

A White Stone

Grace, Mercy, and Peace to you from God our Father, and the Lord, Christ Jesus. Amen.

The text for our message today is the epistle read earlier, continuing with the words of Jesus to the churches in the book of Revelation, and emphasizing especially these words: "To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it." This is the text.

Dear friends in Christ,

Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev once spoke to his congress criticizing his predecessor Josef Stalin. During the course of his speech, a member of the audience sent him a note that asked, "What were you doing when Stalin committed all these atrocities?" Khrushchev read the contents of the note to the audience and then shouted, "Who sent this note?" No one moved. "I'll give him one minute to stand up!" The seconds ticked off. Still no one moved. Khrushchev then said, "All right, I'll tell you what I was doing. I was doing exactly what the writer of this note was doing –exactly nothing! I was afraid to be counted!"

It's a simple fact: It takes courage to stand up for the things you believe in. It takes courage to say "no" to your child when they ask for something you don't approve of and then say, "Everybody else is." It takes courage for a teen to say "no" to someone pressuring them to join in on an activity they don't think is right. It takes courage to go against the tide anytime. The church in Pergamum had courage. The members of that church stood up for something. They were counted. Listen to how our Lord begins this message to the church at Pergamum: "I know where you live-- where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city-- where Satan lives." By saying, "I know where you live," Jesus was saying, "I have eyes. I see the trouble you face in trying to live an authentically Christian life. And I commend you for your faithfulness."

He calls this town the place where Satan rules, where he has his throne. That's because this city was the capitol of the province of Asia, and as such was the official center of emperor worship, where you were considered unpatriotic if you didn't join in. It was also a place where you were expected to be accepting of every kind of god that people could think of. This city had hundreds of temples, with a colossal altar to Zeus carved out of the rock of the mountain. They even had a monument to "the unknown God," just in case they forgot one. And you were expected to honor all of these Gods. Sometime when I'm talking with the unchurched I'll ask if they want me to pray with them, and they'll sometimes shrug and say, "It couldn't hurt." I'm assuming that was the attitude of this city. You were to call upon any mixture of gods for the sake of the blessing that might come to Pergamum by it. But the Christians, because they were

exclusive in worshiping only one God, since Jesus said he is the only way to eternal life and because God had said worship no one else, they were seen by the people of the town as intolerant, undesirable, and worse: even enemies of the state because they didn't worship the emperor. They didn't join in the rites of the pagan temples, so the neighbors thought they were a suspicious part of a cult. They were facing this every day. So Jesus commended them for staying true to his name, "Jesus," the Savior who died for them.

Does Satan rule here in Auburn? Not officially. I doubt Jesus would have used those words to describe this location. You'll find an old framed memorial in the church basement of those from Zion who died in wars, but not of those who died because they stood up for Jesus. We're not under that kind of persecution, and nobody in Bay County is suspicious of Christians, really. Face it, when it comes to scary images, Lutherans just don't have a frightening reputation. When I went on evangelism trips, they said to mention right away that I was a Lutheran so that the person at the door would be relaxed in knowing I wasn't a Jehovah's Witness. Nobody is afraid of a Lutheran. You have that evangelism advantage. In that way, Pergamum was not like us. But there is a way it was.

Pergamum was a very educated city. Today we get the word "parchment" from the name of this town, because at one time their library had over 200,000 parchment scrolls of the best quality. The new central library on Center Ave is shy of that by some 50,000 titles, so it was quite something. And in this enlightened climate, certain opinions were expected. You were expected to freely accept all religions as equally valid. In Pergamum, Christians found that folks were deeply offended that they didn't join in the pagan festivals. They were considered rude for believing that only followers of Christ had eternal life.

Sounds an awful lot like today. We are expected to be so tolerant people are nervous about saying one thing is right and another wrong. I remember when someone considered me backwards for what I believed. I was talking with someone on the campus of the U of M during the time I was a student at Concordia College in Ann Arbor. This person found out I was from Concordia and said, "Oh, you go to that anti-Semitic school." What? That was the first I knew, so I asked what she meant. Turns out she was Jewish, and she said, "I can't believe you think that Jewish people don't have any kind of salvation at all." I told her that, as far as being anti-Semitic goes, Jesus commands us to love all people, but that the is salvation in Jesus Christ alone, God's only Son, who died for us. But she still thought I was horrible. Christians in Pergamum were facing that kind of attitude all the time. People were getting angry about it. They even killed Antipas for it. It takes courage to stand up for the faith in one God and one way of salvation, as Scripture says.

This all-religions-are-equal attitude then and now is part of what Jesus condemned when he said, "Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality. Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans." We talked about who the Nicolaitans were last time. Balaam was a pagan prophet-for-hire in the days when the Israelites were on the way to promised land under the blessing of God and it seemed no one could stop them. They scared a lot of countries as they passed by, so the king of Moab hired Balaam to put a curse on them so they wouldn't be so powerful, and Balaam took the job. He would go into a trance, cutting into animal livers to inspect the signs,

reading the horoscopes and stars, that sort of thing, and the people paying him would feel better that a curse had been placed on their enemies. And Balaam would work for any god you hired him to prophesy for, making him like some of what we see today. Maybe you've heard of shopping cart religion, where a person picks up pieces of religious teachings from here and there and sort of makes up their own. That's going on around here too. You'll hear Christians talking about reincarnation or karma or other teachings that have nothing to do with Bible or faith in Jesus. Balaam did that sort of thing. One religion was as good as another to him. I read that the Dalai Lama said in an interview that religions that emphasize compassion, kindness, and self-discipline are "more or less the same." If that's the case, then why follow his? The Christians in Pergamum and the Christians today win the praise of Christ in heaven when we remain true to his name, Jesus, the only Son of God.

Balaam, for his part, was not allowed to curse God's people, the Lord wouldn't let him. After he saw that angel, he was afraid to say anything other than the words God gave him to say, and he ended up not cursing them, but blessing them four different times. Well, that king was angry, and didn't want to give him the money. So Balaam said to him, "I'll tell you how we'll do this. God won't let me touch them right now because they're under his protection. But, why don't we get them to forfeit God's protection?" So he lured the men with Moabite women who were very friendly and knew how to party, especially at their temples, and the Lord had to send a plague to convince them they were doing wrong. Jesus said, you've got this sort of thing going on in your church. It's true of Zion too. How many times do I hear about people's living situations, "Pastor, I know it's wrong, but..." What's really being said is, this immorality is more attractive to me, than following the Lord.

Well, let's hear what Jesus has to say about that. He says, "Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth." Jesus described himself in the beginning of this message as the one who holds the sharp, double-edged sword. The language is a bit picturesque here, because it's the book of Revelation, but you know what he means. To repent is to turn to the Lord. He's the one with the two-edged sword. One side is the Law. It kills. Whoever turns to evil and leaves the path of the Lord will have to face it in the judgment that is coming for everyone. But the other side is Gospel. It protects the sinner who comes to God for forgiveness, no matter the sin. It kills the enemies called sin, death, and the Devil. Jesus came with the power of God and the love of your Creator, and he gave his own life for you that you could live forever. But don't mess with him. I wouldn't mess with someone with a sword like that. If you say you belong to the Lord and have heard his call for forgiveness and grace to belong to him and to be forgiven, then you live like it. No more the sin of Balaam, spreading his faith among many different gods and no more living as if the law of God didn't matter.

Once there was a guy who worked on the second floor of a building where his office looked out over the parking lot. One day he looked up from his desk and saw a woman walking from her car into his building. She looked like a model. Her face and figure and style were flawless, her stride confident. His heart raced as she entered the building, right under his window. "Wow," he thought, "I wonder who THAT is." The next morning, by accident, he saw her come in again. For the next few mornings, it was no longer a surprise. He was waiting for her. He started thinking about her during the

day, and how he might meet her. Maybe if he waiting at about that time, and acted like he was leaving the building as she was coming in... It was at that point he knew he had crossed the line of what was right. What did he do about it? He told his God and he told his wife and asked for forgiveness. They both forgave him. Good thing he had a strong marriage. The next time that woman came in, he didn't even watch her all the way. Because he had confessed and repented, the thrill of watching had evaporated. When the Lord says, "Repent," he means for us to overcome the culture of the world around us, and to understand that God wants something better for us than what this world gives, if we'll only overcome by faith.

Listen to his description of that promise of something better that Jesus gives us, at the very end of this reading: "To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it." Hidden manna is bread from heaven that not everyone finds. It doesn't only feed the body, but also the spirit, making whole the hurts and injuries of life, giving satisfaction, and life to the full. It is hidden in full view, because Jesus once said that he's the real bread from heaven you should look for. The life he has to give you will give you real life, forgiven, courageous, and free.

That white stone he wants to give you is a bit more mysterious. It might refer to they way juries voted in those days, black meaning guilty and white meaning innocent, just like you have been declared innocent before God through the death of Jesus Christ for you that paid the penalty for all your sins. And you now have the token of that innocent verdict, the grace of God put into your hand in the supper and your heart as you receive the forgiveness of Christ that declares you not guilty. Or it could refer to the white stone given to a Greek athlete who won his event at some meets, a stone which granted him admission to the victory banquet and the triumphal procession, though in this case Christ won the victory for you, so that you would be invited to the celebration in the feast to come and take part in the victory procession of all those entering heaven.

This stone, however, is a little different from them, though. It has something written on it. The text says, "I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it." What good is a name no one knows? Remember Prince, and that goofy time when his name was a symbol no one could say? What good was that for a name? Today, we think of names as just a label, so a name known only to us wouldn't be very useful.

But in the ancient world, your name summed up your character, and someone giving you a new name, as God gave a new name to Abraham and Sarah and Jacob, and Simon Peter, it meant something about who you were. God has done that for you, you know. In your baptism, he called you by a new name, "Child of God." He wants this name to ring true for you. He wants it written on your symbol of victory, and innocence, and blessing. He wants your status as a child of God to be so true for you, that you will gladly take your stand against all the culture around you because you have found something better. You have found what it means to belong to the living God and to have your life and salvation in him. Amen.