

# Will We Let Him In?

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Revelation 3:14-22 NRSV

*And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the origin of God's creation:*

*"I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth. For you say, 'I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.' You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. Therefore I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire so that you may be rich; and white robes to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen; and salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see. I reprove and discipline those whom I love. Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me. To the one who conquers I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself conquered and sat down with Father on his throne. Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches."*

Our text for today is taken from the book of Revelation, chapter 3, verses 14- 22.

Listen first to verses 14-18:

"And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the origin of God's creation:

"I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth. For you say, 'I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.' You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. Therefore I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire so that you may be rich; and white robes to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen; and salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see.

I imagine that most of you have already checked your e-mail this morning. We are so used to doing this, that we hardly give it any thought. Things were different in the time of Revelation.

The post itself was a luxury reserved for the emperor and official business. John had to entrust

his letter to a messenger who would go by ship to Ephesus, then travel from church to church. That was a far cry from today's e-mail!

Still, our e-mail is similar to the letters in Revelation in at least two ways. First, just as we are always concerned about hackers breaking into our e-mail, so were John and his friends worried about the possibility of the book falling into the wrong hands. Therefore, just as today some e-mail messages are encrypted, so did John encrypt his, to keep it from prying eyes.

But then there is the other side of the coin. Even though we do not wish to have everyone read our e-mail, we like to send copies to others. It is as if we wanted people to overhear what we are telling each other.

And in this too, our current practice is similar to that of Revelation. The book opens with seven letters to specific churches. But these are not private letters. They are not even letters intended to be read only in the gathering of each particular congregation. They are letters whose reading is intended to be overheard. Thus, by the time the reading in Laodicea comes to the verses that are our text for this morning, the Laodicean Christians have already heard the messages to the other six churches. They have heard that the Ephesians "are enduring patiently and bearing up for the sake" of the Lord; that believers in Smyrna suffer poverty and are being afflicted; that those in Pergamum are living "where Satan has his throne"; etc. They have heard all of this, and they know that the problems in those other churches are not theirs.

They are not persecuted; they are not poor; no one among them is teaching strange doctrine. On the contrary, they are all quite moderate, and they seem to have reached some sort of accommodation with the surrounding society. They have no problem.

But John sees things differently. You think your easy-going moderation, avoiding conflict and difficulties, is an asset? "Because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth." You think you are rich, and have prospered, and need nothing? "You are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked." You may think that you are better off than those other churches, poor, persecuted, beset by doctrinal debates; but you are not. Your problem is precisely that you have no problem!

As I look at the church in today's world, I find that these words strike painfully close to home. We hear of Christians in Sudan suffering under the imposition of strict Moslem law; of Christians in North Korea pressured by a totalitarian state; of Christians in several countries in the Middle East hemmed in by a society that allows them to exist, but not to grow; of Christians who are so poor that they must meet under the trees; of pastors whose library includes five old but treasured books. We have none of those problems! We are safe, secure, sophisticated. And we say, "we are so blessed!"

In such circumstances, the words of Revelation strike terribly close. Could it be that, precisely because we think we are rich, we are poor? That our supposed sophistication is in truth a

lukewarm commitment, that makes us neither hot nor cold? That, even though we think we are blessed, we are wretched?

But then this letter to the Laodiceans has another context beyond the book itself. Scholars generally agree that the entire book of Revelation was intended to be read at a communion service. At the table, Christians in Laodicea know that they are part of the same church as their sisters and brothers elsewhere. This table reminds them that they too are part of a church that dwells where Satan has his throne, of a church that is poor, persecuted, confused, struggling. This table makes them participants, not only in the suffering and the victory of Jesus, but also in the sufferings and the hopes of the entire church—of the church persecuted in Pergamum and confused in Thyatira.

But the text continues . . .

Verses 19-22 say:

I reprove and discipline those whom I love. Be earnest, therefore, and repent. Listen! I am standing at the door knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me. To the one who conquers I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches."

We have probably all seen the famous painting of Jesus standing at a vine-covered door, knocking. It is a door without a doorknob, one that must be opened from the inside. It is said that the door is to the human heart. Clearly the idea for the painting is taken from this passage in Revelation. Surely there is something true about the painting. But in this passage, we just

read, Jesus is not knocking on the individual human heart but at the door of a church—a congregation—the faithful gathered in Laodicea. And that makes an enormous difference in the interpretation of the passage.

It is not an informal, spontaneous gathering of the Laodicean church. They are gathered for their Sunday celebration of the Eucharist. We know this because John ends his whole letter with the words: "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen." Paul ends his first letter to the Corinthians in the same way: "Our Lord, come! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you." In both cases, the letter closes with words that introduce part of the Eucharistic service itself. It is a way for the writer to preach to the congregation even though he is not there in person. His letter is read at the point in the service that leads directly into the sacrament. They are gathered to celebrate the presence of the risen Christ in the midst of the congregation, for that was the major emphasis of the Lord's Supper at this time.

And yet—while the church is inside celebrating his presence with them, Jesus is outside, knocking, ready to join them if they will only open the door. Hear again the words of Jesus in the text: Jesus is outside, offering to come in and eat with them. They are eating without him. All the proper rituals, the right words, can be said, but Jesus remains outside until he is invited in, which means he comes in as the Lord, the host. He reclaims his Table and his church.

This church seems to have lost the sense of who is Lord. They do things as they wish—and they are doing well. To invite Jesus in would mean giving him the Lordship over their life as the church.

It is dangerous to invite Jesus into the church. Jesus is not a perfect guest by any normal standard. There is a famous story in Luke about Jesus at a dinner hosted by a leader of the Pharisees. Jesus attends—it is in his honor. But he immediately chastises the host about the guest list: he has invited the wrong people! Instead of inviting his friends, he should have invited the poor. No book of etiquette—no Miss Manners—would countenance such behavior. In other words, to invite Jesus in is to give up control over the gathering. For the church, truly to invite Jesus in is to remember that it is his church, not ours. He is never a guest. He is the real host, or he is outside.

Laodicea evidently wasn't ready for this. They paid lip service to Jesus as Lord but excluded him from the real governance of their life as a church. So even at their most solemn moments—when they celebrated his presence—they excluded him from exercising it. His rebuke: "You think I am in there with you, but I am outside, waiting to be asked in to assume my rightful place as your Lord."

The early church was right in what it celebrated at the Eucharist: The joyful reunion of the people of God with their risen Lord—at his Table—at his invitation. Every true celebration is a renewal of his presence as Lord, a renewal of our commitment to be his people, his church.

The gathering at Laodicea that first heard John's letter must have been shocked. Was John saying they weren't really a church at all? Not quite. At least the Lord was at the door knocking—a sign that these were his people, and he belonged in there with them. And his words to the church were hopeful: "I reprove and discipline those who I love. Be earnest, therefore, and repent."

The words to Laodicea are also words to us, especially when we gather at the Lord's Table: The one to whose table we are invited is the Lord. It is his table, not ours. It is his church, not ours.

Hear again the words to the church:

"Listen! I am standing at the door knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me." Amen.