

Seven Letters to Seven Churches, Part 7: Philadelphia

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Scripture: Revelation 3:7-13; 21:1-7

I. From Ephesus to Philadelphia

It's hard to believe that this is the last Sunday of the last full-length series we hold as a church before moving to the Tri-Faith Commons! We still have one more series before the move, our Lenten series called "The Lamb and the Beast," but it will be a "mini-series," cut down to 4 weeks instead of our usual 6 to 8 so that we won't start in our new facility in the middle of a series. I hope you've had as much fun taking a new look at the seven churches of Revelation as I have.

For me, this series has been especially meaningful because the last time we explored these churches, ten years ago, the church we most closely resembled, in my opinion, was the church of Ephesus. You may recall that the church in Ephesus had been founded by none other than the apostle Paul, and it had enjoyed a long, proud history, with dynamic leaders engaging in ground-breaking ministry. But by the time John of Patmos wrote his letter to the church, forty years or more after its founding, the church had become embroiled in conflict and lost much of the love and generosity of spirit that had been its hallmarks.

When I arrived in 2008, Countryside thought it had just emerged from a deep conflict that had resulted in the departure of its Senior Minister, but what I found was that the battles were still being waged – though perhaps at a less intense level – and the distrust among the membership was palpable. Back then, it felt like the Spirit was writing Countryside a letter just as She had to the church in Ephesus. That letter, interpreted through my own, admittedly quirky, symbolic language, was this:

"Countryside is like a Ferrari. [Who knew the Spirit cared about Ferraris?!] But its head-gasket is leaking and its cylinders are rusty. [Who knew the Spirit was an auto mechanic?!] Consequently, the Ferrari hasn't been seeing much action lately. Mostly the congregation has been taking it to the grocery store and back. But a Ferrari is meant for more than grocery errands. Countryside's engine is still viable, however. If you and others will simply give some love, care, and a little elbow grease to the engine – not with some destination in mind but simply for the sake of restoring a car you love dearly – then one day Jesus is going to put his foot on Countryside's gas pedal and the church is going to take off like a bat out of heaven."

I kid you not: this is *literally* what I heard the Spirit telling me and our church. Who knew the Spirit is such a fan of high-end race cars? And such a knowledgeable mechanic? I guess if the Spirit is going to speak to humanity at all, She has to effectively speak “baby talk.” She’s got to dramatically reduce the spiritual signal to the point where even a nut like me can understand it!

I don’t know whether I got the metaphor right or not, but one thing is perfectly clear to me: the essence of the message came through loud and clear. In 2008, no one had the faintest inkling that the Tri-Faith Initiative would need to look for a new Christian partner. All we focused on was loving and restoring the engine without any clue as to where God would take us. Then, in April of 2014 when the Episcopal Church asked if we could consider taking their place as the Tri-Faith’s Christian partner, I cannot think of a single minister in the entire country who would have predicted that a church that had proudly stood in a great neighborhood for 65 years, with a great relationship with that neighborhood and a wonderful building that they had just renovated a handful of years earlier, and who had nearly imploded half a dozen years earlier, would accept the offer, much less successfully fulfill it. If ministers spoke “race track,” they would have said, “Only a church with a powerful engine, exquisitely tuned and ready for the open road could pull this off.”

They were right, at least about the kind of engine that would be needed. But it’s not our church who created the car, or who ultimately restored the car. The Spirit did this. We were just the novice mechanics straining to hear, interpret, and carry out the instructions we were given.

All this is to say that, if the Spirit were writing to us today, I think that the church we would most resemble of the seven iconic churches of Revelation would be a different one. No longer Ephesus, but Philadelphia – a church in the City of Brotherly Love.

If Ephesus, like Countryside 11 years ago, was a bit like a Ferrari in need of restoration, what kind of car would Philadelphia be today, especially if Philadelphia is the Spirit of Countryside’s present?

I would say it would be an early-generation electric car, like a Chevy Volt. To be sure, it may not be considered as sexy as a cherry-red Ferrari – not by much of the world anyway. But what is considered sexy to the world isn’t necessarily the sexiest thing to God. Do you remember what Jesus said about John the Baptist? *“Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.”* (Matthew 11:11)

John the Baptist was the one-man, spiritual Ferrari of his day. But what good is a 12-cylinder Ferrari if electricity has replaced gasoline? Even the most basic Chevy Volt can beat a Ferrari that can't gas up!

A Chevy Volt is an apt metaphor for the church of Philadelphia. The church was in 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!

Incidentally, even when Islam swept across Asia Minor and the Muslims came to power, Philadelphia stood as one of the last bastions of Christianity. Even though the city was not easily defended against invaders, and the Muslims besieged the city many times, it never fell through lack of courage or weakness. Curiously, Philadelphia fell because she was betrayed by fellow Christians! The Christians in Byzantium (Constantinople – modern Istanbul) were jealous of Philadelphia's prestige and honor. So the City of Brotherly Love was, in the end, betrayed by Christian brothers, proving that one should never underestimate the power of human beings to mess up a good thing ... But we're getting ahead of ourselves.

Let's start with the beginning. Philadelphia was founded in 250 BCE by King Eumanes II of Pergamum. You may remember Pergamum as the city that went to great lengths to ensure that its library was the greatest in the world, and the place where parchment was invented.

Like the former rulers of Pergamum, Eumanes II was an appreciator of education and higher learning. He was particularly enthralled with Hellenistic culture. At the time, this would be the “Next Gen” culture. Although the Romans were on the rise in his era, it was the Greeks whose culture captivated the imagination and was bringing civilization forward. It was revolutionizing the arts, literature, theatre, architecture, music, mathematics, philosophy, and science. Many believed that Hellenistic culture was capable of even transforming the world into a more peaceful place. The whole “pen is mightier than the sword” kind of belief. Eumanes II was such a believer.

As beautiful as the idea of a violent world being made peaceful through the development of high arts and culture was, not everyone was so impressed. Some preferred the old ways, and the “might makes right” days. They didn't necessarily believe that the old ways were better. It's just what they knew. It's a lot easier to

understand what an iron sword held in your face means than a treatise on Stoic philosophy or a satirical play written by Aristophanes.

Consequently, Eumanes II had a number of significant enemies as well as friends, who conspired for years to overthrow him. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that when Eumanes II once took an extended trip to Greece, word came back that he had been assassinated there. Subsequently, his younger brother, Attalus II, was crowned king of Pergamum.

This was all well and good except that, months later, Eumanes II returned alive from Greece. Apparently rumors of his death had been greatly exaggerated. And why wouldn't they be, really? His enemies simply realized that it would be far less effort to spread a rumor of his death than launch a coup d'état. They figured that, once Attalus II was installed on the throne, nature would simply run its course. Attalus would do what most any other person who gained the throne would do. He would execute or assassinate his brother to hold onto his power.

Much to everyone's surprise, however, Attalus relinquished the throne immediately and publicly, acknowledging his older brother as the rightful king. Such a story of brotherly love and loyalty had rarely been heard in the ancient world – not among kings, anyway. It earned Attalus the nickname, "Philadelphus" – "lover of his brother."

Because of Attalus's continuing love and loyalty, when his brother built a new city on the edge of his kingdom, he named it in honor of Attalus, calling it Philadelphia – the "City of Brotherly Love."

II. From Philadelphia to the New Jerusalem

What does this history have to do with the church in Philadelphia, or Countryside? Well, cities tend to have personalities and so do churches. While the personality of a church may or may not influence the personality of a city – depending on how influential the church is – a city's personality often has a distinct influence on a church. Can you imagine Countryside being any different if we were located in New York City instead of Omaha? I mean, some people wonder about how we might change by moving 40 blocks to the West. Imagine moving 1,200 miles to the East and about 12,000 miles culturally! Certainly, where a church is located has at least some effect on who a church is and what it does.

Given that we have so little knowledge of the distinctive character of the church of Philadelphia of the time, we pretty much have to base our assumptions on what is said in the letter and the character of the city.

We know, for instance, that the City of Brotherly Love wasn't being so brotherly or loving to the church there. Being a *Christian* congregation meant being a persecuted congregation because Christians refused to offer sacrifice to the Roman Emperor as a God. So the church's "brothers and sisters," in the worldly sense, were literally firing them from jobs, putting them in jail, or executing them. Making matters worse, the church's *spiritual* "brothers and sisters" had essentially slammed the door of their house in their face, leaving the church to fend for itself against the Romans.

The church's *spiritual* "brothers and sisters" were, of course, the Jews. Remember that the earliest Christians considered themselves to be Jews who recognized Jesus as the Jewish Messiah. While the divide between Jesus-following Jews and the "orthodox" Jews had grown fairly substantial by the time Revelation was written, Christians were quite enthusiastic about being associated with Judaism. For, not only was there no evidence that Jesus came to start a new religion, but the Jews were the only people in the entire Roman Empire who were exempt from making a sacrifice to the Emperor. So when "orthodox" Jews claimed that Jesus-following Jews weren't Jewish, this was no small, family matter. It was a death sentence.

So once again we hear a letter to a church in Revelation referring to the "synagogue of Satan" and must remember that this statement was not anti-Jewish. It was a statement against those who had slammed the door shut on those Jesus-followers who wanted to be Jews but were not considered "orthodox" enough.

Against this backdrop, you can perhaps hear the significance of the opening words of the letter: "These are the words of the holy one, **the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens.**" In other words, the church is being assured that, in God's eyes, the congregation is living out the heart of true Judaism, for the One who holds "the key of David" has opened a door to them that no one besides God can shut.

While Countryside may not be persecuted like the church in Philadelphia – and we don't face anywhere close to the same dangers they faced merely for identifying ourselves as Christian – I do see many similarities between them and us.

First of all, it has been a long time since we've been considered "orthodox" by many self-proclaimed "orthodox Christians." After all, we believe that "filial love" (i.e. brotherly/sisterly love) means that men and women live as equals – in both church and society – and that women may be as readily ordained as men. That's enough to get us banned from many Christian communities right there.

Of course, we also believe that "filial love" means welcoming the LGBTQ community into the full life and ministry of the church and working for equal rights in society. Another

strike against us in some people's views! Are you aware that a denomination as moderate as the United Methodist Church is effectively splitting this weekend over the issue of LGBTQ equality?

Our interpretation of what "filial love" means with respect to people of color, or the poor, or immigrants also puts us at odds with certain Christian communities – as well as the general flow of society at the moment, but the *pièce de résistance* of our so-called "unorthodox" understanding of who can rightly be called a "sister" or "brother" has to do with our Tri-Faith partnership. While most Christians would agree that people of other faiths can be our *biological* sisters and brothers, many certainly deny that they are our *spiritual* sisters and brothers.

In other words, while we may not feel the sting of rejection as sharply as the Jesus-following Jews in Philadelphia experienced from their "orthodox" Jewish sisters and brothers, or experience the same level of physical threat they were under because of their faith, it also must be acknowledged that we are considered "misfits" by the standards of many Christians, and by society at large. All because our congregation is actively building a Next Gen "Philadelphia" – a Next Gen "City of Brotherly Love." You might even call it a New Jerusalem ...

No, to me there is no question that we share more in common with the church of Philadelphia than any of the other churches of Revelation. Incidentally, the letter to the church in Philadelphia is one of only two letters to the churches of Revelation where the Spirit of Jesus has only praise for the congregation and no words of critique. That's how I feel today, too. We're not a perfect church, but we're perfect enough for me, and for Jesus. We've traded our super-charged Ferrari for a Chevy Volt. And we'll have to tinker for years with this new kind of car until it becomes the kind of automobile that makes cars that consume fossil fuels, fossils themselves. But I have little doubt that we'll do just this.

My only question is, will the effects of what we're doing here in Omaha extend beyond us for a thousand years, just as they did in Philadelphia?

Much love,

Eric