

“Mission Impossible: Christian Edition”

Revelation 2:8-11

The church in Smyrna in Asia Minor was a church that faced great difficulty in its aspirations or goals for ministry. This was a church that was heavily persecuted for existing, just because they were a Christian church. It would have been extremely difficult to be a Christian in Smyrna because you were held in contempt because you followed a faith that was different and unlike any other faith in existence.

Today as Christians, we face hurdles and difficulties in being Christian in our modern day and place. We face difficulties of living our faith in a time and place that no longer has the respect that it once had in the past. We live in an era where we face challenges to faith from every angle, from consumerism, from politics, from culture, from any other angle. While Christianity may be the dominant religion in our country, it is not the dominant force in the country.

The early Christian church many challenges in its early existence, which the seven churches of Revelation will show us in our studies. The seven churches faced challenges from within and from outside the congregation. Today, we focus on the external challenges we face.

In past sermons we have discussed challenges we face from outside our faith, but today, I'd like to frame it in the context of living out our faith being

Mission Impossible. In my generation, Mission Impossible has been a series of high-action movies, but it is my understanding that there was a tv series before that.

In the movies and show we have main characters facing huge odds in order to get their mission and objectives accomplished. Through the show or the movie we see amazing feats in order to come over odds that seem impossible. What seems impossible is possible. All it takes is some special gear and thinking outside of the box and you can do whatever you need to do.

In living our faith today, we face challenges that might seem impossible. I mentioned some challenges earlier on, but I believe one of the biggest challenges we face being Christian is our own culture that we live in. We may feel that our faith identity is safe in the United States, the country that we call home, but in Western society, which includes the United States and Europe, our faith is on the decline. Society is moving away from faith, and we are now facing challenges that make us think we are living in a Mission Impossible episode.

The early church in Smyrna would have been held in contempt by its non-Christian neighbors and questioned for its very existence. The early Christian church was held in contempt because it challenged the status quo and was a new faith that had appeared on the scene. We don't quite have the same experience today, but we can relate to similar challenges.

In the Roman Empire and in the ancient world, whatever was old, reigned supreme. The Pyramids of Egypt were revered by the Romans for the significance and prominence in Egypt. The culture of the Greeks was also revered by the Romans, for its roots that reached back into time and gave rise to many of the ideas of the Empire. More mysteriously, the Romans thought highly of their predecessors, the Etruscans and tried to copy much of Etruscan culture. It was the ancient that reigned supreme and was the ideal to strive for. If it was old, it was in vogue.

This concept of ancient being supreme carried over into religion. The religion of the state had ancient roots in the Etruscan religion and in the religion of Greece. In fact, much of the religion of Rome was copied from the Greeks. The names might have been changed, but much of the same elements remained. The state religion favored power and was done so that those in power could be held in reverence, and held up to ancient ideals. The state religion of Rome was at its core a very ancient religion.

Yet this favoritism for the old carried over into other religions. For example, Judaism was allowed to exist as it was because its roots were ancient and reached further back than the religion of the Romans. The Romans were able to conquer those who lived in Palestine quite easily, so as a return, the Romans allowed the Jews to keep their faith. They were not forced to accept the state religion, because

their faith was old. Yet even then the Jews were held in some contempt, because their faith seemed so strange, with its one God and one Temple for sacrifices, as opposed to the many Gods and Temples of the state Roman religion.

Christianity faced their Mission Impossible moment when it burst onto the scene with the life of Jesus Christ. When Jesus Christ was alive he was treated as a strange preacher of the Jews by the state, and the Jewish authorities held him in contempt because he challenged the state and religion of the Jews. He came to bring about something that was otherworldly, a new tradition and a new day. It is in this newness that Christ and then Christianity would face their challenge—it was a new faith.

For quite some time, Christianity and the teachings of Christ did not enjoy a privileged status in the empire. It wasn't until the fourth century that Christianity rose up to be the state religion, so the time period in which John the Revelator was writing and receiving his vision of a new day and a new creation would have been a time of great difficulty, and persecution of the faith. In the newness of the faith, they faced persecution by the old, state and autocratic religion.

Today, this is a contrary idea to what we experience today. In fact, our culture has totally turned away by being fascinated by the ancient and instead fascinated by the new. Instead of wishing technology and culture embraced things of old we look towards the newest and greatest ideas and push for innovation.

Today, I do not condemn our desire for the new, in fact, I embrace it in my own life. As many of you now I enjoy computers, working with them and as a hobby of my own. Being a computer nerd naturally causes me to look forward to the new, to the newest technology. So I may seem like a hypocrite when I decry the new, but let me explain further.

I believe that pushing forward to the new is good thing and can be healthy endeavor. However, what is occurring in our society, which is causing much difficulty for our faith and bringing us to our mission impossible moment, is that our culture has become enamored with the new at the expense of learning from our past and has gone to the point of compromising on our principles of faith.

Our now ancient faith, Christianity, is being pushed aside because it is no longer new or exciting. Instead of our culture embracing the old things we have become focused on the new, at the expense of losing our faith and our heritage. This can be easily seen by the decline of the church, especially in the churches like the United Methodist Church which we are a part of. We have not been able to keep up with the new, and thus, we are being cast aside, and now held in suspicion for being too old fashioned. In efforts to counter this, some people are beginning to embrace more progressive beliefs at the expense of our authentic faith, further causing the process of decline to accelerate cause us to loose who we are the world.

Our once strong beliefs are beginning to be eroded in the world, at the expense of our faith in Jesus Christ. We must hold on to our faith, so that we are not pushed away and persecuted for being a thing of the past. I believe much our decline as a faith has come from the fact that in some ways the church has tried to embrace culture too much and thus lose its distinctiveness and heritage.

I went to a seminary that was considered a progressive seminary, a seminary that wanted to push the limits and embrace what is new. I believe this was done at the expense of losing what it means to be Christian. I have struggled with this recently, as I have gone about my ministry. I am told to embrace new progressive ideas, but I see that as part of our problem as a church. By our desire to become a part of culture we are losing ourselves.

Christianity was persecuted early on because it was different, because it was counter-cultural, and I believe today we must embrace what it means to be counter-cultural once again. Yes, this will bring about persecution for us, because we will be embracing the old, but it is what we must do in order to survive. We must hold true to our faith in order not to lose ourselves.

In this desire to embrace our heritage as Christians, this does not mean we will not cease in our desire to reach the lost and try new strategies to reach those who need to hear the gospel. There is nothing wrong with trying new things to

reach people; Christ did so in his life. But we must not sacrifice our principles and our faith.

Yes, by sticking with our faith we reach a Mission Impossible moment when we face the point where we will be persecuted again for what we believe. Our faith may not be popular for taking a stand on its core beliefs, but we must embrace the historic faith that has preserved over time. Yes, it will not be easy to continue on being a Christian, but that is the cost of discipleship.

We risk this moment in our own church as we begin to reach out into the community. As we begin to reach out people will begin to get curious about our faith and wonder what we believe in. We must be ready for the fact that what we believe in may not be popular because we believe that Jesus Christ came into the world for sinners, so that we might have everlasting life. We might be turned away because we have traditional beliefs in the Trinity or in the true authentic nature of the scriptures we hold dear.

We have been in a vision process at the church, and these are some of the challenges we will face as we spread the historic faith of Christianity and love and salvation that come through a relationship in Jesus Christ. We must innovate to reach the lost, but not at the cost of our principles. The early church in Smyrna held true to their faith and faced persecution, but that is the cost of believing in

Jesus Christ. Believing in something as counter-cultural as a faith in Christ is not easy and we have been told in scripture that we would face difficulty.

Our faith ancestors did keep true to their faith, especially the church in Smyrna. It is because of their willingness to be unpopular and face persecution that we have the true life and salvation of Jesus Christ. We must likewise face the impossible of persecution in our own day, so that we can live the life in Jesus Christ that we are called to have.

In our journey as authentic Christians we believe in God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit we are not alone in our struggle. Christ himself has gone before us and paved the way so that in our difficulties we can turn to Christ. Christ faced the ultimate persecution of death, yet he lived again, showing us the way that death and destruction do not have the final say in life. We have new life in Jesus Christ, a new hope to push forward in our difficulties. We are not alone in our struggles as a Christian congregation and especially as individual believers. In our difficult times of life we can turn to Christ, and experience the new day and resurrection.

It is our ultimate goal to face the challenges of faith, so that others might live. It is our goal to share the light of Christ, so that others might have eternal life. The stakes are high, but the end goal is worth it. We can push forward in faith, so that others might have the peace and love of God in their lives through Jesus

Christ. Let us push forward, living in Christ, through the difficulties, so that others might have life. In Jesus Name, Amen.