

NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH

October 7, 2018

The Crossroads – Dear Church

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If you have your Bibles with you this weekend go ahead and turn over to Revelation chapter 2, verse 18, and if you don't its okay, we'll be putting the words on the screen, you can follow along with us. It's been a different; it's been a difficult couple of weeks. I have friends from across the political spectrum coming from different stories and different perspectives and many of us over the past couple weeks have been wrestling and questioning and really trying to lean in and listen to the stories of others to try to hear their perspective and I'm carrying within me this weekend the stories of women who have been abused, stories of men who have been abused. I'm carrying within me this week and the story of a friend who reported her abuse and it was disregarded and dismissed, and the story of a dear friend who was falsely accused. And the commonality I believe that we all find is that over the past couple weeks we've all been wrestling with our own demons and facing our own fears and we brought all of that together this weekend to the table of communion into the peace and the presence of Christ, the one who more than anyone else can understand and empathize with our own individual stories. Now some of you this weekend probably think that I am on the platform this weekend because of the events in the last couple weeks and we thought it might be a good idea to elevate the voice of a woman and in that some of you would applaud that decision others of you might find yourself slightly irritated by it, some of you would have given absolutely zero thought to it except that I just said it. {laughter} And so maybe if I could just give you a little insight into how we plan our calendar; this weekend was actually on the calendar for me to speak over a year ago. And so here I am and I just want you to take a moment across all seven of our locations and just look around. Okay. Your right your left. Make sure you look somebody in the eye. I just want us to recognize for a moment community of faith. This is the family of God; this is the body of Christ. So can we just lean in for a moment and listen to the words of Jesus?

Revelation 2:18

<sup>18</sup> *"To the angel of the church in Thyatira write:*

*These are the words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze.*

<sup>19</sup> *I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are doing now more than you did at first.*

<sup>20</sup> *Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols."*

Father, give us ears to hear what you're saying. May you open our minds to be renewed by your truth? May you give us hearts that are transformed by your love? May you stir our imaginations

to see the potential of your church and to see your Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven?  
Amen.

Well, welcome to the Dear Church series for those of you that are just jumping in with us, or maybe it's been a few weeks. I'd love to get you caught up to where we are. We are talking about the seven messages or letters that were written to churches around Asia Minor sometime around the year AD 90 during the reign of Emperor Domitian, possibly most probably by the disciple John. Now, a lot of us have a really hard time with this book of Revelation, right? I mean some of us have tried to dive in and we find ourselves surrounded by charts and timelines and interpretations that often contradict and leave us confused and others of us find ourselves reading it and then we get to trumpets and vials and bowls and we just flip back over to Ephesians where things make more sense. But here's what's really interesting about this book while we might find it confusing the early church obviously was not confused by it. The fact that this book has been kept around and included in this larger book that we call the Bible meant that it made perfect sense to the church in the first century. They understood it, they believed it, they knew what it meant, they knew how to apply it. They found that its teaching was Apostolic and helpful and beneficial to the churches, that it was standard faith and practice for communities of faith. They put it in the canon and they believed it was worth keeping around for posterity sake, for application and teaching for the church for generations to come. They understood what it meant and so maybe instead of beginning with the question. What does it mean? We should start with the question; what did it mean? And when we start with the question, what did it mean then we can move to the application for our contemporary times.

A few weeks ago Pastor Joel gave a lot of background on this book, a lot of background on Revelation the seven churches and I'm going to spend just a couple of minutes today to get us kind of caught up with that and reminded of that. And so the first thing I want to talk about is geography and the second is culture. So, geography let's look at a map really fast of the seven churches that were written to. One of the things that you'll notice when you see a map of Asia Minor and those ancient seven churches, you'll find that they're kind of on a loop. This probably constituted an ancient mail circuit thus being written to these churches it was delivered in that way and in that format. The other thing that you notice is that many of these churches were situated at crossroads. Now in the ancient world a cross road didn't just mean you had to put a stop sign in place, crossroads were very important places. They were the places where culture and politics and society collided; they were the convergence points of ideas and ideologies. They were hubs of commerce and communication and technology and ideas. If you wanted to get a message out across the ancient world it would often get out at one of these crossroads. And so it's no accident that churches were founded in these places. And when we think about how in the world did the ancient church multiply itself and gain such influence so quickly if we look at this strategic placement, we find that God had his people exactly where he wanted them to be. And the question that they faced was will they be faithful and will they be obedient at the crossroads; at the crossroads of culture, at the crossroads of politics, at the crossroads of life, at the crossroads of technology, and ideas.

Second thing, culture; the cultural realities of the churches of all seven of these churches, they faced tremendous external pressure from the culture surrounding them and incredible internal tension from the very different personalities and people that were involved in the life of the

church. Now, the early church was composed of two very different kinds of people; there were the Jewish people that had come out of the temple and the synagogues of Jerusalem and Judea. Jesus was a Jewish man, and so the original followers of Jesus were Jews, and then synagogues that were spread around the Roman Empire began to get word of his message and word of who he was and some of them began following him as well. But then there were also these Gentiles who found the message of Jesus to be much more compelling than the philosophies of the Pagan world of Rome? So they started following Jesus too and they started showing up at the communion table and the gatherings of the church. And if you could just imagine for a moment that a Jewish Zealot trying to overthrow the Roman Empire and a Roman Centurion whose job it was to keep the peace are coming together around the communion table. Would the way of Jesus be compelling enough to cause them to love one another? Would the message of Jesus be strong enough to cause them to look past their individual differences? Would their commitment to Jesus transcend their other affiliations, opinions, preferences and affiliations? That was the critical question facing all seven of these churches.

You know, I think a lot of times at NCC we pride ourselves in our uniqueness that we're in a place or Democrats and Republicans can come together and worship God but what happens when the dividing line is much deeper than your political preferences and it gets into your identity. I mean in contemporary times think about Israelis and Palestinians; the Hutus and the Tutsis Rwanda; I don't know maybe Vikings fans, Packers fans serving one another could it work? Could they navigate it? Was it sustainable? What was going to happen and would Gentiles be required to convert to Judaism in order to follow Jesus?

As Pastor Joel said a couple weeks ago, the decision of the Jerusalem Council in Act 15 is playing in the background of every one of these letters, because in Acts 15 a decision had to be made about the Gentiles because the Jewish people were looking at them and saying hey, you've got to become Jewish in order to follow Jesus. And the question was did you have to become culturally Jewish in order to be a follower of Jesus and the Jerusalem Council decided, 'no', that there were just three prohibitions; to stay away from idolatry, stay away from sexual immorality and stay away from murder, bloodshed, blood sport. Now on one hand this caused a great deal of friction because Jewish people are looking at that and thinking wait have you seen all of the laws I have to keep, all the rules, all the regulations, all the stuff I have to do, that's not fair? And on one hand it does seem like low-hanging fruit until you think about the cultural context of the Roman Empire; idolatry, sexual immorality ran rampant, blood sport was the entertainment of choice in the coliseum in the Circus Maximus. To be a Roman businessman or a Roman soldier and follow Jesus was close to an impossibility. They were facing external cultural pressure, an internal relational tension. Would they be able to make it work? And maybe these words are more relevant today than we might think on the surface.

Let's talk a little bit about the city of Thyatira. It's actually the smallest of the seven cities and even though it was kind of a small place it had a road system that was considered to be the major road juncture of the region. It had a famous temple to the sun god, Apollo and there were two primary, it was a huge commercial center and there were two primary goods there were textiles, primarily purple dye, purple cloth and then metalworking. And those were the commercial centers and the people that worked in these industries would form themselves into trade guilds in

order to make a living, in order to be successful in your business, in order to be good at what you are doing in your trade you had to be a member of these trade guilds.

Now, you've probably not heard of Thyatira until this weekend, but you may have heard of a woman by the name of Lydia. We encounter her in Acts 16 verse 4 when Paul and his mission's team find themselves in Philippi. And it says that they encounter a lady named Lydia who was from the city of Thyatira and a seller of purple goods. She was probably at one time in one of these trade guilds. Another thing I find interesting when we read in verse 18. It says...

*These are the words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze.*

This language is referencing and resonating with that metalworking industry and I just say these things because I think they should serve as reminders to us that Lydia and the language of metalworking, it's just a reminder that these letters were written to real people at a real time in a real place who were facing very real issues. This is not just some kind of random, elevated, eloquent, poetic language that John chooses to use; he's speaking right into the culture. He's specifically tailoring his message for his audience.

And then he goes on to say this...

<sup>19</sup> *I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first.*

<sup>20</sup> *Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols.*

The general structure in all of these letters is the giving of an affirmation and then a giving of an admonition. To Thyatira, the affirmation is this, you are crushing your mission, you are loving people, you're compassionate and you're engaged in social justice and bringing right to the world, you're assisting the poor and oppressed and you're caring for the sick, you're bringing reconciliation and transforming lives and communities and stories, you are on mission doing what Jesus did together wherever you are you're on mission every day and you're doing it better and better and better every day.

The admonition was this; you're tolerating sin. The church in Thyatira had the opposite problem of the church in Ephesus if you'll recall from a few weeks ago. The church at Ephesus was actually very diligent about having right doctrine and rooting out false teaching and making sure that they were embracing the proper truths of the message of Jesus and putting into place that moral code. And to that church Jesus said, you've got your doctrine right but you forgotten to love each other so, do the things you did it first. Thyatira has the opposite problem; Jesus is saying you're doing great at loving one another. You've got it down. But you're missing a couple of things in your doctrine and how that plays out you're tolerating sin and there were two that were mentioned idolatry and sexual immorality. And then there's this woman named Jezebel that's mentioned now likely this was not her real name. It was probably an actual person who

was a teacher in that church, but the name Jezebel is probably a code name. It's probably a reference back to the Jezebel that we meet in first and second Kings the wife of King Ahab.

Now, Jezebel in the Old Testament was very bad news. You know who the bad characters in the Bible are because we don't name our children after them. {laughter} There's just not a lot of little Jezebel's running around today. But what we know about Jezebel is that she was the one that primarily introduced the worship of Baal into Israel and it was the beginning of the end of the northern tribes of Israel. And so this code name is used to describe this person who is saying to the church there; hey you can you can dabble a little bit in idolatry, you can dab a little bit in sexual immorality, its okay. And if we remember back to the cultural influences in the Roman Empire pagan worship was rampant. There were hundreds of temples to hundreds of gods everywhere and sexual immorality was everywhere, there were depictions of sexual acts on textiles, on frescoes, on mosaics hanging in public places, even as decorations in people's houses. Today in the city of Pompeii; if you go to the ruins of Pompeii you can step into first century brothel, on the wall you can still see in graphic color detail depictions of different sexual acts. It served as a visual menu of sorts because Pompeii was a port city and so sailors and merchants were coming in from all over the Roman Empire and they could step into this brothel and without speaking the language just point to their pleasure of choice. But not only was it that kind it was also embedded in the everyday walking around life of people, of everybody. To be a member of one of these trade guilds meant that you were expected to participate together in the pagan worship of the day. That would mean sitting at a table eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols, going in to the temples and often sexual practices and acts were a part of that worship. This may sound strange to us, but this was just normal everyday life, it was expected that they would do these things together. And so to walk away from that was to commit career suicide. It was to change the way that you just engaged in normal social life. It changed the way that you engaged with other people. It could massively change your diet. It meant that businessmen may not be able to join in for the power lunch. It was changing the way they lived and changing the way they did business to walk away from that.

But there were people in this church at Thyatira who had a leader who was obviously saying, you know what it's okay to continue on in some of those things. You're loving God, you're loving people, you're involved in compassion, you're involved in being on mission, its okay to do those things. They were loving and compassionate people. They were being the hands and feet of Jesus. They were making a difference in the world, but tolerated just a couple of things, just kind of glossed over them, just kind of shove them under the rug, just kind of shrugged them off, just kind of thought well, I don't want to get too caught up in legalism, I want to focus on what I'm doing right.

What are we tolerating? I mean, what's that little thing that just... everything else our life is okay and that one little thing well because of the greater good Jesus just isn't as concerned about that because it hasn't really hurt me or hurt anybody else or hurt my witness, it must be okay I'm just going to kind of gloss over that one. And here's the deal, I truly believe that for many of us, we're not even sure what that thing is that we're tolerating. But here's what's dangerous, even though it may be difficult to locate, what we tolerate in our lives will replicate until it suffocates our life in Christ. What are we tolerating? Jesus said repent.

Let me talk a little bit about idolatry because I think there's a tendency for us to think that's not an issue today because we don't go to pagan temples to worship and we don't have little stone or wood carvings in our room somewhere that we bow down to everyday. But idolatry in its most basic form is anything that takes the rightful place of God? It's anything that you are looking to, that you are focusing your attention and affections on more than God. It's the thing that you look to to give yourself meaning and purpose. It's the thing you look to for your refuge, your security, your comfort. It's the opinion that counts most in your life. And here's what's really challenging in Old Testament times we find that the people of Israel fell into idolatry over and over and over and over again, but it wasn't that they were turning their back on God. They were just letting some other gods in. I mean imagine for a moment you're living in an agrarian society and your life depends on the fertility of the soil and the rain that comes down from the heavens and you look around you and the cultures around you are worshipping the fertility gods of Baal and Asherah. Well, you're still going to worship God and you're going to pray to God and you're going to believe in God, but you know what, you might set up an Asherah pole just cover your bases you might set up a Asherah pole just as a little bit of a security blanket, and I wonder if we do the same kind of thing today. Are we really, truly, completely trusting God or do we look to a few other things to cover our bases? Do we look to a few other things as security blankets in case God doesn't come through? It could be a habit, it could be a hang-up, could be something that we're just kind of holding onto to give us peace, to give us comfort, to give us direction, to give us clarity because we feel like God doesn't always come through. Are we tolerating some form of idolatry in our lives?

And then the second one is sexual immorality. Are we tolerating it? Awe, it's just a little fun at the strip club with some guys from work, it's not a big deal, it's just a little sneak peek at porn, it's just a little bit of escapism in the romance novel, it's two consenting adults, it's just a little bit of fun. Catholic author, scholar, theologian Christopher West says to find that which is most sacred in this world look to that which is most violently profaned.

A lot of us can probably, well, those of us that grew up in church can probably relate to this next quote from Butch Hancock

“Life in Lubbock, Texas taught me two things: One is that God loves you and you're going to burn in hell. The other is that sex is the most awful, filthy thing on earth, and you should save it for someone you love.” {laughter}

The problem is that neither the culture around us nor the church has always given us a view of sex as the way God created it and God intended it. So God created sex and he put guard rails in place not to deprive us but to elevate what is sacred.

Now, brothers that are here I want to talk to you for just a minute and it's not to pick on you. And I know that you're often the ones that get picked on with this topic. But you may think it's just hanging out with coworkers on the work trip at the strip club and it is not a big deal. You may think it's just looking at porn and that's okay because it doesn't really hurt anybody else. But are you aware of the fact that when you go to the strip club, and when you look at porn that you're fueling the sex industry and you're increasing the demand for human trafficking. You may think it's just good-natured banter in the locker room, but does it diminish the image of God in

women? Would you want those things said of your daughter? Are we tolerating some level of sexual immorality? The scripture says our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit. Are we honoring God with our bodies? Are we honoring one another with our bodies?

And to the church in Thyatira who was tolerating, Jesus said repent. Now, for those of us again that are in church circles, this word sounds pretty harsh and a lot of times we interpret it to mean get your act together, clean up your mess, pull it together. But it really doesn't mean that. It simply means to turn around, to change your mind, Pastor Joshua talked about this last weekend and I want to give us some pathways to consider that this weekend. In Romans 8:1 we are told that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. II Corinthians 5:17 tells us that to anyone who is in Christ he is a new creation the old is gone and the new has come. And in Romans 2:4 we learned that God's kindness leads us to repentance. In light of your identity in Christ, in light of your freedom in Christ, in light of God's kindness, what are you tolerating? Jesus says there's a better way.

I think the message to the church at Thyatira puts a few questions before us.

- One is will we be faithful at the crossroads? As we stand today at a Crossroads of sorts of culture and ideas and politics and society and life will we be faithful and obedient at the crossroads where we've been put.
- I think another question that faces us is, is the way and the message of Jesus compelling enough to make us love one another well and does our commitment to Jesus transcend every other preference, opinion, affiliation, loyalty that we have?

And are we tolerating something that risks our joy and our peace and our life in Christ. What are we tolerating?

At the end of the letter to the church at Thyatira, Jesus proclaims that to the one who is victorious he will give the Morning Star. Again, I think this language is very intentional. If you remember in Thyatira stood the temple to the sun god Apollo and in stark contrast to that the writer is saying Jesus is the True Light. He is the light who guides, he is the light who illuminates, he is the light who heals, he is the light who has the power to change the circumstances of the world that we live in. And Jesus said I am the light of the world and then he turned around and he also said you are the light of the world. Is there something that we're tolerating that is diminishing the Light of Christ in us, through us to the world to the one who is victorious I will give the Morning Star.

Would you stand with me across all of our all seven of our locations this weekend? May the Spirit go before you to guide you, behind you to propel you, above you to overshadow you and protect you, below you to under-gird you and support you and beside you to comfort you, to strengthen you and to give you peace. Holy Spirit give us ears to hear what you are speaking to our church today. In Jesus name, amen.