

The Smell Of Three Churches

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[0 : 00] Our God and Father, grant that as we are in the midst of this season of Lent, that you will grant to us the wonderful grace of the gift of repentance and faith.

Father, we need very much to be renewed in our personal lives, in our life together as a congregation. We need the forces of your gracious gospel renewal to touch our city and our country.

We ask that we may hear as those who are willing to obey. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Now, if you turn to the epistle to the Galatians, which is on page 176 in the Blue Pew Bibles, Fran and I just spent a week in the state of Oregon.

The highways from the border down into Oregon were festooned with yellow ribbons. You have the remarkable experience of every store you go into or restaurant you stop at.

They treat you like a long-lost first cousin. There's a tremendous sense of euphoria that the war is over and that the victory is complete.

[1 : 42] And we went down, as George Bush made his sermon or his talk, that was interrupted 12 times by standing ovations.

We went through a great Indian reserve at Warm Springs and all the bushes along the side of the road were festooned with yellow ribbons.

A tremendous sense of well-being, a tremendous sense of unity, a tremendous sense of purpose. We've fought the battle in the Gulf. We want to fight it on the streets of our big cities.

We have been hit by this terrible savings and loans problem, but we're going to overcome it. A tremendous sense of power and of victory and that they're going to go ahead, which when I thought to the sad state of my own country, to which I am deeply loyal, I was envious, I must say, that if something could galvanize us into a sense of purpose, the way this victory in the Middle East seems to have galvanized the United States, it would be a great thing for our country.

And I prayed for and longed for our country that we might find something. But where are we going to find it? And though it may simply be my private opinion, I don't know where to find it except in the gospel and how people are to hear it and to respond to it.

[3 : 16] Well, I also was covetous for our church, you know, that we would have a tremendous sense of the victory that has been won and that we might respond knowing that the victory has been won to fight the other battles that need yet to be won.

And that that's a great place for the church to be. And as we prepare for Easter, when we celebrate that victory over death itself, that we may have a tremendous sense of all that God has given us. So I just wanted to tell you that, to share that with you. Now I want you to look at the text that I've chosen for today, which is very brief. And it's a verse, it's the end of verse two, which says simply to the churches in Galatia.

Do you see that? Now I've been, what we're trying to do during this Lent is get you to read epistles, the whole thing at once. You know, we mostly are, our biblical information is made up of a text from here and a text from there and a text from somewhere else and a text from I don't know where.

And a text from no place at all, which I've sort of got in my mind. Those kinds of things make up the content. And what I'm anxious you should do is to get hold of this, of some of these epistles, like the epistle to the Galatians, which is highly controversial, which is extremely rude, which at some places is funny and some places very abrupt.

[4 : 56] But you have to find that for yourself. And that can only happen as you sit down and enjoy reading it. But I want to tell you about three of the churches that are spoken of in the epistle to the Galatians.

And the way I want you to identify the churches is by smell. You can smell these churches. It's not a matter of geography, and it's not a matter of who the leaders are.

It's how the church smells. I don't know if you've ever considered how the church smells. Well, there are three kinds of churches that are spoken of in this epistle.

And one of them smells musty and old and orthodox. You've probably smelled churches like that.

And one of them smells fresh and beautiful, like you stuck your head in that whole decoration of flowers there.

And one of them smells as though it's gone bad a little bit. And it's just off. You know how you pick up a jar and you open it and you smell and your nose sort of squints?

[6 : 12] So that there's those three kinds of churches. And I want you to think about those three kinds of churches as I see them in the whole of the epistle.

Now, I'm not going to give you chapters and verses, but I want you to know that all the evidence I'm putting before you is right there in the epistle, somewhere between chapters 1 and 6.

And you can go home and find it. You can make notes, if you like, about them. This is the first church, the one that's musty and orthodox, and it just smells old.

And something's wrong with it. And this is how it's described in the epistle. It's caught up in this present evil age.

It's a church that was violent in the persecution of other congregations.

[7 : 14] It was a church that was very orthodox and kept the law to the letter, as they imagined. It was a church that compelled circumcision because that was the sign that had to be there in order for someone to belong to the people of God.

It's a church that felt the weight of the law as a curse upon it, a law that could never be fulfilled, a law that forced people into hypocrisy to pretend they had fulfilled it, a law that was a burden too heavy to be borne.

It was a church that was in despair about the inheritance that belonged to it because they thought that somehow they had to deserve that inheritance and were trying hard to deserve it and covering up mostly the fact of their undeserving.

This is the church that smelt so old and musty. It was a church that had made a temporary condition of the law to be its permanent condition.

That is, the law was to serve a purpose for a certain amount of time, but after that, it was to change. It was like Paul when he was hailed into court and he made his defense.

[8 : 43] He said, I was taught to look to the law because the law pointed to someone coming back from the dead. And he said, I went through the law and I discovered the person coming back from the dead.

And they left him in prison. It's the musty oldness of the church is pointing to something, but people don't like that.

They just prefer the sentiment and the tradition of what's old and musty, and they stay in it. This church is, they claim to be children of Abraham, but they don't exercise the faith of Abraham.

Abraham, this church is prisoners to the law. You know, lots of people don't come to church because when they do come, they smell it and it's old and musty and full of law, and they recognize the futility and hopelessness of it, and they're driven away by it.

That's what they smell when they come into church. Lots of people come to church with a good sense of smell and don't last very long because that's what they smell. The church is full of children who have not grown up.

[9 : 58] A church is full of people who are guardians and trustees telling other people what to do. It's a church that is enslaved by the basic principles of the world.

It's a church that's under a curse, not under a blessing. And so that's the first church that you can read about. And all the evidence that I've suggested to you is right there in the epistle to the Galatians.

The next church is the church that smells lovely and fresh and attractive and compelling and makes people want to belong. And that's the church that Paul was seeking that all the churches in Galatia should become like this one.

It was the good news church. It was a church in which the gospel, the only gospel, had been preached and which the wonder and love of the gospel was so attractive and so compelling and so fresh and so vibrant that everybody was drawn to it.

And it was a church which Paul said, you know, it had the kind of smell about it of a maternity ward. I don't know. Maternity wards are full of flowers and loveliness and they're lovely places to go.

[11 : 25] And Paul says, I'm laboring among you like I was in childbirth, that Christ be formed in you. Something lovely is happening. Something beautiful is happening.

Christ is being formed in the midst of this congregation. That's what it was. It was a church that was brought to be by the Spirit, that was maintained by the Spirit, that was to continue on in the Spirit. That passage which Tim read for us this morning, when you began, how did you begin? In the Spirit. How are you continuing? In the law.

No. No. You're to continue in the Spirit. It's a church which had an inheritance which was not based on the performance of the people, but on the promise of God.

Very different. Religion, isn't it? A church based on promise received by faith, rather than performance regulated by law.

[12 : 31] And this was the church at the center of which was Christ crucified. A beautiful church.

And that was its center in focus. And it was fresh and alive and vibrant. The third church is spoken of here in this epistle to the Galatians, and it's the church that's begun to go bad.

It was fresh and alive and vibrant, and now it's going bad. And Paul is writing to them. And I would rather be musty with orthodoxy, that's my natural bent, than to be just to smell bad, you know.

Which is what happens to churches that have come into the wonder of the gospel and somehow have got turned off and gone bad. True of our lives and true of our congregations.

So the third church, Paul addresses as, you foolish Galatians. When you've seen the loveliness of the church that has been called out by Christ and established by his death and resurrection, when you've seen that, why do you turn back?

[13 : 57] Do you suppose that there is another gospel? There isn't any other gospel, Paul says.

There is no other message from God, which is the good news of his eternal purposes in Christ. Do you think because you still have the desires of the flesh, that the freedom you have in Christ is so that you can indulge those desires?

contrary to the leading of the Holy Spirit, on which the life of the congregation depends? All these churches have to confront the desires of the flesh.

All of us in our Christian life have to confront them. In our personal and private life, we have to confront them. But Paul says to them, you don't have to give in to them.

Because you have the Holy Spirit, which cleanses and purifies and maintains and preserves you and keeps you and brings you back, renewed in the power of the Holy Spirit.

[15 : 11] That's why you're in church this morning, that you may be renewed by the presence of the Spirit, by your encounter among one another with God the Holy Spirit.

Not listening to the dull orthodoxy of our liturgy, which you may think of it that way. We like to belittle it, don't we? But it's very good.

But it's not that. It's that through the reading of the Scriptures, through the music, through the communion, we may come in touch with the renewing life of God the Holy Spirit, and we might overcome the desires of the flesh which drag us down all the time, and that our lives will begin to display the fruits of the Spirit.

Maybe just little at first, but it begins, and that's better than nothing. So, this third church is thought there might be another gospel.

It's thought that the liberty they have is in order that they can indulge the flesh. They thought that now that they have come to this wonderful experience, they will revert back to the law which has tradition and all sorts of things going for it, and which is what they were brought up in and they're more at home with.

[16 : 34] This third church, which has begun to go bad, has rejected as the central reality of the church the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. That's no longer central to the life of this congregation.

It's begun to smell bad. And that's why. It's become a man-pleasing church. It's become a church which says, oh, Paul, he lacked integrity anyway.

We shouldn't do what he told us to do. It's a church which has become hypocritical again. And pretending to observe the law to cover up the inward and smelly reality of a faith that's gone bad.

It's a church that is willing to become a prisoner. It's a church that's willing to become enslaved again to things that they had been set free from.

Something has gone seriously wrong. Now, I would delight to belong to the church which is fresh and alive. I could understand belonging to a church that is musty and orthodox.

[17 : 52] But to a church that stinks because of this, that's worst of all, isn't it? That's the thing that can happen to us.

Because once we have tasted all that is new in Christ, to go back into that. And that's the danger that confronts us.

And that's the danger that confronted one of the churches in Galatia. So we have to look this morning. And I want us to look personally and I want us to look as a congregation at the, what kind of church do we want to belong to?

Do we want to belong to one that is innocent of the gospel and has never heard it? And that the church that tries harder, it's second best, but it tries harder.

No, that's not the church we want to belong to. The church that tries hard to be good and ends up in frustration and disappointment. And so many people are not worshipping on this Lord's day because they've experienced the mustiness and the frustration of trying to accomplish by their own efforts that which can only be theirs by the gracious gift of God in Christ.

[19 : 15] They don't know about that. That's the kind of church that we don't want to be. What we want to be is a church that is led by the Spirit, that is full of joy, that is, has the gift of faith, that has, knows the one gospel, that is, that is a church enabled by Christ, a church that will inherit the promises.

The reason I'm preaching you this sermon this morning is because so much of this is my own experience as a minister in this congregation.

I watch the dead hand of orthodoxy reaching out and squeezing the life out of the church sometimes. and I also watch people who have known the fullness of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and who have glimpsed the glory of God in the cross of Jesus Christ turning back.

I mean, I see that happening to myself. I want to blame you for it, but I, you know, because you raise all sorts of questions for me and you present me with all sorts of difficulties and you make all sorts of demands which I foolishly tried to meet and all that kind of thing happens and instead of living in dependence upon and the leading of the power of God's Holy Spirit and glorying only in the cross of Christ, you try and please people and you can't do it.

There is no way you could ever do it. There is no way that we can be a congregation that is pleasing to men, pleasing to our humanity, pleasing to our society without us beginning to stink with hypocrisy and legalism and immaturity.

[21 : 15] That's what would happen. so we want to be a spirit-led, joy-filled, faith-gifted, one gospel, Christ-enabled church that's inheriting the promises of God.

And that's the church that Paul portrays brilliantly in the epistle to the Galatians. And the church that we don't want to be is the church that is deserting the gospel, the church that is turning back, the church that is relying on self-achieving victory over the desires of the flesh, the church that has lost its joy, the church that is enslaved by the law, the church that is defeating, the church that is man-pleasing, the church that stinks with death.

We don't want that. And so Paul brings his whole epistle to a glorious climax when at the conclusion of it he says, God forbid that I should glory save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

That's what he said. That's the glory of the church. That's the means by which God the Holy Spirit that's the thing that attracts our faith and God the Holy Spirit is communicated to our hearts and to our lives to our prayer and to our worship and to our relationships one to another.

That's the enabling power of the Holy Spirit comes as we glimpse the glory of God in the person of Jesus Christ crucified. That's why at the center of our service is the Holy Communion.

[23 : 10] drink this in remembrance that Christ died. Drink this in remembrance that Christ's blood was shed for you. That's why you're not allowed to come to church on Easter morning unless you've been through Good Friday to understand how it is that Christ fulfills all the aspirations of man's ancient religious instincts and becomes a curse for us so that we through faith in him might enter into new life.

So I just pray that God the Holy Spirit might deal with my heart and deal with your heart and deal with our hearts as a congregation to renew us and to make us a fresh joyful spirit led congregation in every aspect and dimension of our life together.

Having a little epilogue service today just for people who want to pray as well for particular concerns in their lives of illness or other difficulties and you're welcome to stay for that afterwards but that we all may make it that we may be wonderfully refreshed in our faith and trust in the God who has made himself known to us in Christ crucified and that that strange picture of shame should be the one in which we are renewed and in which the glory of God is revealed.
Amen.