed the hungry, he forgave those who hurt him, he helped people find God, he loved children, he cared for strangers and those who were not popular. He told us to clothe the naked, feed the hungry and house the homeless. See if we remember we know what to do and we can do these things and say, “This is great.” To use a more modern term, “This is not rocket science.” This is intentional faithful living.

I sat on the trail for about twenty minutes trying to catch my breath and thinking that reaching the top was impossible. But then something wonderful happened. Even as my father and older brother disappeared from sight up the trail my mother wandered back and sat with me. She said it was up to me whether to go on, but that she was sure that the destination was worth the effort. With her patience and encouragement I made it...barely...but I made it. And she was indeed right. When I finally got there and saw the view I said, “This is great.” The same is true of our following after Christ. It is not always easy. It is often hard work that calls for difficult choices. But in the end, if we are willing to be a church alive, it is worth it...for we will say at the end, “This is great!” because we have discovered the joy of being those who helped change lives and the world for Christ and we will hear Christ confess our name before God above.