

Seven Letters to Seven Churches, Part 8: "Let anyone who has an ear, listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches."

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Scripture: Revelation 1:9-20, 2:7

1. Intentional Listening

This series began eight weeks ago when we began to look at what John of Patmos believed the Spirit of Jesus revealed to him to pass on to the seven churches of the area that supported "The Way" of Jesus in the world. These seven churches were in the main cities of the territory that actually made up the major postal route of the area, so John of Patmos could be assured that his letters to these churches to share his revelation from the Spirit of Jesus, would in fact, be delivered.

John of Patmos wrote letters to these churches instead of visiting them himself because he was imprisoned at the time by the Roman Empire. Besides not being free to visit these churches, John also had to disguise his language in these letters so that the Roman guards, who no doubt read the letters before letting them go out of the prison, would not be able to read the main message of the revelation he was reporting, which was: "the Roman Empire will fall!" As Eric mentioned several times throughout this series, John was fond of having his head attached to his shoulders and went to extreme care to make sure that the metaphors he used in his letters would not be understood by the guards, but only by the churches he was writing to as he used symbols that they would readily recognize.

The relevance of studying the revelation of the Spirit of Jesus that John of Patmos passed on to the seven churches, is that we too are seeking the Spirit of Jesus within our ministry. So, when we listen to what the Spirit revealed to the churches of first century Christianity, we might find clues toward answering the question "What kind of church are we, and what kind of church do we want to become?" at this critical transition point in our own ministry.

The first of the churches was in the city of **Ephesus**. These Christians were told: *"I also know that you are enduring patiently and bearing up for the sake of my name, and that you have not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first."* (Rev 2:3-4) Apparently this early church was faithful to its original calling, but perhaps had grown so accustomed to following all the doctrines to the letter, that they had somehow lost the very heart of why they were following Jesus's Way in the first place. The Spirit of Jesus calls this church back to its "first love" of The

Way, so that the passion they feel in their faith might be of comfort and nurture to all those around them. Have you experienced these kinds of churches in our times? Churches that work so hard to do everything just right, that they have become boring and complacent? Translate that complacency into lacking the passions to share God's love with real fire, or in a way that touches and moves the lives of the folks to whom they are speaking.

The second letter from John of Patmos was to the church at **Smyrna**. To this church the Spirit wrote: *"I know your affliction and your poverty, even though you are rich. I know the slander on the part of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Beware, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison so that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have affliction. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life."* (Rev 2:9-10) Of the seven churches, the Spirit commends only two of them, and asks them to continue doing what they do without any admonishments. Smyrna is the first of the two. This church stayed faithful, though their economic realities were the poorest of the poor, without any hope for improvement without sacrificing to the Emperor and giving up the faith practices of The Way. And, to make things worse, their fellow Jews also denounced them, and turned them into the authorities, rather than allowing them refuge under the privilege the Romans gave to the Jews. To these of the faithful church in Smyrna, the Spirit comforts with words of promise that they will wear the crown of life.

Our next church was **Pergamum**. Like Smyrna, they were heavily prosecuted for their faith but, unlike Smyrna, their faithfulness has not held up well under the pressure. To the church in Pergamum the Spirit writes: *"But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the people of Israel, so that they would eat food sacrificed to idols and practice fornication. So you also have some who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Repent then. If not, I will come to you soon and make war against them with the sword of my mouth."* (Rev 2:14-16) The Spirit is calling the people of the church at Pergamum to come back to the faithful practices of The Way of Jesus so they do not forget the love and promise of this relationship. If a church assimilates to their culture in ways and practices that directly offend the practices of their own faith, eventually they will not hear the voice of the Spirit calling them to their fullest life. The consequence of this way of living is to forfeit the promise God has given to creation and will lead others away from this promise as well. The Spirit asks "What good is it to proclaim a strong faith in the world if your actions do not support your proclamation?" All of the churches in our own times struggle with this admonishment. How then might we discern our own actions as faithful to the Spirit in our time?

The fourth church is in **Thyatira**. To this church the Spirit writes: *"I know your works-- your love, faith, service, and patient endurance. I know that your last works are greater than the first. But I have this against you: you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet and is teaching and beguiling my servants to practice fornication and to eat food sacrificed to idols."* (Rev 2:19-20)

Thyatira was known for its industry and trades. Thyatira made the things everyone else in the territory used. And each of the individual industries had guilds which were supported by their own gods. The argument of the Spirit with these Christians is that they placed a higher value on the things they made and the profits they could make from selling these things, than the faith they proclaimed about The Way of Jesus. Most of the tradesfolk were bowing to the gods of the guilds rather than the God who promises love and mercy for all. Could the Spirit be carrying the same message to us in our time? What strength and energy might we be forfeiting in our own time by placing our values on the lesser gods of privilege and fortune than the one God who gives us life? As the musical offering is playing, let us consider the messages of the Spirit to these churches and how it might also be speaking to us. What of these messages resonates with you?

2. What do we hear?

The fifth church of Revelation is found in Sardis. To this church the Spirit of Jesus writes: *"I know your works; you have a name of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is on the point of death, for I have not found your works perfect in the sight of my God. Remember then what you received and heard; obey it, and repent. If you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you."* (Rev 3:2-3) If you remember the week Eric spoke of this church in Sardis, you will remember that this is the community whose guards did not stay at their posts overnight, thinking that their city was impenetrable. So the one army who found a weakness in their wall and dared to search to find an entrance, not only found one but also found no one there to defend it! The intruders walked right in, opened the front gates to the rest of their army, and conquered the city. To this community, The Spirit is harsh in its message, calling them to "Wake Up!" and understand that they have the beginnings of revolution in their present, and that the Spirit is about to do great things through them. If the community is so asleep as to not see its very purpose in the glory that is imminent, then they will miss their opportunity to participate in it. Have we experienced this warning in our own times? Are we ourselves paying attention and watching for the great things the Spirit is doing in our times?

To the church of Laodicea the Spirit writes: *"I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither*

hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth. You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked." (Rev 3:15-17) The spirit is warning these folks not to waver in their faith, trying to be all things to all people. Instead, they are urged to jump into their faith with both feet and be whole-hearted about practicing The Way of a loving and accepting God in our midst. To us we might think of this as support for standing up for those things we are called by God to be about in this world, even if it is not the popular stance to take.

The final church of revelation was in Philadelphia. This church was discussed last week during an online sermon from Eric, because the weather caused us to cancel our services here in the sanctuary. (For those who did not catch this sermon, you can find it recorded as a video on our Countryside Facebook page or on the Countryside website.)

This church in Philadelphia is the church that Eric believes is most comparable to our own Countryside Church, because it was a community that was open to learning new things and finding meaning and value in all the things that surrounded it. In his own summary of the churches of Revelation Eric wrote, "The church in Philadelphia is much harangued by others, but they have stayed faithful. Their community is strong and lively. Part of their vitality seems to stem from a sense of boldness and humility that allows them to welcome new insights and awareness regarding their spiritual path rather than shunning them. Consequently, the door is wide open for Philadelphia. 'Step through it,' says Jesus, 'and I will make you a strong pillar in my church.'"

Ten years ago when Eric first presented a sermon series on these churches from Revelation, he compared Countryside to a Ferrari automobile that had a great engine for speed, but needed a bit of TLC to tune it up and have it revving at its full capacity. But in this current series Eric changed his automotive metaphor to a Chevy Volt, saying

A Chevy Volt is an apt metaphor for the church of Philadelphia. The church was the youngest city in our seven churches series – so you might call it a "Next Gen" city. And the church itself had a pretty low profile within the city. Yet the church there was the wave of the future. Starting with the work of this little congregation, Christianity would eventually become the dominant faith in the city. And for a full thousand years after this letter was written, Philadelphia would be renowned for being one of Asia's leading Christian cities!

You can see then why Eric thinks this church in Philadelphia most resembles the ministry we ourselves are stepping into as we are packing our boxes and preparing to move to the Tri-Faith Commons with our faith partners, Temple Israel and the American Muslim Institute. To these folks in Philadelphia (and maybe also then to us) the Spirit writes: "

know your works. Look, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. ... Because you have kept my word of patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth. I am coming soon; hold fast to what you have, so that no one may seize your crown.” (Rev 3:8-11)

Now that we have an idea of what we are hearing the Spirit saying to these churches in Revelation, let us gather with 3 or 4 of the folks around us to discuss these messages of the Spirit and explore how they might speak to our own ministry at Countryside.