

THE MESSAGE

Aug 1, 2010

Revelation 10:1-11

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Bitter and Sweet

He got in the car not knowing exactly where they were going, but he had anticipated a night of fun with his friends. He was a fraternity president and had a lot of friends. They were taking him out for a birthday night on the town. A few miles into the ride he found out where they were going, and his stomach started to stir. As they got closer, his stomach was churning, and he was very uncomfortable. He knew what he had to do. He knew it would not be easy.

After this, things would certainly be different. They were bound to be different. His buddies would no longer look at him the same way. He would no longer be invited to the same places or hang out with the same people. The butterflies in his stomach were churning. Make no mistake; he was not perfect or pious. He was not a prude or prideful. Yet, he was confident about his decision and how he would live his life; otherwise he would have gone into the strip club with all his buddies. But he didn't. Sitting in the car was bitter and sweet, while his buddies went into the strip club without him.

Sometimes doing God's will, sometimes living by God's values, sometimes doing the right thing – the Christ-like thing – is bitter and sweet.

Our reading from Revelation this morning describes the bitter and sweet reality of God's Word. We are told about an angel who instructs John to eat the scroll, to literally eat the Word of God. The Word was sweet on his lips, and bitter in his stomach. What an image. Sometimes the Word of God is like that for us. We are to take it in, devour it, and make it part of our lives...

Sweeeeeeeet! Simon and I like to say that when we enjoy something. Like going for ice cream – sweeeet!

The angel gives us a glimpse of the sweetness of God's will and God's values for living. In the vision the angel has one foot on land and one on the sea, reminds us that God has dominion over all the earth. Sweeeet! Wrapped in a cloud, with pillars of fire for legs, the angel reminds us of God's guidance for Moses and the Israelites in the wilderness for 40 years. Sweeeet! The rainbow shows us that God remembers God's promise to Noah, and all humanity. Sweeeet! The angel's face like the sun reminds us of the image of Christ as the light of the world. Sweeeet! A mighty roar comes from the angel's mouth. The seven thunders sound, and then... and then... and then... Before we go there, consider this:

This letter would have been read out loud, from beginning to end, in the churches at the time. Sitting in the congregation you would have been on the edge of your seat. Names have been named. Accusations have been made. The call to repent has come.

Plagues have rained down on the people, and still they do not change their ways. The call to faithfulness has come. And now the seven thunders seem more frightening than ever. Something big is about to happen.

The seven thunders sound, and John is ready to write down this powerful message of judgment from God. And then... and then... John is told to not write down the message. No one knows what the seven thunders said about God's judgment. No one knows what the message was. So, we need not read too much into or out of Revelation. If the message was good, sweeeeet! If it was bad, sweet for John not to write it down. Either way, it's sweeeeeeeet!

It all sweetness up to this point. So far so good, right? So how does it become bitter for John? How could the Word of God be sweet on his lips and bitter in his gut?

In biblical times, people believed that the stomach, the gut, was the emotional center of the body. Some Bible translations have moved this emotional center from the gut to the heart. And yet, people have been experiencing a stirring in the gut for a long time. Having "butterflies" is nothing new. But why would God's Word be bitter in the gut? It just is.

Here is a top ten list I put together of God's words that are bitter and cause a stirring in our guts.

- 10 Love the unloveable...
- 9 Pray for the well being of your enemies...
- 8 Serve others and see them as more important than yourself...
- 7 The first will be last and the last will be first...
- 6 Turn the other cheek...
- 5 The church exists to serve those who are not yet members...
- 4 Forgive, forgive, forgive... 77 times if needed...
- 3 Give, give, give... Giving is an act of thanks and praise for what God has done for us and will do for us
- 2 Giving the first 10% back to God is expected. A tithe is the guide.
- 1 Live the faith by putting Jesus first in your life... Live not for yourself but for Jesus...

These are just a few examples of how God's Word causes a stirring in our gut. Point is God's Word is sweet and bitter. And when it's bitter, when it causes a stirring in our gut, God is probably trying to tell us something.

This bitter and sweet Word of God's reminds me of Jeremiah. Jeremiah experienced the sweetness of God's Word, and the bitterness of his faith community. The people didn't want to listen to him. They didn't want to follow his leadership. They didn't want to do what God was telling them to do through his messages.

Jeremiah was led by God's Word, to live his life differently, proclaiming God's will to the people. Yet the people didn't want to hear it or live by it. They didn't want to do God's will so they made life miserable for Jeremiah. They didn't support him. We often do that to our leaders in the churches. I'm talking about others churches, not here at Friedens. I wonder, why do we do that to our leaders?

While the Word of God is sweet on Jeremiah's lips, his gut is wrestling with what it means for his life. The churning in his gut is so strong that he questions God's sweet promises. God's Word is difficult to stomach sometimes. Got to tell you, I can certainly relate. I can relate to Jeremiah's situation.

To live as God's faithful people we experience both the sweet and the bitter. In fact, to live as God's faithful people, we should expect the bitter and the sweet. As Lutheran Christians we call it Law and Gospel. Each verse in the Bible is both Law and Gospel.

The Law is bitter. It points out our faults and failures and follies. And we all have them. We don't have to look very far to see them. The Law points out how far we have strayed from God and God's will for our lives. The Gospel points out the sweetness of God's love for us in spite of ourselves. God's grace and forgiveness and new life is ours in Christ Jesus. And how sweeeeeet that life is!

Point is life is filled with decisions and the Word of God should be our guide. On the road of life we make thousands of decisions everyday often without much thought... I encourage you to choose the road that leads to faithfulness...

Whenever we come to the crossroad in life to conform, or compromise, or live comfortably for ourselves, the Word of God will upset us, stir within us, and seem quite bitter. When we face the choice to conform to the ways of the world, tempted to do what we know we ought not do, then we ought to do a gut-check.

Two weeks ago we learned that God is in charge. Last week we learned that God is faithful. This week we learn that before we decide to do anything we ought to do a gut-check. What is your gut telling you to do in this situation, whatever that situation might be?

John, in our reading from Revelation today, speaks of his gut check before he was sent out to "do God's work in the world..." (Revelation 10:11). As followers of Jesus as its gut-check time for us.

Here's the point of today's message. If you don't remember anything else I've said remember this. God's word is sweet and bitter. But God's word is not designed to make us sweet or bitter. God's word is designed to make us faithful to do God's will living according to God's values.

The ride home from the strip club was brutal. His friends made him feel like an outcast. He had never been called some of those names before, and, while some of them were spoken in jest, there was a bite to them that signaled a change had come. It was a life-defining decision guided by God's grace and God's goodness in his life. A life he wanted to share that goodness with others.

As a fraternity president, he had connections with some 50 people and their friends. That spring, partnering with the local church, he led dozens of servants into the poorest parts of the community to repaint and restore homes in Jesus' name. The bitterness of God's Word propelled him to live into the sweetness of God's grace. "Operation Paintbrush" as it was called returned dignity and joy to people who were ignored and cast out.

God's Word leads to redemption, reconciliation, and re-new life. What is God's Word calling you to do? The Kingdom of God is at hand; may God's will be done in us and through us. Amen.