

## Letter From Jesus Workbook

### Sermon Series – RE:think Church

Imagine that you are walking out to the mailbox to collect your usual assortment of junk mail and bills, and you see a plain white envelope with your name and the words Tuscola United Methodist Church. There is no return address and no stamp. You open it curiously to find that Jesus has written an identical letter to each member and associate of Tuscola United Methodist Church.

The letter is very specific to us here in Tuscola, Illinois, United States. Jesus talks a bit about our nation and town and the specific temptations we face. Jesus then reminds us that he has walked with us through difficult times and has always been faithful towards us. In the next part of the letter, Jesus offers us praise on certain ministries and visions that we share. But then...Jesus calls us out on something. Something that we are doing wrong that threatens our church's soul. Jesus urges us to face this issue and deal with it before the negative work outweighs the good.

This is what happened in the book of Revelation. The author, John of Patmos, had a prophetic vision of Jesus who asked John to write down His words. These words were addressed to seven of the major churches in the area. Each church is praised for what it does right, but each church has a sin that is beginning to weigh on its ministry.

Over the next six weeks, we are going to walk through these passages in Revelation, but it's not enough to just learn about other churches. Before we can RE:vive as a church, we need to decide what is good and where we struggle. When I say struggle, however, I'm not referring to things that "others" do. For instance, if a church had a preschool, someone might try to say that their church's struggle was that the preschool director didn't attend church. That's not what we're looking for here. We're looking for deep, repetitive actions that **each** of us take part in, knowingly or unknowingly, that threatens the entire mission of the church.

But this work can't be done in a vacuum by staff and Church Council only. This type of work takes each one of us spending time in deep prayer and quiet reflection. If we ask God's spirit to work through us, there is nothing God will not reveal to us. However, I would like to provide a caution: if you

think you already know what our successes and struggles are, then I ask you to put those thoughts out of your mind. We can only truly do this process if we come in without pre-conceived ideas and petty squabbles weighing down our hearts.

Over the course of these weeks, I will invite you to work through a weekly devotion. By week six, each of you should have a letter from Jesus (and I truly believe if we ask for guidance from the Holy Spirit that these will be Jesus' words) to Tuscola United Methodist Church. We will collect those letters and put together a packet of each of them. These will be entirely anonymous as the letters are meant to reflect Jesus' words and not our own.

The only part of this packet that will be turned in is your final letter, so I encourage you to be honest and do some deep soul searching on the questions. You (and God) are the only ones who will ever see these words.

I encourage you to take part in this devotional. This is powerful work that we are doing for our church, and I plan to discuss these letters in detail with Church Council as we make decisions on the future of Tuscola United Methodist Church.

Thank you so much for participating in this activity. I pray you find deep joy in taking this time to work for the betterment of our church.

God Bless,

Pastor Terri

## **Week 1: To the Angel of the Church of Tuscola**

**Pray:** All knowing God, we come seeking your guidance and your spirit of discernment. You know our hearts, you know our community, and you know our nation. You know the unique challenges that we face in 2022 and you understand how this has affected your church and our own hearts. Grant us your wisdom as we seek to better understand our community and our role within that community. Through the name of our redeemer Jesus Christ and our sustainer the Holy Spirit, Amen.

**Silence:** Take a moment to slow your breathing. Quiet your mind. Feel the spirit of God beginning to work through you. When you feel centered and ready, go on to the next step.

**Scripture:** Read Revelation 2:1-2, 8-9; 12-13; 18-19; 3:1-2, 7-9, 14-15

What are the specific concerns facing the church in:

1. Ephesus (2:1-2)
2. Smyrna (2:8-9)
3. Pergamum (2:12-13)
4. Thyatira (2:18-19)
5. Sardis (3:1-2)
6. Philadelphia (3:7-9)
7. Laodicea (3:14-15)

### **Questions:**

1. When you think of the United States right now, what word or phrase comes to mind?

2. When you think of the culture of the United States right now, what word or phrase comes to mind?
  
3. What changes have you noticed in our culture since you were a child? Since 20 years ago? Since pre-Covid?
  
4. Does Tuscola seem like a good representation of what's going on in the United States? Why or why not?
  
5. Describe Tuscola to someone who has never been here. What are the people like? What is the best part about living here? What is the hardest part about living here? What is unique about living here?

6. What is our biggest sin or struggle in Tuscola? This shouldn't be aimed only at others (i.e. drug use). What things do we **all** struggle with here? (i.e. self centeredness, apathy)

**Letter:** Write the first few sentences of your letter from Jesus to Tuscola. This week, we will focus on our community and our unique challenges and temptations. You can use the provided template or write your own:

*To the Angel of the Church of Tuscola:*

*I know your works. I know where you are living in Tuscola, Illinois, United States in 2022. I know that living in your culture and your town have caused unique situations such as \_\_\_\_\_*

\_\_\_\_\_.

*I know this has given you (the entire church) certain temptations such as \_\_\_\_\_*

\_\_\_\_\_.

**Closing Prayer:** Gracious God, thank you for your guidance as I, a member of Tuscola United Methodist Church, seek to discern your will for our church. Please draw my eyes and ears towards particular situations that will further illuminate your path. In your holy and powerful name, Amen.

## **Week 2: I Know Your Works**

**Pray:** All knowing God, we come seeking your guidance and your spirit of discernment. You know our works. You know our very hearts and souls. You know the difficult situations we have walked through and how those situations have impacted us today. Show us connections that we may have missed in order to help us not cling so tightly to the past and instead, embrace the future. Through the name of our redeemer Jesus Christ and our sustainer the Holy Spirit, Amen.

**Silence:** Take a moment to slow your breathing. Quiet your mind. Feel the spirit of God beginning to work through you. When you feel centered and ready, go on to the next step.

**Scripture:** Read Revelation 2:2a; Psalm 139

Each letter in Revelation contains the phrase, “I know.” For most of the readings, it’s, “I know your works.” God reminds us that God knows us deeply and has a strong interest in the works, life, and activity of the church. Nothing escapes God’s notice! Nothing!

Re-read Psalm 139:23-24. Why is the author asking God to search his or her heart? Doesn’t the author know if there are “wicked ways” within them? Do we know our own hearts that well or would it be helpful for God to search us deeply?

## Questions:

1. God knows us incredibly deeply, not only as individuals, but as a church. What are some situations that Jesus has walked with Tuscola UMC through? If you have not been here long enough, you can use examples from other churches you have known.
2. Does God knowing you (us) intimately frighten you or give you hope? Why or why not?
3. John 3:17 says, "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." However, it sure seems like Jesus is judging those churches in Revelation! Do churches have a higher standard of accountability than individuals? Why or why not?

**Letter:** Write the second part of your letter from Jesus to Tuscola. This week, we will focus on the deep things that Jesus knows about Tuscola UMC. Where has Jesus walked with us in difficult times? You can feel free to use the template or to write it in your own words.

*I know your works. I have stood by you when \_\_\_\_\_*

\_\_\_\_\_.

*I wept with you when \_\_\_\_\_,*

*and I rejoiced with you when \_\_\_\_\_.*

**Closing Prayer:** Gracious God, thank you for your guidance as I, a member of Tuscola United Methodist Church, seek to discern your will for our church. Please draw my eyes and ears towards particular situations that will further illuminate your path. In your holy and powerful name, Amen.

### **Week 3: Good Job!**

**Pray:** All knowing God, we come seeking your guidance and your spirit of discernment. You know that, while we often sin against you, our hearts truly want to serve and praise you. Show us the works that make you smile and say, "Well done, good and faithful servant." Show us what we should celebrate even as we struggle to follow your will in every way. Through the name of our redeemer Jesus Christ and our sustainer the Holy Spirit, Amen.

**Silence:** Take a moment to slow your breathing. Quiet your mind. Feel the spirit of God beginning to work through you. When you feel centered and ready, go on to the next step.

**Scripture:** Read Revelation 2:2-3, 13, 19, Mark 12:30-31, Matthew 28:16-20

Each letter in Revelation follows a formula. First, Jesus identifies the church and reminds them that Jesus knows them deeply. Then, Jesus praises them for the ways in which they are keeping God's commandments.

What words of praise does Jesus offer for:

1. Ephesus (2:2-3)
2. Pergamum (2:13)
3. Thyatira (2:19)

**Questions:**

1. When asked what the most important commandment in all of scripture was, Jesus responded that we should love God with all our heart, soul, and mind, and love our neighbor as ourselves (Mark 12:30-31). This is Jesus' ultimate command for us as Christians. Based on this command, what types of corporate acts (things we do as an entire church) would genuinely please God?

2. Jesus also gives the disciples a final commandment which we call The Great Commission. In it, Jesus instructs us to go and make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:16-20). Since this is the last command Jesus gave to his disciples, it is clearly important. Based on this command, what type of corporate acts would genuinely please God?

3. Are any of the acts you mentioned in question 1 or 2 performed here at Tuscola UMC? If not, can you think of other acts that we do that would greatly please Jesus?

**Letter:** Write the third part of your letter from Jesus to Tuscola. This week, we will focus on the things that Jesus would praise us for. What are some areas in which you feel that we, as a church, are succeeding in the mission to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, and mind and love our neighbors as ourselves? You can feel free to use the template or to write it in your own words.

*I know your works. I know where you have heard my commands to love God with all your heart, mind, and soul and your neighbor as yourself, and I see those acts in you when you:* \_\_\_\_\_

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**Closing Prayer:** Gracious God, thank you for your guidance as I, a member of Tuscola United Methodist Church, seek to discern your will for our church. Please draw my eyes and ears towards particular situations that will further illuminate your path. In your holy and powerful name, Amen.

### **Week 4: BUT.....**

**Pray:** All knowing God, we come seeking your guidance and your spirit of discernment. You know that we struggle to be more like you not only as individuals, but as a church. Help us to examine our own selves thoroughly today to see where we struggle with a lack of holiness. Help point out our flaws so that we can continue to strive to be more like you, Lord. Through the name of our redeemer Jesus Christ and our sustainer the Holy Spirit, Amen.

**Silence:** Take a moment to slow your breathing. Quiet your mind. Feel the spirit of God beginning to work through you. When you feel centered and ready, go on to the next step.

**Scripture:** Read Revelation 2:4, 14-15, 20, 3:1-2, 15-19

Each letter in Revelation follows a formula. First, Jesus identifies the church and reminds them that Jesus knows them deeply. Then, Jesus praises them for the ways in which they are keeping God's commandments. After that, Jesus scolds them for a particular sin they have committed. What words of rebuke does Jesus offer for:

1. Ephesus (2:4)
2. Pergamum (2:14-15)
3. Thyatira (2:20)
4. Sardis (3:1-2)
5. Laodicea (3:15-19)

## Questions:

As Christians, we spend time confessing our personal sins as a way to seek forgiveness and get closer to God, but we are much less comfortable with “corporate sin”. Corporate sin doesn’t refer to something that corporations do, although they can be guilty of corporate sins too. Instead, it is defined as a sinful act done by many towards others. One example of this might be consumers who want less expensive goods. As a group, these consumers vote with their dollars which increases the amount of cheaper goods on the market. However, as consumers, we are taking part in a system that exploits children and slave labor to create those goods. That is a corporate sin. Corporate sins can be easy to overlook because we rarely see the faces of those who are hurt. It is important to understand that corporate sins are not sins in which we had no part, such as “sins of the parents”. Instead, it is sin that we have taken a part in but often fail to notice because it is so much a part of our lifestyle and culture such as the example I shared earlier.

1. What are some corporate sins you can think of?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. Do any of these corporate sins affect us living here in Tuscola? Do we take part in some of those sins?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. What corporate sins might we, as a church, be committing?

**Letter:** Write the fourth, and hardest, part of your letter from Jesus to Tuscola. This week, we will focus on the ways in which we, as a church, have failed God. You can feel free to use the template or to write it in your own words.

*I know your works. I know the deepest depths of your hearts. I know when you fail me. Tuscola United Methodist Church has failed me by \_\_\_\_\_*

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**Closing Prayer:** Gracious God, thank you for your guidance as I, a member of Tuscola United Methodist Church, seek to discern your will for our church. Please draw my eyes and ears towards particular situations that will further illuminate your path. In your holy and powerful name, Amen.

### **Week 5: Moving Forward**

**Pray:** All knowing God, we come seeking your guidance and your spirit of discernment. Our hearts are saddened by the sins we as a church have committed. We want to be more like you, God. Forgive us and free us for joyful obedience. Guide our steps, so that we may return to right relationship with you. Through the name of our redeemer Jesus Christ and our sustainer the Holy Spirit, Amen.

**Silence:** Take a moment to slow your breathing. Quiet your mind. Feel the spirit of God beginning to work through you. When you feel centered and ready, go on to the next step.

**Scripture:** Read 2 Kings 22:1-23:3



3. How did God react to King Josiah's deep regret? Was God angry? Did God forgive (2 Kings 22:18-20)? How do you think God reacted to your own unknown sin?
  
4. It wasn't enough that King Josiah and the people recognized that they had unknowingly sinned against God. What did they choose to do even after God had forgiven them (2 Kings 23:1-3)? Why was this important?

### **Questions:**

As Christians, we were raised in a world of rights and wrongs. There are consequences for our actions, even if our actions hurt someone inadvertently or unknowingly. First, we apologize and ask forgiveness. Then we try our hardest to make it right.

1. Last week, you named a (or some) corporate sin(s) that the church is guilty of. Who have we hurt through those sins? Is there someone(s) we can ask for forgiveness from? If so, how can we go about doing that as a whole congregation?

2. When King Josiah realized that God had forgiven him, it was still important for him to lead all of Israel in re-establishing the covenant with God. How can we make our sins “right”? Are there changes we can make going forward to help avoid the temptation to sin in the same way? What types of changes?
  
3. If we have asked for forgiveness and made things right, it is time for us to move forward as a church. How can we focus on the future while making sure not to re-commit the sins of the past?
  
4. Can we be successful in loving God with our hearts, souls, and minds, loving our neighbors as ourselves, and making disciples of all nations if we continue down the same path of sin? Why or why not?

**Letter:** Write the fifth, and final, part of your letter from Jesus to Tuscola. This week, we will acknowledge what our legacy will be if we continue down our current path of corporate sin. How will our church be impacted if we continue in our sin? Like King Josiah, we will ask forgiveness of God and anyone else that we have harmed and covenant to do better.

*I know your works. If you continue to sin against God in this way, \_\_\_\_\_*

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*Repent. Ask for forgiveness from God (and from \_\_\_\_\_).*

*Seek to do better by \_\_\_\_\_*

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**Closing Prayer:** Gracious God, thank you for your guidance as I, a member of Tuscola United Methodist Church, seek to discern your will for our church. Please draw my eyes and ears towards particular situations that will further illuminate your path. In your holy and powerful name, Amen.

### **Week 5: A Letter from Christ to Tuscola UMC**

**Pray:** All knowing God, we come seeking your guidance and your spirit of discernment. Today, we ask to see things through Your unknowable mind. Show us the words that you would speak to and through us. Help us take pride in our accomplishments while mourning our sins as we strive to be Your holy church. Through the name of our redeemer Jesus Christ and our sustainer the Holy Spirit, Amen.

**Silence:** Take a moment to slow your breathing. Quiet your mind. Feel the spirit of God beginning to work through you. When you feel centered and ready, go on to the next step.

**Scripture:** Read Revelation 2 & 3

**Letter:** It is now time for us to write our full letter. Using the prompts and questions from the past five weeks, I invite you to write a full letter from Jesus Christ to the church at Tuscola UMC. You can freely write your letter or use the template on the last page. The letter should contain five parts:

1. Through the voice of Jesus, state where we live and the unique situations and temptations that we face as residents of Tuscola, Illinois, United States in 2022.
2. Through the voice of Jesus, remind us of the times he walked with us as we faced difficulties as a church. Remind yourselves of the ways that God has been faithful to us.
3. Through the voice of Jesus, praise us for the areas in which we are fulfilling his commands to love God with all our hearts, souls, and minds, love our neighbors as ourselves, and to make disciples of all nations.
4. Through the voice of Jesus, point out the areas for us in which we have failed his commandments.
5. Through the voice of Jesus, call on each of us to repent and remind us of how our church will be affected if we continue down our current path of corporate sin.

You can add other details as you'd like and make the letter as long or as short as you like.

When you have finished your letter, turn in a copy to the office or email Pastor Terri a copy at [thaas@tuscolaumc.org](mailto:thaas@tuscolaumc.org). Your name will not be attached to your letter in any way. Once we have gathered all of the letters, we will create a book of them for you to read.

Thank you for walking through this time of reflection. I hope that it has been powerful and meaningful to each one of you, and I hope it allows us as a church to be opened to the areas in which we have not been good servants of Christ. May God Bless each of you.

*To the Angel of the Church of Tuscola:*

*I know your works. I know where you are living in Tuscola, Illinois, United States in 2022. I know that living in your culture and your town have caused unique situations such as \_\_\_\_\_*

\_\_\_\_\_.

*I know this has given you (the entire church) certain temptations such as*

\_\_\_\_\_.

*I have stood by you when*

\_\_\_\_\_.

*I wept with you when \_\_\_\_\_,*

*and I rejoiced with you when \_\_\_\_\_.*

*I know where you have heard my commands to love God with all your heart, mind, and soul and your neighbor as yourself, and I see those acts in you when you: \_\_\_\_\_*

\_\_\_\_\_.

\_\_\_\_\_.

*But I also know when you fail me. Tuscola United Methodist Church has failed me by \_\_\_\_\_*

\_\_\_\_\_.

\_\_\_\_\_.

*If you continue to sin against God in this way, \_\_\_\_\_*

\_\_\_\_\_.

\_\_\_\_\_.

*Repent. Ask for forgiveness from God (and from \_\_\_\_\_).*

*Seek to do better by \_\_\_\_\_*

\_\_\_\_\_.

\_\_\_\_\_.

*Love, Jesus*