

REKINDLING THE FLAME

September 9, 1984

TEXT: Revelation 3:16 "So because you are lukewarm and neither cold nor hot I will spew you out of my mouth."

Many Christians know very little about the book of Revelation except that it is full of fantastic imagery. Perhaps they have tried to read it from time to time, only to be put off by its very picturesque language. All one has to do, for instance, is turn to the thirteenth chapter, verse one, and read: "And I saw a beast rising out of the sea with ten horns and seven heads, with ten diadems on its horns and a blasphemous name upon its heads. And the beast that I saw was like a leopard, its feet were like a bear's, and its mouth was like a lion's mouth." About that time we are inclined to agree with a little old lady in one of my former Bible classes who exclaimed, "My stars! I just don't believe that man slept good."

Actually, however, the book of Revelation contains much that is useful. What a pity so few people really understand it! Even its fantastic imagery served the very practical purpose of concealing its message from Roman authorities who would surely have surpressed it had they realized what it meant. But the picture we find in this morning's scripture lesson is very different. Its meaning is clear enough even to those who do not know the circumstances which produced it.

What, for instance, could be more obvious than the sixteenth verse, which is my text this morning, "So because you are lukewarm and neither cold nor hot I will spew you out of my mouth."? It doesn't take any special information or scholarly knowledge to understand what the author is saying. You know as well as I that he is telling them --and us--that indifferent, half-hearted Christianity is not good enough. It was not good enough during the time of persecution when the book of Revelation was written. And it is not good enough today. If Christianity is to have any impact --in any era-- it needs more than luke-warm commitment from its adherents.

One of the great preachers and teachers of preaching of this century, Halford Luccock, once wrote, "One very popular substitute for following the teachings of Jesus is to admire them. It is popular because it is so much easier. It is always in good taste to admire Christianity, and it costs nothing. Admiration of this kind is worth just what it costs. . . The purpose of the Gospel is to plow down deep into men's lives and make them fruitful in the largest sense. It is a poor substitute for this to pay the Gospel a few cheap and easy and empty compliments." So Jesus, when asked which was the greatest commandment answered, "Thou shalt love the Lord, thy God, with all your heart and with all your strength and with all your mind."

Now some of you may be wondering who I'm talking about. Perhaps about all those people who belong to this church but aren't here this morning? Or about those others who generally agree with some of Jesus' more palatable teachings but are not interested enough even to join a church? Well I'm not! In the first place, none of them are around to hear what I am saying. And, in the second, Jesus had some very hard things to say about those who look for the speck in their neighbor's eye but ignore the log in their own. So I'm talking about us. I'm talking about us because we are here, because we are listening, or at least I hope so, and because we are the only ones we can do anything about. I am talking about us because, in the words of the comic strip character, Pogo, "We have met the enemy, and they is us!"

Here, of course, you may be saying, with some justification, "Why us? We're not indifferent. We're not apathetic. We care about the church. We support it with our contributions. We got up this morning and came to church. We serve on committees and boards and sing in the choir. Why is he talking about us?" And my answer is that I know you do all those things. And I know how much I do, too. But I also know that neither Christianity nor this church will ever accomplish what we were meant to accomplish unless we all do more. And I know that few, if any of us, can really claim that we love the Lord our God with all our heart, and with all our strength, and with all our mind. So when I read this passage from the book of Revelation I have to believe that it speaks to us.

First of all, please note that this letter is not addressed to the heathen. It is addressed to good church people just like ourselves. Nowhere does it say, or even imply, that they are bad. In fact, it specifically says they are neither hot nor cold. The word for cold is psuchros, and it means cold enough to freeze. It means without any heat at all, and was often used of a fire which was completely out. Figuratively, it means to have no enthusiasm at all. Now the letter says that the Laodiceans were not psuchros. They were not frozen; they were not without enthusiasm; their fire had not gone out. Like us, they believed; they met for worship; they prayed; they sang; and they taught their children about their faith.

But if they were not cold, neither were they hot. The Greek word is zestos, and it means hot enough to boil. The Laodiceans were not accused of being cold. They just weren't hot enough. But then John says a very strange thing. He says, "O how I wish that you were either cold or hot. But because you are lukewarm and neither cold nor hot I will spew you out of my mouth." Actually, the English translation has watered it down a bit. It really says "I will vomit you out of my mouth." And the Laodicians surely understood what it meant. Theirs was a town with no water supply of its own. All their water came over aqueducts from mineral springs six miles to the south.

Those mineral waters were drinkable when they were very hot, but by the time they reached Laodicea they were lukewarm and thoroughly nauseating. At that temperature they literally induced vomiting. Only if they were either chilled or reheated could they be kept down.

So you can see how appropriate the letter is. And, yet, note what it is saying. It is saying, "O how I wish that you either had no religion at all or that you were really enthusiastic. Either one would be better than the nice, polite, conventional religion you have now." William Hale White once wrote "Most of us have no real loves and no real hatreds. Blessed is love, less blessed is hatred, but thrice accursed is that indifference which is neither one nor the other." Here John is saying the same thing.

Does that surprise you? It really shouldn't. I have often heard that a golf pro would much rather teach someone who has never had a club in his hands than someone who has been practicing mistakes of twenty years. Since I fall very much into the latter category, I can certainly understand why. And we all know that there is no one more enthusiastic than a new convert to something. No wonder John writes, "O, would that you either had no religion at all or that you were really enthusiastic. Either one would be better than the nice, conventional religion that you now have. The Laodiceans had religion, but they didn't have enough. And neither have we. If we had, the world would not be in the mess it is in. Our lives, and the lives of those around us, would be more abundant, not in things but in the spirit. And the words, "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven," would seem a lot less like words and lot more like reality than they do now.

So what can we do about it? If there isn't enough zest to our religion, if we are too often spectators and too rarely participants, what can we do about it. If we, like Timothy need to hear the words of Paul, saying, (I Timothy 1:6) "Here I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you. . . ." How do we do that? The answer, it seems to me is pretty obvious. By getting closer to the flame. We have a fireplace in our family room, and I am one who really likes a good fire. In fact, so much so that sometimes I get a bit grandiose, and once the fire really gets going I realize that I have put too much wood on it and it is burning more furiously than is safe. Then I reach in with my tongs and take a log or two out of the fire and lay it to one side.. It is still in the fireplace, but away from the flames, and even if it is burning its fire slowly dies out. Then, when it is time to add more wood, I just reach in with the tongs and put those logs back on the fire and they burst into flame once again. If Laodicea had been closer to those mineral springs, their water would not have cooled so much during transit. William Barclay says that there was an unwritten saying of Jesus, "He who is close to me is close to the fire." And John 15:5 says, "I am the vine and you are the branches. He who abides in me and I in him, he it is who bears much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing."

If we are to rekindle the gift of God that is within us, we must draw closer to the spirit of God that was in Christ and that seeks to dwell in us. We don't have to deserve it. We don't even have to find it. It is always with us patiently waiting to be admitted to our hearts and lives. All we have to do is to open the door and let the spirit in. For, in spite of the harsh words which opened this morning's scripture reading, don't forget the way it ends: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door I will come in to him and sup with him and he with me." If life is empty, or even lukewarm, here is the answer: rekindle the gift of God that is within by getting closer to the flame. Or to be more accurate, by letting the flame come closer to us, to dwell in us as it so lovingly seeks to do.