

The Living Dead

In the name of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars, dear friends in Christ: A very basic reference book for people in the medical profession is the *Merck Manual*. It's an index of medical problems. It describes the symptoms of various diseases and says a bit about treatment for them. In our Lenten meditations we've been looking at the letters of Jesus to the seven churches. Think of them as the *Merck Manual* for the Christian church. In these letters we find a list of ailments that have infected – and that continue to infect – churches that bear Christ's name. We also find the cures prescribed by the Great Physician himself. So, as we read these letters, we should be asking self-diagnostic questions like: how is our church like the one mentioned in the letter? How do we manifest the same symptoms of sickness? On a more personal level, and recognizing that a church is a collection of individuals, we should ask, how am I acting like the members of the church in the letter? Then, having identified the disease, we should ask: what's the prescription for getting better? May God give us the grace to do this as we continue this evening.

Last week, we looked at the church in the wealthy city of Thyatira. While there were some signs of health, like the church's increasing propensity to perform acts of love and service, there was also a grave problem in this body of Christ that might be likened to a potentially fatal brain cancer. A woman in the church claimed to be a prophetess. Her false teachings were leading members away from the truth of the Gospel. Unfortunately, she was being tolerated and allowed to keep on teaching by the very people whose job it was to oversee the doctrinal integrity of the church. She needed to be cut out like the cancer she was; and Jesus made it clear that if the church didn't do it, he would – and with her would go all those who had been led astray by her. Because they'd let it go so long instead of treating it early, the whole church would suffer in the end. All of which speaks to our need to stay watchful for the warning signs of false teachings, and to nip them in the bud.

Tonight we heard what the Divine Doctor says is right and wrong with the church at Sardis – though in this case, there's a lot more wrong than right. In fact, the Doctor says the patient only gives the appearance of life; she is, in truth, dead – or well into her final stages. In that, she is a lot like the city of Sardis itself.

You see, Sardis was once the capital city of the ancient kingdom of Lydia. In its day, Lydia was a force to be reckoned with. It was a significant contributor to culture, science, architecture, and the arts. As the capital, Sardis was at the center of it all – but that had been a long time ago: five hundred years at least. When John wrote Revelation, Sardis was a hollow shell of what it had been, its glory long since faded. Still, the inhabitants were intensely proud of their past. And like many peoples who have a hard time reconciling an illustrious history with the grim realities of the present, they tended to assess their present worth and nobility by looking at the crumbling ruins of an era long gone by. “See what great people we are? Look at what our ancestors did!”

This same attitude was mirrored by the church at Sardis, even though the church there was only about 40 years old. I don't mean that the members thought they were something special because they were from Sardis (though they probably did); but rather that the congregation was trying to live off its own once great reputation. They were looking back at who they were in the past and the wonderful things they had done as a church instead of looking

honestly at who they are now and what they are doing at the present. Diagnosis: they were dying of the dread disease *nostalgia*.

It's amazing how fast this disease can set in – even to a relatively young congregation. Thirty or forty years is all it takes because that's a generation. Especially at Sardis, the original adult converts to Christianity would be mostly gone by now. They had been called out of their pagan lives and transformed by the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. They had been on fire for the Lord. But by now they would have handed things off to the next generation – a generation that had, for the most part, been born and raised in the church and really didn't know what it was like to live without the Gospel of God's grace. And for that reason they did not appreciate it as much as their fathers had.

It's been rightly said the Christian Church is always one generation away from death. Each generation must discover the Gospel for itself anew. You can't live off the faith of your parents or grandparents. Hopefully they will be instrumental in guiding you to the truth, but you have to experience the Good News of Christ crucified for sin and raised to life for your justification for yourself. You must make your own journey of faith. This is true; but I need to make this clear: it doesn't necessarily take thirty or forty years for a church to start dying of nostalgia. We all have a tendency to want to rest on the laurels of the past. Your faith can die of fond memories of *your own* past: "Boy, I used to be a faithful Christian. You should have seen me the day I was confirmed!" You can't live on that today. The life of faith is an ongoing journey—but it's like going up a down escalator. If you stop moving forward, you don't stay where you are – you go down and backwards. Your faith begins to die.

This was the problem at Sardis. Jesus says, "You have the reputation for being alive, but you are dead." The casual observer might think that things were going well in the church. There might be every *appearance* of life. But inside, *spiritually*, they were dead. It was a zombie church; its members just animated corpses. Like a bad horror movie, they were the living dead.

Exactly how this is so is not certain. From patient to patient the same disease may behave differently. And sometimes the same disease will be classified according to how the symptoms appear: like diabetes. You've got type I and type II (maybe more – I'd have to look in a *Merck Manual*). Well, it happens that the living death of nostalgia disease appears in several types also.

The first is what's referred to as Dead Orthodoxy. In such a church doctrine is carefully guarded and taught – as it should be. Great emphasis is placed on working out intricate details of the faith, and solving deep, philosophical questions of theology. That's not wrong in itself. But in a church suffering from dead orthodoxy, people are so focused on being right that they literally become "damned right". They reduce the Christian faith to a mere intellectual exercise. Faith is equated to nothing more than assent to a collection of precisely formulated doctrines. The Gospel becomes information: a fact to agree to, rather than a powerful, life-changing message of salvation. People learn the Scriptures to know *about* Jesus. They do not learn the Scriptures to *know* Jesus.

A church suffering from dead orthodoxy will emphasize ritual and tradition. And there's nothing wrong with rituals and tradition; every church has them—even those that insist they don't. But in a dead orthodox church the rituals and traditions are carried on without meaning. If you ask about a particular ceremony, "Why do we do this?" The answer is, "It's because we've always done it that way!" There's no awareness of the significance. But you see, rituals and ceremonies are created to highlight and convey a message. You know you are suffering from

dead orthodoxy if you're engaged in a ritual that you do not understand, but you still cherish the ritual for its own sake and you'd fight to preserve it. Such ceremonies become works without faith – and without faith there is no life: the church is dead.

Another form of living death that infects churches (and individuals in them) is what we heard St. James address this evening: the problem of faith without works. This fits hand in glove with dead orthodoxy. We understand that we are justified by faith in the saving work of Christ and not by any works that we could possibly do. The point that James is making is that a faith that produces no good works cannot be called saving faith. Works do not save; but saving faith *works*. A faith that doesn't work is dead. Those who know the love of Christ through the Gospel are motivated by his love to act. They help the sick, poor, and needy; they contribute their time, talents, and treasures to good causes; they seek to extend God's kingdom of grace through the spread of the Gospel; and they do what they can to grow in God's grace through learning to know Christ better. God's love within them compels them to do these things.

That brings me to yet another way to be among the living dead. You see, it's possible to have the sort of mental faith I've mentioned, and to be active in good works – to be out doing all kinds of wonderful things for other people – but to be doing them without love. In 1 Corinthians 13, the great chapter on love, St. Paul says it like this (and I'm paraphrasing): Suppose I understood every biblical truth perfectly, and believed them; and that I could proclaim God's Word to you with the speech of angels; and suppose that I gave all my possessions to the poor, and surrendered my own body to be burned as a martyr for the cause of Christ—suppose I did all that: without love, it wouldn't be worth a thing. Works themselves can become dead rituals. *"We're collecting money for the poor, just like we always do. Why? Because we always do."* *"What? Another collection for the poor? Oh, right: 'God loves a cheerful giver'. Here you go. But I sure wish those infernal poor people would go get jobs."* If faith without works is dead, then it's also true that faith and works without love are equally dead.

So there are several ways in which a church may appear to be alive but be dead. Fortunately for us, our Lord Jesus Christ came into the world to overcome death. And where the Word and power of God are still present in a church, its death may be only slumber. That's why the Lord tells the church at Sardis (and ours here) to "Wake up". His call breaks forth like the rising sun to end the night of the living dead. His Word has the power to bring his church back to life. And ironically, the cure to overcome nostalgic's disease involves looking backward. He tells his church to *remember*—not what tremendous Christians we used to be, or what great things our church once accomplished, but rather what *we once were*: lost, condemned creatures, without hope and without God in the world. He calls us to remember what we've received: a true and living faith by the Holy Spirit he gave us in our Baptisms – a faith in the Gospel that washed away our sins, and clothed us in the white robe of Christ's righteousness. By calling us to remember, he calls us to return in repentance to that moment of Baptism: when we died with Christ, were buried in the water, and were made new again by his word of forgiveness.

To those who continue to walk daily in this baptismal life, he makes a sacred promise: "I will never blot your name out of the book of life." There is, of course, a subtle warning there. It implies that it can be done. The living dead will not inherit the kingdom of God. Their names *will* be blotted out of the book of life. Therefore he calls us not be among the living dead, but rather for each of us to be one of the dying living: those who are constantly dying to sin and self to live in Jesus and his love. These will he dress in white and acknowledge before his Father in heaven. So may he give us the grace to stand always among the living. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!