Quinguagesima
Rolling Meadows - 1971

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IN NOMINE JESU

Revelation 2: 9: I KNOW YOUR TRIBULATION AND YOUR POVERTY, BUT YOU ARE RICH!

As you remember from last Sunday, the theme of this SERIES OF SERMONS on St. John's SEVEN LETTERS TO THE CHURCHES IN ASIA MINOR is: WHAT THE SPIRIT IS SAYING TO THE CHURCHES! In reality he is writing to the Church Universal - and therefore also to us. We are looking for one, single distinctive note that sums up the whole message.

What does the Spirit say to the Church in Smyrna? The Spirit says: "REALIZE YOUR RICHES!" "I KNOW YOUR TRIBULATION AND YOUR POVERTY, BUT YOU ARE RICH!"

REALIZE YOUR RICHES! This is the great, over-arching melody that runs through the entire New Testament. The New Testament is not a dull treatise on ethics or humanitarianism or respectable behavior. It is much more like a wild treasure island story - throbbing with the exhilaration of adventure and discovery - of fabulous wealth and unsearchable riches! And mark you, this is not fairy-tale and make-believe! That God bears the sins of the world - this, even in a world of electronic brains and artificial satellites and technical marvels of all kinds, is the ultimate mystery and miracle of the LOVE OF GOD. That Christ communicates life - this is the redeeming of existence from meaninglessness and insignificance. For the moment you say: "I LIVE, YET NOT I, BUT CHRIST LIVES IN ME," - you are into a new dimension. Your human nature has been laid hold of by a Super-Nature. To use our Lord's own figure, just as the vine injects its life into the branch, so Christ imparts to His Church and to all who will receive Him the VERY LIFE OF GOD -- not just an improved existence, but actually GOD'S OWN QUALITY OF LIFE.

REALIZE YOUR RICHES! The Church of Smyrna was up against it. Clearly their tribulation was persecution. The enemies of the faith were aggressive and cruel. It was a dangerous thing to be a Christian in Smyrna. The threat of death at any moment hung over them.

Already in 195 B.C. a temple was dedicated in Smyrna to Dea Roma - ROME PERSONIFIED AS A GODDESS! Then around the year A.D. 25, another temple was

dedicated to the emperor Tiberius. The cult of empire and emperor - of Rome and Rome's Caesar - was a matter of great pride in Smyrna. The Christians quickly became unpopular, when they refused to sprinkle incense on the fire which burned before the emperor's bust.... They could not call "Ceasar Lord" when "JESUS CHRIS WAS THEIR LORD." Their unwillingness to conform brought about tribulation, persecution, and suffering.... In one of the richest cities of that day, they knew only poverty. Because of their allegiance to JESUS CHRIST, they were ignored and outcasts in the business world.....

Make no mistake: It does not always pay to be a Christian. Nor is honesty by any means always the best policy - if material gain is your ambition. Still the text wants to assure them: "YOU ARE RICH!"

A good example of the REALIZATION OF SUCH RICHES is seen in the martyrdom of Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna. He was consecrated bishop of Smyrna by St. John himself.

It was February 23, A.D. 156. Polycarp had fled from the city at the request of his congregation. But he was tracked down to his hiding place. He made no attempt to flee. Instead, he offered food and drink to his captors, and asked permission to retire for prayer - which he did for two hours. Then, as they drove into the city, the officer in charge urged him to recant. "WHAT HARM CAN IT DO," he asked, "TO SACRIFICE TO THE EMPEROR?" Polycarp refused. On arrival, he was roughly pushed out the carriage, and brought before the proconsul in the amphitheater, who addressed him: "HAVE RESPECT TO YOUR OLD AGE....SWEAR BY THE FURTUNE OF CAESAR....CURSE CHRIST." To that Polycarp gave his immortal answer: "EIGHTY-SIX YEARS I HAVE SERVED HIM, AND HE NEVER DID ME ANY WRONG. HOW CAN I BLASPHEME MY KING WHO SAVE ME?"

The proconsul persisted: "SWEAR BY THE FORTUNE OF CAESAR....I HAVE WILD BEASTS. I SHALL THROW YOU TO THEM, IF YOU DO NOT CHANGE YOUR MIND." Polycarp replied: "CALL THEM."

Again the proconsul said to him: "I SHALL HAVE YOU CONSUMED WITH FIRE, IF

YOU DESPISE THE WILD BEASTS, UNLESS YOU CHANGE YOUR MIND."

By this time the people were infuriated by the magnificant audacity of his faith and his confession. They gathered wood for the pyle. Polycarp stood by the stake, asking not to be nailed to it, and prayed: "LORD GOD ALMIGHTY, FATHER OF THY BELOVED AND BLESSED SERVANT JESUS CHRIST, THROUGH WHOM WE HAVE RECEIVED FULL KNOWLEDGE OF THEE....I BLESS THEE, BECAUSE THOU HAST DEEMED ME WORTHY OF THIS DAY AND HOUR, TO TAKE MY PART IN THE NUMBER OF THE MARTYRS, IN THE CUP OF THY CHRIST, FOR THE RESURRECTION TO ETERNAL LIFE."

The fire was kindled - but as the wind drove the flames away from him and prolonged his agony - a soldier's sword put an end to his misery.

REALIZE YOUR RICHES! I wonder just how deep committed we are to these words of the alpha and the omega, the first and the last - WHO DIED AND CAME TO LIFE. I don't have to tell you about the hard cell of the business world. I don't have to tell you about greed, and graft, and dishonesty, and greased palms. I don't have to tell you about the opportunity for climbing the ladder of success by doing what is called "SPECIAL FAVORS." I don't have to tell you about "putting in a dishonest days work." I don't have to tell you how often the Name of Christ is denied and blasphemed - rather than confessed and adored.

REALIZE YOUR RICHES! Is it not true that we have our values and priorities all mixed up? We shrink from suffering. We tend to avoid suffering by compromise Our lives do not challenge and rebuke unbelievers. The world sees in us nothing to hate. We make little impact on society. Our committment is only half-hearted. We mind our own business lest anyone should be offended. We hold our tongues so that nobody is embarrassed. We tread ever so delicately so as not to step on anybody's corns. We are respectable, conventional, inoffensive, and ineffective!

Such behavior is utterly absurd - if we would only REALIZE OUR RICHES! Always with us there is the ONE WHO HAS CONQUERED DEATH - the ONE WHO HAS TAKEN ON THE LAST ENEMY and who has SHATTERED HIS POWER. We are "HEIRS OF GOD, JOINT HEIRS WITH CHRIST" -- we hold the title-deeds of our inheritance here and now --

life eternal in the midst of time -- the first anticipatory sample and installment of the Heavenly Kingdom!

At the INSTITUTE ON WORSHIP A LITURGY which I attended this past week in Valparaiso, a brother pastor told about leaving home to come to the institute. While he was gathering things from his Study, he overheard a conversation taking place between his wife and their five year old son. The mother was trying to explain to the boy that daddy would be gone for several days. "DO YOU KNOW THAT DADDY LOVES YOU?" she asked. The boy replied, "YES, MOM, I KNOW THAT DADDY LOVES ME."!.."HOW DO YOU KNOW THAT DADDY LOVES YOU?"//.. "BECAUSE HE KISSES ME."..... "BUT DADDY KISSES A LOT OF PEOPLE....HOW DO YOU KNOW THAT DADDY LOVES YOU?" Without any hesitation, the boy replied: "DADDY KISSES ME ON THE LIPS!"

In just a few minutes you will have the opportunity to come forward and to let your Lord touch you on your lips - to tell you of His Love with HIS BODY GIVEN FOR YOU and HIS BLOOD SHED JUST FOR YOU. Remember His words: "BE FAITHFUL UNTO DEATH, AND I WILL GIVE YOU THE CROWN OF LIFE."

This is the Word of the SPIRIT for the Church in Smyrna: REALIZE YOUR RICHES! It is also a word for us. "HE WHO HAS AN EAR, LET HIM HEAR WHAT THE SPIRIT SAYS TO THE CHURCHES." Amen.