

Seven Letters to Seven Churches, Part 3: Pergamum
January 20, 2019
by Rev. Dr. Eric Elnes

Scripture: Revelation 2:12-17
Poetry: "The Summer Day," by Mary Oliver

I. Over the Hill

*"Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"*

These questions posed in the poem, "The Summer Day," by Mary Oliver (who died last week) demand answers. Answers not with words, but with our very lives. How will our lives, and our deaths, reflect what we hope to do with our one wild and precious life?

Today's letter from the Book of Revelation posed these same questions to the ancient congregation of Pergamum. How they responded to these questions is as instructive for us today as it was for yesterday's Christians. Pergamum is a church that, in former times, was living its own wild and precious life to its fullest – so fully that when the persecutions of Christians started in earnest in the Roman Empire, many preferred death to renouncing the life they had found in Christ.

In fact, one of the early members of the congregation in Pergamum, a man named Antipas, was one of the most famous martyrs of the ancient world and is specifically mentioned in John's letter. Even a century later, when stonecutters across the sea in Rome refused to carve images of the god Aesclepios, they were accused of being followers of Antipas of Pergamum!

Yet something changed.

If you were to visit Pergamum in John's day, you might never know Christians lived there because most Christians had begun living exactly like the pagans. They made the required yearly sacrifices to the Emperor as a god rather than refusing them like previous generations had. They were buying and eating meat sacrificed to idols in the marketplace, which previous generations had found abhorrent. And the more significant marks of Christian faith and action were no longer in evidence – like caring for the poor and vulnerable, loving their neighbor as themselves, and rejecting any power that would place itself higher than the God of Jesus.

What in heaven's name happened to this church?

Well, as with most conundrums posed by the Book of Revelation, before we can consider heavenly realities, we must consider more the earthly ones. So let's take a brief trip back to the city of Pergamum before turning back to John's letter, shall we?

Many years before Christianity came to Pergamum, it was the capital city of the Kingdom of Pergamum. It was a great and powerful city. Partly this was because Pergamum was situated

along a major trade route. Partly, too, it was incredibly hard to conquer. As an inland city about 16 miles from the Mediterranean Sea, Pergamum couldn't be taken by naval forces. Yet sitting strategically atop a 1,000-foot mesa and surrounded by thick-walled fortifications, Pergamum could withstand practically any inland invader as well - any inland invader except the Roman Empire, that is.

Pergamum, like every other city in the region, eventually fell to the Romans in 133 BCE and established a major administrative center there. Between Smyrna on the coast, where the Romans built a great naval port, and Pergamum inland 50 miles northeast of Smyrna, the Romans literally ruled land and sea in Asia Minor through these two centers of power, making them famous and prestigious cities to live in – at least for a while.

Pergamum's fame as Asia's administrative center for the Roman Empire was equaled only by the fame of its mind-blowing library. With over 200,000 hand-written volumes, Pergamum's library was one of the most important libraries of the ancient world. Its only real competition was the great library of Alexandria, Egypt, where the world's greatest source of "paper" could be found, known as papyrus.

The competition between these two libraries was fierce. So fierce that each city paid enormous salaries to entice the world's finest scholars to locate there. So fierce was the competition, in fact, that the ruler of Pergamum once tried to entice the head librarian of Alexandria to relocate to Pergamum to become its head librarian.

As you might expect, the Egyptian pharaoh of the time didn't like this tactic very much so he threw his librarian in jail just to make sure he couldn't leave the country! Then, he ordered an embargo on the export of Egyptian papyrus to Pergamum – leaving Pergamum high and dry.

In response, the ruler of Pergamum offered a king's ransom to anyone who could find or invent a viable alternative to papyrus. Eventually, someone discovered that if you take the skin of calves, goats, or sheep and scrape, stretch, and dry them in a certain way, you could make "paper" far superior to papyrus – and produce it locally. Today, we know this "paper" as parchment, which literally means, "sheet of Pergamum." You can imagine whose library became first and foremost after that.

Once the Romans took over the city, however, other projects were considered more important than maintaining an expensive library and the scholars to support it. Projects like world domination. Thus, funding an expensive library gave way to funding an even more expensive military. Eventually the library, and the intellectual and spiritual resources it contained, was considered by the Romans to be so far off to the side of what they considered important that Mark Anthony is said to have given Pergamum's 200,000 volumes as a gift to his new wife, Cleopatra. She used these to bolster the collection of the library ... in Alexandria! Apparently, the Egyptians still held to the old-fashioned notion that books, scholars, and "higher learning" were critical to maintaining an advanced society. Good thing we no longer engage in such "primitive" shenanigans today, draining educational resources to help maintain military dominance over a worldwide empire ...

Ironically, it was a well-funded military that led directly to the decline of Pergamum as a leading city of the Empire. For, not only did people stop coming there to use its great library, but its strategic position 1,000 feet above the valley floor became completely irrelevant. After all, the military was so vast that marauding hordes couldn't come within a hundred miles of Pergamum. So if the valley below was safe to live in, who in their right mind would want to schlep to the top of a 1,000 foot mountain after working a long day in the fields? The *Pax Romana* – peace maintained at the edge of a sword – along with the loss of Pergamum's great library, ensured that the city would henceforth be a city of yesteryear.

Yet, in John's day, the residents of Pergamum still clung to the notion that theirs was a great and mighty city even though it had been a ghost of its former self for decades. You might say that Pergamum was the Elvis of John's day, still acting very much like a rock star long after the glory days were over.

Just as Elvis had zealous fans until the end, so Pergamum had its share of zealots. Yet at least Elvis still had some good music for his zealots to groove to. Pergamum didn't even have a band.

So, what happens when a fiercely proud city has lost its groove, yet still tries desperately to hold on to its former identity? They do what most people do. They focus their anxieties on those they consider to be lower on the totem pole than they are. They seek to raise their own stature by lowering that of others. This truth is as old as human civilization itself. When the powerful and privileged no longer contribute anything meaningful or productive to society and start to feel their standing in society slip, it is usually the powerless and vulnerable who bear the brunt of their angst.

II. Under the Gun

In the case of Pergamum, the poorest and most vulnerable group were the Christians, just as they were in Smyrna where we visited last week. Christians were especially vulnerable because, in the years before they lost sight of what they stood for (as they had done in John's day), they refused to make the required yearly sacrifice to the Roman Emperor as a god. Anyone who could not produce the proper documentation that they had made this sacrifice was considered an illegal alien, subject to imprisonment and even death.

Also, Christians drew the ire of Pergamum's butchers because they would not purchase meat sacrificed to idols – which was about 99% of it. (The sacrificial fires of Pergamum were said to burn 24 hours a day.) Thus, not only did they not support the local economy, but their insistence that these idols represented false gods meant Christians were considered blasphemers of all that is holy. If you stood out in any way as being a follower of Jesus either for these reasons or because you had devoted yourself to loving the kind of people Jesus loved and serving those who Jesus served, you would end up like the Christians in Smyrna. If you were lucky, you just lost your job. If you were less lucky, you lost your freedom and went to prison. The rest were simply executed.

Most of the Christians in Pergamum fell under the latter category. In fact, the people of Pergamum were so enthusiastic about killing Christians that they became the execution center

for the entire region. If you were Christian, you went to Pergamum not to *live* for your Lord but to die for him.

So, what if you are Christian and you don't want to risk losing your income, your freedom, or your life for your faith? What do you do?

You do what many members of the congregation of Pergamum had started doing by the time of John's letter. You live like a pagan! You make the yearly sacrifice to the Emperor. You purchase meat sacrificed to idols in the marketplace. Basically whatever the pagans are doing, you do too – which includes stomping on other people thought to be “outsiders” in the city, or at least not standing up for them. You do anything not to stand out.

According to John, who writes in the name of the living spirit of Jesus, Jesus is quite angry with certain members of the church in Pergamum for just this reason. In essence, Jesus says, “If you're so afraid of the sharp sword of Rome that you'll let go of everything I came for, I'll come after you with the sharp, two-edged sword of my mouth!”

This seems awfully harsh and judgmental coming from Jesus, doesn't it? I mean, when we look around us today there are all kinds of Christians in our country whose faith seems to make little difference in how they act. Their faith doesn't affect how they spend their time and money, or how they raise their children. It has no bearing on how they treat the poor and vulnerable, or how they vote. It doesn't even seem to affect how they treat God's sacred Creation, or seek to preserve it for future generations. In other words, their actions cannot meaningfully be distinguished from anyone else who is living only for themselves and their arbitrary desires rather than Jesus.

In this respect, I know many of you have encountered more than one Christian who has questioned why you're a member of Countryside Community Church: “Why would you spend so much of your hard-earned money just to move your church a few blocks west to the Tri-Faith Commons? Do you really think you're changing anything – at least anything we care about? And don't you know there are people out there who might seek to do you harm in your new church? Why would you take that risk when you can play it safe in countless other churches that never do anything to anger or offend anyone, no matter who they are? Some of these churches are really popular! They're even considered hip!”

If the spirit of Jesus were writing to American Christians today, would he be threatening to make war on Christian churches that don't actually act like Christians?

Yes and no. If “war” means that Jesus would act with hatred or violence toward them, then absolutely not. The kind of “war” that Jesus threatens is not a military war fought with swords of iron, but a spiritual war, fought with the sword of Truth. Did you notice that in the letter Jesus's sword is not held in his hand, but comes from his mouth? His *word* is his sword. It is said to be two-edged because Truth cuts everyone down to size no matter which side they stand on.

In essence, this is what Jesus is saying to the congregation of Pergamum:

The Truth is that you are in no way honoring the one wild and precious life God has given you, for which I set you free. Nor are you honoring the precious life God has given to others. If you can't stand hearing this Truth or changing your ways in response to it, then you may be fit to fight in Rome's army, but not mine. You are a citizen of the Roman Empire, not the Kingdom of God.

Jesus's Truth is as true today as it was yesterday. Yet so is his promise:

"To everyone who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give a white stone, and on the white stone is written a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it."

While the meaning of "hidden manna" and the "white stone" upon which our new and secret name is written is obscure even to biblical scholars, one thing is clear: Jesus has not given up on those who have denied and deserted him. If they return, he promises that they can trade in their cheap idol-meat – meat that fills the stomach but not the soul – for the sustaining bread of heaven. They can trade in the name and identity society has given them for a name and identity that only God can give them.

Whatever these symbols actually represent, they surely represent good things. Even wonderful things. Things that help us not just speak our answer but *live* our answer to the question, "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

ADDENDUM FOR MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. WEEKEND

Excerpt from MLK's "I Have A Dream" Speech, August 28, 1963 Modified (slightly) for Our Day

[Modifications in brackets.]

I say to you today, my friends, that in spite of the difficulties and frustrations of the moment, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day our nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed – "We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal."

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi – a desert state sweltering with the heat of injustice and oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of brotherhood and freedom.

I have a dream that one day my four little children will live in a nation where they are not judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character. I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day the state of Alabama, whose governor's lips are presently dripping with the words of interposition and nullification, will be transformed into a situation where little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls and walk together as sisters and brothers. I have a dream today.

[I have a dream that one day in the great city of Omaha, Nebraska, Jews, Christians, and Muslims of every color, class, and creed will be able to stand shoulder to shoulder to do on earth as it is done in heaven. That will be the day when the New Jerusalem is built over the cracks and fissures of the old one, and faith is no longer used as a weapon.]

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted. The mountains and the hills shall be made low. The rough places shall be made plains and the crooked places shall be made straight and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.

This is our hope. This is the faith with which I return to [the year 2019 of the Common Era]. With this hope, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith, we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith, we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together knowing that we will be free one day.

That will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with new meaning "My country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrim's pride, from every mountainside, let freedom ring."

And if America is to be a great nation, this must become true. So let freedom ring from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire. Let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York. Let freedom ring from the heightening Alleghanies of Pennsylvania. Let freedom ring from the snow-capped Rockies of Colorado. Let freedom ring from the curvaceous peaks of California. Let freedom ring from Stone Mountain in Georgia and Lookout Mountain in Tennessee. Let freedom ring from every hill and every molehill in Mississippi. From every mountainside, let freedom ring!

When we let freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children – white men and black men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, [Sunni, Shi'a, and Sufi, Hindu, Buddhist, and Sikh] will be able to join hands and sing together in the words of that old Negro spiritual, "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God almighty! We are free at last!"