

It seems like C.S. Lewis and his Narnia series have fit well into several sermons lately (if you have not read these they make for great summer reading and are also great to read with children or grandchildren. We have several sets that we are willing to loan if you are interested). In the third in the series, The Voyage of the Dawn Treader, the adventurers have stopped on a remote island inhabited by invisible creatures. Lucy, the only girl on the voyage, is asked to go into the magician's house and find his book of magic spells and release them from the invisibility spell he has cast on them. While searching through the book she comes upon several spells she would like to try—she is able to resist several of them but one, the one that allows her to hear what others are saying about her is too hard to resist. She is not pleased with what she hears. She quickly turns the page, “but not before a large, angry tear had splashed on it.”

Paul, as he writes to the congregation in Ephesus, says of them, “*I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints.*” Even in a day before Facebook, Twitter and the World Wide Web news of what was happening in Ephesus was being told throughout the region. For the most part it was good news. They have a strong and growing faith. A faith that Paul prays, with thanksgiving, will continue to grow and mature in the coming days. They are making a positive impression in Ephesus and around the region.

It is interesting to note that, perhaps a few years later, John writes of the Ephesus congregation, “*they have lost their first love.*” This should serve as a reminder to us that our situations are always changing. We cannot count on our past history to carry us forward into the future. “Yesterday” does not always move forward into today.

However, for the present Paul is pleased with what he is hearing about the work and ministry of the congregation in Ephesus. He is pleased with

- Their faithfulness to the Gospel - their first love
- Their love for one another - building of Community
- Their work for the Kingdom of Christ - being doers of the word

They are making a reputation, a positive one, on the world. They are encouraging others in the faith. Their story is being told in other congregations in other regions. Paul is well pleased about what others are saying about the congregation in Ephesus.

I remember being asked what I did. I told the questioner, and he then asked what congregation I served. I told him. He paused for a few moments and then said, “Oh, the fighting church.” I asked him what he meant by that. He told of growing up, living near the church, and on warm spring summer and fall evenings sitting on the porch and listening to the church members fight at their monthly business meeting (the windows were open). It was a sense of entertainment for the neighbors...thus the “fighting church” designation. Now this was forty years after the “fights” and the image was that this was still a fighting church - I never did experience this. (Have even heard of a congregation in Australia that carried its fight out into the parking lot and the pastor was hospitalized because of injuries sustained - just a few years ago.) Our reputations often stay with us longer than we wish they would and travel much further than we could imagine.

The report from Ephesus is a good report. Paul's prayer is that they continue along the road they are now on. He asks for continued unity among the members, that they

continue to walk with Christ and that they put on the “whole armor of salvation. He ends praying that *“their love for Christ would be undying”* (Eph. 6:24).

Of course this led me, as usual, to a series of questions: What are they saying about us? What if we came across the magician’s book of spells and could find out what others were saying about us? Would we dare speak the spell and listen to what they are saying about us? What might we learn in the process? Would we have courage to listen? What type of letter would Paul write to us today?

Now I know that this is not an easy thing to do. All of us think we are doing a good job – and we are! Although it is often hard to see ourselves as others see us and evaluate ourselves. The congregation I served in New Hampshire had the opportunity to broadcast our services via the local television cable company. We bought a professional camera and recorded our services to be aired twice weekly – we could not go on live (equipment costs) but could air recorded worship services. It was hard to watch ourselves (what in the world did I do that for?). And, we almost lost two lay leaders in the process once they saw themselves. However, rather than quit we decided to use it as a learning experience and improve what we did. We were amazed at the number of people who watched and the comments we received (both good and bad).

The question is not what we think of ourselves, but what does the world think about us? Now I know that our job is not to please the world. If we are doing our job correctly the world should not be happy with everything we are doing. However, we **MUST** learn that the world does not have a positive attitude toward the church, not because of what we stand for but because of our actions. This is hard for us who have given ourselves to the church to hear. People are being drawn to Christ and to “spirituality” but not to the church. They want to know Jesus but not within the framework of a local congregation. We stand in need of a check-up – a good look at what it means to be the body of Christ.

It is not that we are trying to keep up with the world or please the world but that we are trying to be like Jesus. People flocked to him. They wanted to be around him. They invited him to their parties and celebrations. He was the “hottest” ticket in town. We must become as Jesus was.

Why are people not seeking out the church? What are we doing wrong? What are we doing right? The question is one of self-examination. A time when we listen and respond (in love). The more we listen the more able we will be to change the world and the image of Christ’s church (we need to remember it is his church and not ours. What happens in one sector affects all of us (for good or bad). May this be said about us, *“I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the Saints.”*

NIV, New International Bible Society, Zondervan, 1973, 1978, 1985
NRSV, Division of Christian Education, NCC, 1989
Lewis, C.S., *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, Macmillian Publishing, NY, NY 1952