Success and the City

Scripture Lesson: Revelation 2:1–7
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Last week we talked about how God loves cities. For 2000 years Christianity has thrived in cities. Where are we headed at the end of time? To a city, says John in Revelation—a holy city that comes down out of heaven from God, where God will wipe every tear from our eyes.

Meanwhile we do have tears in our cities. Our series title comes from a song by Glenn Frey—“You Belong to the City”—about the hard edges, the coldness and loneliness of city life. In fact, let me ask you this: if you were to come up with an unofficial theme song for our state of Georgia, what might that be? Probably at the top of the list would be “Georgia on My Mind.” But a close second might be a fabulous song by Gladys Knight and the Pips, “Midnight Train to Georgia.” Everybody knows the chorus: “He’s leavin’—woo hoo—on that midnight train to Georgia (leavin’ on that midnight train).”

Why is he leavin’? Where’s he leavin’ from? What is the very first line of the song? It’s so poignant—almost heartbreaking: “LA proved too much for the man.” He didn’t make it. “Woo hoo hoo.” That big city out there chewed him up. “He kept dreaming (dreaming) that someday he’d be a star but he didn’t get far and even sold his car. (Woo, woo, woo-woo)” So what’s he doing?
“Leavin’ on that midnight train to Georgia.”

My only advice is he might want to avoid Atlanta because Atlanta can be as hard on your ego as LA.

Dorothy, you’re not in Kansas anymore.

We’re looking this morning at a church that made it big in the city. Many scholars see the church of Ephesus as the most successful church of the first century. I see parallels between that church and this congregation—for starters, in the impact they had on their city. Only that church had a far greater impact on its city than even we have had on Atlanta. They were a force in their local economy.

Today Ephesus, as some of you know, is the most spectacularly restored city of the ancient world. A gleaming metropolis of 300,000 in its heyday, Ephesus featured one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, the temple of Diana. The Book of Acts tells this amazing story of how a booming industry there was the making and selling of little silver figurines—they were little idols—of the goddess Diana. But the church was winning so many people to faith in Jesus that these idols stopped selling. So merchants wound up with this stockpile of idols in warehouses. That so ticked off the local silversmith’s union, that its head, a guy named Demetrius, started a riot in protest against the church.

Can you imagine if we so touched Atlanta with the gospel that we had an effect on the local economy—like, say, in the sex trade? That strip joints started boarding up and shutting down because men got a life and said, “We shouldn’t be treating women like objects. What’s that about?” That online escort services disappeared for lack of interest? In Ephesus they changed their city. They got this message across that if you have to make a god—spoiler alert—it’s probably not a god. How weak and tiny is a god you make with your hands? They touched the hearts and minds of their city with the gospel. This church put that message into the hearts and minds of their city. Wow!

But it’s not surprising when you consider their church staff. This was the greatest church staff in history, period. Their founding pastor was the Apostle Paul, who stayed for three years. Wow—imagine hearing those sermons! Then following the riots I mentioned, Paul had to flee the city, so he turned the reins over to his young protégé, Timothy. And get this—a long-time member of that church sitting in the front rows on Sunday mornings was—are you ready?—Mary, the mother of Jesus, who was brought there from Nazareth by the Apostle John. John stayed in Ephesus and remained as pastor until he died in his nineties. As pastors you had Paul, then Timothy, then John.

Now I love our staff. We’re a good staff here at Peachtree—but here’s the deal. We exegete Scripture. John wrote the Scripture. When I say, “And Jesus said...” I point you to the Bible. When John said, “Jesus said,” he was literally saying, “Here are the words I remember him saying to me as we walked together along the road.” They were in a whole different league in Ephesus.

We could go on and on. They were busy, active, powerful, orthodox, committed, faithful, and yet—listen carefully—deeply at risk of falling apart. That’s the punchline of our morning scripture and it comes out of nowhere. In Revelation 2 Jesus came down and gave the church at Ephesus a performance review. He said, “You’re great; you’re great! Then, “whap,” right between the eyes. Can you imagine how stunned they must have been? He said, “You’re the church that has everything, except the one thing that really matters.”

Could it be that big city church of the first
century has much to teach this big city church of the 21st century? Let’s listen to Jesus’ words to the church of Ephesus in Revelation chapter 2, verses 1–7:

“To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands. 2 I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. 3 You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. 4 Yet, I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first. 5 Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. 6 But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. 7 Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.”

Ephesianitis

You heard all the compliments: “I know your deeds, your hard work” The lights are on every night down there at that church. You don’t just come on Sundays and sit. You’re not just some “Our Lady of Cadillacs” congregation that’s a country club. You serve. You care. You give. Not only that, “you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not.” You are orthodox—sound in doctrine.

Then on top of that, “I know your perseverance.” You have endured hardships for my name.” What a church—faithful in suffering, orthodox in doctrine, busy in service! If I heard Jesus say that about Peachtree, you’d see me doing backflips down the center aisle.

But, Jesus says, “I have this against you. You don’t love me—not like you used to. You have forsaken the love you had at first.”

Here they were, hitting it out of the park. Jesus’ mom was on the front row. People were coming in. They were changing their city. But Christ was not the center. Something else was. Their work and busyness had taken over. So here they were functioning at a very high level but their heart wasn’t in it. Very gifted people can do that. Many of you in this room are so talented you can pull off things that other people could never dream of doing, without even breaking a sweat—or maybe even engaging your heart.

This happens in marriages when over time the daily chores take over. There was a time when every conversation was a meeting of two hearts. Now it’s, “Who’s going to pick up the kids? Where did that Amex expense come from?” Neil Diamond and Barbra Streisand have a heartbreaking duet they sing, where the wife sings, “You don’t bring me flowers. You don’t sing me love songs.” The husband sings, “You hardly talk to me any more when I come through the door at the end of the day. I remember when you couldn’t wait to love me.” The wife sings, “You used to hate to leave me.” Together they sing, “But used-to-be’s don’t count any more. They just fall to the floor ‘til you sweep them away.”

They’ve lost the love they had at first.

Oh, the bills are getting paid; the kids are fine; careers are on track. If you look on the outside, they’re the all-American couple. But from the inside it’s all empty, exhausting, and joyless, for they’ve lost the love they had at first.

That very thing can happen with God when we get so busy doing for God that we don’t spend time with God. I read a statistic the other day that 85% of Christians admit the only praying they do is on the run.
Now if you were Satan, could you think of any better strategy for neutralizing the church? You’ve already tried persecution, but persecution only makes Christians multiply faster. So here’s your strategy: keep Christians sprinting through superficial lives where they hardly even know their spouses and children and God. Then make sure there are no places for solitude, no moments of delicious aloneness with Jesus. Give them a case of Ephesianitis.

Now we’re tempted to say, “Ephesianitis can’t be that bad. This was such a great church. It’s just a case of the sniffles.” Surely what Jesus is saying here is, “Look you’ve got so much on the ball there in Ephesus. Don’t panic. Just tweak a little here and here and you’ll be fine.”

No. Jesus says to this church in verse 5, “Your light is about to go out. You are on the critical list. You are on life support. If things don’t change, I will come and take away your lampstand and all will be darkness. Your lights are going to go out.”

**The Love You Had at First**

Remember what that first blush of love was like? Have you ever gone through your old love letters? I mentioned in my column this week that I found one I wrote Becky back in college and I just cringed. Up in the left hand corner of the envelope for the return address I wrote, “City of Love, Kissing State, Pardon me honey I forgot the date.” And that’s not the half of it. Later driving to one of our engagement parties I was so off on Cloud Nine that I drove off forgetting that I’d left my mom’s best chafing dish on top of my car. I was going 40 when it slid off and splattered cheese fondue all over an intersection. People in love do things like that. Imagine being so preoccupied with God that you’re no good to the world.

But isn’t that why you’re here? Worship is our way of being in love with God. Here is where we get back our first love. In this hour we re-center our lives on Christ.

What kind of worship does that? I’ll tell you: it’s passionate worship. In Ephesus what they had was correct worship—orthodox worship. It was as proper as a procession of bishops.

A pastor friend of mine told me a story about his church in Idaho. It was a Sunday morning, and they were having Communion. The way they served Communion in that church is the way it’s served in many Presbyterian churches: the elders would pass down the aisles these little trays that have individualized Communion glasses. When it comes, you partake of the juice and put the cup back inside the little tray. When all the glasses were empty, the elder would then come back up to the front where he or she would be met by a deacon who would give him or her a fresh, full tray to replace the tray of empty glasses.

This particular Sunday morning, there was a rookie elder on board. He passed the Communion tray down the rows and ended up with a tray of empty glasses. He came back to the front, but on this day the deacons had their hands full in the sacristy filling other trays, so that he had to wait. He was standing on one side of the Communion table, while my friend, the pastor, was standing on the other. Meanwhile, this new elder became very nervous as he was standing there, and his hand began to tremble. Some of the glasses began to clatter in the tray, and my friend decided he had to do something to relax this man.

So, he leaned across the Communion table and just flippantly whispered, “Fake it!” This elder, before my friend could reach out and grab him, turned around, went back out down to the end of the row where he had left off, took that tray of empty glasses, handed it to the lady on the end of the row, and said, “Fake it!” That lady,
bless her heart, took an empty glass and put it to her lips as if she were drinking and then put it back in the tray! She then turned to the man next to her and said, “Fake it!” My friend said he almost passed out as he saw this whole row of Presbyterians fake their way through Communion that morning!

Now, that’s funny, but it’s also very sad, isn’t it: that in our highest and holiest moment when we should be losing ourselves in wonder and praise of God, we’d be bound by fear and formalism. What Jesus yearns for this morning is for you to get lost in your love and worship of him.

Donald Miller is a writer who says, “I never liked jazz until one night I went to a club and watched a saxophonist play for fifteen minutes without opening his eyes. That night watching someone else love jazz so much was the beginning of my love affair with jazz.” If someone were watching you worship in this hour, would anything they saw make them walk out of here and begin a love affair with Jesus? What if we were a whole room full of people so caught up in our worship and praise of Jesus that we were like a saxophonist playing with his eyes closed? Before long we might not have enough seats in this room.

**Worship Passionately; Work Joyfully**

In passionate worship something happens. It is an event in which people open their hearts to Jesus and respond to his love and mercy and glory and grace. Passionate worship isn’t always happy and zippy. We bring in here our hurts from the city. After all, sometimes Atlanta proves too much for the man. Atlanta proves too much for the woman. And on our midnight trains we come to Jesus with our shattered dreams, and those might-have-beens that never were, and he takes away all the pain of each and every regret. I heard someone say, “I come to worship and just lay my soul there before God, sort of like a puppy deposits a slobberly tennis ball at the feet of its master.”

Jesus says, in this room I want you to worship me passionately. But it doesn’t just have to be in this room. There are two places I feel the love I had at first. One is in singing. The other is in nature. To this day I have never sung through all the verses of “How Great Thou Art” without choking up – usually right at the point of, “Then sings my soul, my savior God to thee, how great thou art.” There’s that lump right here, the size of a basketball. Maybe you have a song that brings back the missing tingle.

And maybe just maybe as recently as this summer there was a sunset at the beach or the mountains and in a moment of heart-stopping beauty you saw that huge orange ball drop below the horizon. You thought, “Whoever made that, I want to give my life to.” Now add to that gift the cross and forgiveness for everything you’ve ever done wrong and the hope of eternal life and your children and family and friends in this life and perhaps you can feel that first blush of the love you had at first.

Then Jesus says “Now I want you to go out into this city and work for me joyfully.” Remember the Disney classic Snow White? Jesus wants us to walk out of here like those seven dwarfs with joy on their faces and pickaxes on their shoulders: “Heigh-ho, Heigh-ho, It’s off to work we go!” In Ephesus they worked, but they had a bumper sticker that said, “I owe, I owe, so off to work I go.” Jesus wants the joy of our hearts while we’re working. Even as Jesus wants passionate worship in here, he wants joyous work from us out there as a way of showing our love. Colossians 3:23 says we do all things “heartily as unto the Lord.” Done well, work becomes worship. Love Jesus with your work.

Last week I said even the most active church member who shows up every time we open the doors will spend at most only around five
percent of his or her time here, so doesn’t it follow that what matters most to God is that 95 world out there where we spend our week?

Done well, your work can be a holy act of worship. A while ago I came across something that, looking back now, seems like a breathtaking insight into the obvious — but at the time it stunned me. It was only in the twentieth century that people began seeing the top of the Statue of Liberty. In the 1800s the sculptor Frederic Auguste Bartholdi had no way of knowing that people would one day invent helicopters and airplanes, so far as he knew no one would see the coiffure gracing Lady Liberty’s head.

But look at how he used the same painstaking artistry up there as he did finishing off her face, arms, and torch which he knew people would see every day as they sailed up the harbor.

For me, that’s a metaphor for how I want to do my work. My Boss sees the top of the statue. Maybe you’re in a job where you feel like you never get noticed, where you feel underappreciated, overworked, and underpaid. Your true boss sees the top of the statue.

Excellence is a way of loving Jesus.

Do it with joy. I heard of a lawyer who thought he was having a clinical depression until he realized it was an aching yearning to find spiritual meaning in his work, which had become a dreary assembly line of briefs and cases just for the necessity of putting bread on the table. Then one Sunday in church he heard a sermon on Moses and, “ping,” the light came on. He connected the dots: “Law is God’s gift. It’s right here in Exodus. As I make this world a fairer place with more justice, as I bring resolution to human conflict, albeit imperfectly, I’m doing the work of God on earth.” He even got to the point where after a long, bruising day of lawyering he’d hear a still small voice whisper, “Attaboy—well done thou good and faithful servant.” He found the missing tingle of the love he had at first for his job.

Do your work excellently; do it joyfully; and do it out loud and proud to the glory of God.

Last week I told you that the basketball star Stephen Curry does that. This week here’s one of my favorite stories of another athlete, Dodger pitching great Orel Hershiser.

Some of us lived through the 1988 baseball season when Orel Hershiser was in pursuit of the record for the most consecutive scoreless innings pitched. As that string of scoreless innings began to mount, it was like the whole world stopped what they were doing and sat on the edge of their seats to see how long that streak would last. Hershiser broke the record, and after the World Series, he was invited to appear on “The Tonight Show” about the time Johnny Carson was wrapping up his career.

I will never forget Johnny Carson sitting there with Orel Hershiser. He said, “Now, Orel, I was watching you and between innings, you were by yourself and your lips were moving. Who were you talking to?” Hershiser said, “I wasn’t talking.
I was singing.” Johnny Carson thought that was the funniest thing he had ever heard. He said, “What were you singing?” Orel Hershiser, on “The Tonight Show,” said to Johnny Carson, “I was singing the Doxology.” Johnny Carson had never heard of it. “Doc Severenson? Doc what?” Orel said, “Yeah, the Doxology!” And on national television, he sang:

“Praise God, from whom all blessings flow, 
Praise Him, all creatures here below, 
Praise Him above, ye heavenly host, 
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.”

The audience was stunned.

This wasn’t some canned Jesus spiel. Orel was just being Orel, letting his joy show through, loving Jesus with his work. “This is who I am.” And it was so winsome and disarming and authentic.

This is really odd, but the other day I was working out, lifting weights in our Peachtree gym and looking in the mirror when someone made me laugh. It was one of those spontaneous caught-off-guard guffaws. Only I happened to be looking at myself when it happened and I got a sudden self-revelation. I had never seen that look on my face before. What I saw in the mirror was a look on my face I had not seen before. Now, I smile a lot for cameras and there are pictures of me smiling in the literature of this church and in our family albums and all sorts of places, but those posed smiles are different.

In other words, it’s one thing when somebody says, “Look happy. Say cheese.” Jesus is saying “I don’t want picture perfect Christians. I don’t want good little boys and girls who eat their broccoli and pose for the religious camera. I want to own your heart. At the mention of my name I want a spontaneous moment of joy. I want to see your eyes dance. I want to hear your heart sing. I want the very thought of me to bring a smile to your face. Yes, here in worship and out in the world.”

Let’s bow our hearts and ask Jesus for that love we had at first.
Prayer:
Lord, some of us have a sin to confess to you this morning and that is our love for you has gone cold. Like the church of Ephesus we are busy and active and successful, but on the inside the light on our lampstand is flickering. We’ve gotten so caught up in working for you that we aren’t spending time with you. In fact, we may be avoiding time with you because there are things that come to come to the surface in our times of aloneness that we’d rather not deal with. Lord, let your Holy Spirit minister to our hearts and woo us back. Rekindle that fire of passion and love both here in this place and out in the world. Lord Jesus, we love you. Amen.