

## Pretending to Be Good

Sermon for the 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Advent

Sermon Text: Revelation 3:14-22



*“And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: ‘The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God’s creation. <sup>15</sup> “I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! <sup>16</sup> So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth. <sup>17</sup> For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. <sup>18</sup> I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see. <sup>19</sup> Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent. <sup>20</sup> Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. <sup>21</sup> The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on His throne. <sup>22</sup> He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”*

Cicero was a Laodicean his entire life. His fate was therefore so tightly interwoven with this city that it was a part of him. The highs and lows of the city were also the highs and lows of his private life. For example, Cicero could look back at the terrible earthquake of 60 AD. At that time, the whole city was destroyed and many died. Cicero and the survivors of the city didn't let it get them down though. After they had cleared the rubble, they began to build new shops – they were especially successful in the production of ointments and in the trade of gold and silk. A short while later, the city of Laodicea was famous throughout the world. It was known as the city that reinvented itself from the rubble without outside help. Cicero was also a member of the Christian congregation in Laodicea. He could be proud of his city and his congregation together with the other church members. Together, they had accumulated considerable wealth through hard work. For example, their precious eye ointment was known worldwide and they could stroll around the city in the latest fashions. So everything was going wonderfully, if only this letter from John hadn't shaken everything up! Because John had a devastating message for the congregation and the message came from God Himself. God said that the Christian congregation disgusted Him so much that it would make Him nauseous. So in other words, completely unbearable, which could be expressed with the word “puke!” Everything was going so well. There were no corruption scandals! No immoral stories among the church members as such stories had been known among the Corinthians, for example. The Laodiceans were not even a financial burden to other communities. Cicero thought at length about these words sent by John. Even when the words were so hurtful, he could not angrily chuck them into a trashcan. Above all, Cicero obsessed over the word “lukewarm.” God actually said here that it would be better if they were completely cold than just lukewarm. In other words, it would be better that they had not become Christians at all than only half-heartedly believing. The words remind us a little of the words Jesus said about the Pharisees – On the outside they look good and pious but on the inside, a den of thieves! And that's exactly what got Cicero thinking. He asked himself where it went wrong for him and the congregation. How could it be that they had the Gospel and yet were so far from God? He regularly went to church with his congregation. They confessed their sins. But honestly, sometimes such confessions had no meaning because no one thought about sin when he had confessed the words: “I a poor miserable sinner.” Even the good news of forgiveness and about Christ who sacrifices His life for us and our sins, could no longer inspire either him or the congregation. The good news about Christ had become boring. And Cicero had long since considered all this to be normal and had worked it out in his head that at least they were being nice to each other and not causing any trouble. They were just normal Christians and God must be content with that. But God was not content! And half-heartedness was a disgust to the almighty God. And Cicero asked himself: What could you do so that you don't look at God half-heartedly? What could you do so that the Gospel would burn inside your heart again? How could you go from being a lukewarm Christian to a warm, motivated Christian? Cicero thought about these questions and asked himself if there was anything that could generate more enthusiasm. God had lovingly made suggestions to the Laodiceans – one was

that instead of Laodicean eye ointment, they get ointment from God to open their eyes! Cicero remembered that Jesus had said something similar: "Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear?" (Mark 8:18) Could it be that he, along with the congregation, just couldn't see well anymore? Could it be that they took pleasure in the wealth and great accomplishments that they had made but had lost sight of God? They only counted on their own wealth and ability and not on the living God who is over everything. They had forgotten that the sun, under which they lived, came from God as well as the health and strength given to them every day. They lost sight of these normal things! That was at least part of the problem! Cicero knew from his own experience how it is when you can't see well due to old age. When you can't see anymore, you fumble around disoriented and you no longer know where you came from or where you are going. Isn't that what God means when He wants to awaken us from being lukewarm? You fumble around in the darkness because you no longer have the teachings of Jesus in sight. The precious ointment that the Laodiceans had sold and that was sought throughout the world had helped a little so that their physical eyes would be healed. But what is meant by the ointment that God offered him? It was about God wanting to awaken people from being lukewarm. In any case, a clear view seems to be an important key because we cannot cook up enthusiasm like a recipe in the kitchen. Nor can we inspire ourselves or warm ourselves towards God. But if our eyes are opened and we see, it becomes clear what we should and can do. The delight of God comes through seeing! Even more surprising now is the explanation God Himself gives to the congregation of what they should see! They should see that Jesus stands persistently and with great patience and with even greater love at the door and knocks! This is all the more surprising because to the same Jesus, this congregation is disgusting.

And He stands now at the door and knocks. He doesn't come like a king with trumpets, so the red carpet is rolled out for Him. And He also doesn't come storming into the Laodicean church and shatter the chandelier so that He can express His displeasure and finally tell them the plain truth. No, He comes without attracting attention. He knocks quietly and hardly discernably at the door. But He knocks without ceasing. There is absolutely no lukewarmness to be seen in this Christ who knocks at the door. Despite His disgust about the deceit within the congregation, it is love that drives Him. Christ also never gives up even after trying a few times without success. No, He knocks without ceasing and remains uncompromising in love. It was precisely because of this love that He allowed Himself to be nailed to the cross. And if He never stops pouring out His love on us day and night, then He expects nothing but the same from us: we should let ourselves be nailed to God! We should say that it is He who created us and preserves us and our lives. We should acknowledge that we can accomplish absolutely nothing without His blessing and protection. We should pin ourselves to God as He allowed Himself to be nailed to the cross for our sake... you can't help but be excited about that. And yet it's not all that simple, God is invisible. Even though He created the world and everything in it, He doesn't proclaim it. Even though He has the power to destroy all the worldly powers and all cruelty, He doesn't do that and instead lets Himself be nailed to the cross. External power and piety that can be seen from the outside are much more convincing for us than this Jesus who knocks softly at the door. And that's why we must realize again and again that we are so powerless when it comes to Jesus. We can neither see Him nor feel Him. And above all, we can't love like He can. We can't be faithful like He is. We can't believe as He can. What is beautiful about this is that He knows this... yes, He even counts on it and that's exactly why He wants to come in! He didn't come to strengthen us morally, so that we become even better Christians, but He came to have fellowship with us. He wants to celebrate a meal with us. He wants to share everything that belongs to Him with us. Only through Jesus do we come to God, only through Jesus would we regain the excitement of the first hour, only through Jesus would we love.

All at once it became crystal clear to Cicero. It's all about this Christ. Jesus Christ is the foundation and the life of the church. And where Christ no longer is, there is also no longer a church. Where there is no Christ, there are only lies and deception. Together with his congregation, he had transformed into a fluffy, feel-good community that no longer had anything to do with Christ. The hypocrisy had disgusted Jesus. And the amazing thing was that the same Christ still wants to eat with those that actually disgust Him. That's Christ. He sits at the table with those who don't deserve it. There is no other way to Him except the way He takes to us when He has fellowship with us. Amen.