

Seven Letters to Seven Churches, Part 6: Laodicea

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by Rev. Dr. Eric Elnes

Scripture: Revelation 3:14-22; Colossians 2:1; 4:15-16

Poetry: "Praying Dangerously" by Regina Sara Ryan

I. Terrible to Be Tepid

Thus far in our series, we've been exploring the seven churches of the Book of Revelation in the exact order they appear in John's letters – which is also the exact order of the old Roman postal route. This morning, however, we're going to pass over the sixth letter – written to the church in Philadelphia (the *original* Philadelphia, that is) to explore the seventh – to the church in Laodicea. My reason is simple: When I think of Countryside Community Church, I think we bear more resemblance to the church in Philadelphia than any of the other churches of Revelation – so I want to save that one for last. This should cause some measure of relief once you hear about Laodicea, because Jesus has almost nothing good to say about it!

Says Jesus, "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."

Pretty harsh, huh? So harsh, in fact, that we almost miss his words of assurance – "Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline" – and his words of promise – "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne."

In light of the problems Jesus identifies with Laodicea, one has to wonder if they'll ever even open the door to Jesus, let alone sit on his throne.

There are a lot of historical and geographical facts about Laodicea we could get into this morning that help us understand the references John makes in his letter to riches that don't make a person rich, or to wearing white garments as opposed to soiled ones, and eyes that see but are really blind. But the main reference that needs explanation if you want to understand the letter to the church of Laodicea is Jesus's accusation that the church is neither hot nor cold, but tepid – lukewarm.

Laodicea is located in a highly volcanic area in the region of Phrygia, about 100 miles east of Ephesus. It sits on a long spur in the middle of two valleys within sight of two famous cities: Colossae and Hierapolis. Hierapolis was known for its amazing hot springs – and still is. When our group from Countryside visited Hierapolis a few years ago, everyone was pretty impressed with those hot springs. The white salt and mineral deposits that have built up over centuries of continuous water flow are so vast that they make the city look like a winter ski resort from a distance.

What makes the hot springs relevant for our letter is that Laodicea's water supply was siphoned from a hot spring several miles away. It was literally transported through a large aqueduct that started on a high mountain, plunged down to the valley below, and then shot straight up and over the spur where Laodicea sat. Quite a feat of engineering for the time! Yet while the water started out boiling hot (*zestos* in Greek – the same word translated as "hot" in the letter), but by the time it reached Laodicea, it was neither hot nor cold, but tepid.

You know the phrase, "Why drink water when you can drink wine?" I don't know if that phrase originated in Laodicea or not, but you can bet that most of the inhabitants found the cold snowmelt from the Lycus river at the bottom of the valley far preferable to the tepid, sulphury spring water that was piped into their city. The only reason they weren't piping in the Lycus water is because water doesn't run uphill unless its source is higher than its distribution point and is conveyed through siphon.

You know what it's like to drink tepid water. It's the most boring water you can drink. When John writes in his letter that the church in Laodicea is neither hot nor cold but lukewarm, he's calling them boring. Beyond boring, in fact. According to John, Jesus says he wants to "spit" them out of his mouth. The Greek word actually means vomit. In other words, you're so boring and non-committal you make me sick!

As we read in the apostle Paul's Epistle to the Colossians, Paul was not only aware of Laodicea, but wrote a letter to the church there which is now lost to us. Imagine that – a lost letter of Paul's! Given that Paul's correspondence with other churches eventually became part of the body of ancient testimony which we call Scripture, it is rather mind-boggling that Paul's letter to Laodicea is missing. I wonder what was in that letter, and why it went missing. Was the congregation even in Paul's day (about 40 years earlier) already so sleepy and boring that they didn't realize what they had in their hands? Did someone accidentally put Paul's letter in a stack of junk mail before clearing it off their desk and into a wastebasket? I wonder what could have happened that would have turned a spiritually "hot" church into a tepid one in just two generations.

We simply don't have answers to these questions. All we know is that Jesus would have preferred that the church be spiritually "cold" to being lukewarm. He would literally have preferred them to be strongly unfaithful to being kind of faithful and kind of not.

Have you heard the expression, "It's easier to steer a boat that is in motion than one that is dead in the water?" I doubt this phrase came from Laodicea, but it is clear that this church is dead in the water. Dead in the tepid water.

Though I'm sure we can find our church reflected in each of the seven letters of Revelation to a certain extent – including the church in Laodicea – I really don't find much similarity between Countryside and this church. But do you think there are a few Laodicean churches out there? If you gathered them all together in America alone, you could probably form one of the largest denominations in the country! Isn't it interesting that if John's letter reflects the true will of the spirit Jesus, then Jesus would prefer these churches be stone cold (patently unfaithful) to being lukewarm (sorta faithful, sorta not). Of course, there is probably another full denomination's worth of these, too!

II. Praying Dangerously

A gentle breeze blew through my hair and tugged at the sleeves of my T-shirt keeping me cool on a balmy Northwest day some years ago. Its subtle nudging only served to increase my anxiety, though, as I stood inches away from the edge of a hundred-foot cliff. I was going to step over the side and did not welcome the help from the wind.

I wasn't contemplating suicide, though some might say that I was doing something equally crazy. I stood at the edge of that cliff about to attempt my first-ever rappel.

A harness was securely fastened around my waist. A rope anchored to a sturdy tree nearby was threaded through a braking mechanism on the harness. Rock climbing shoes adorned my feet, and chalk dust covered my hands to keep the rope from slipping between my fingers.

My companion, a seasoned rock climber with the Mountaineer's Club in Seattle, had set the equipment up, so I was fairly certain that the rope would not snap, the anchor would not come loose, and I would arrive safely at the bottom of the cliff in a few minutes.

Still, perspiration moistened my temple, despite the breeze. I could imagine, in vivid detail, what my lifeless body would look like at the bottom of that cliff sprawled out with a few lengths of frayed rope draping over my corpse like a shroud! Though I figured it would be an instant death, the thought brought me little comfort.

The time had come. Despite my anxieties, I had looked forward to this moment, and trained for it, for too long to stop now. I took in a deep breath, then followed my

companion's instructions. The instructions went like this: "Turn around with your back to the cliff's edge. Keep the rope taught. Then gradually lean out over the cliff, letting your rope out bit by bit until your body is perpendicular to the cliff's face."

"Perpendicular?" I asked. "You mean, like parallel to the ground?" I was hoping against hope that he had forgotten what the word "perpendicular" meant.

"Exactly," was his reply. My heart sank.

If you have ever done this before, you know the wild thoughts that run through your mind particularly as your body goes from zero to ninety degrees out over the side of a cliff. There is absolutely *nothing* natural about the feeling. Your rational mind screams "Don't do it! The rope is too thin! It's going to snap and you're going to fall!"

Yet even after you begin to lean back, discovering the rope really does hold, it still contradicts every instinct that hundreds of thousands of years of evolution has embedded in your mind and body. You simply are not meant to lean backwards over a cliff – not even a little bit, let alone at a 90-degree angle! I started wishfully thinking that maybe I was the one who didn't know what "perpendicular" meant – like maybe it meant 45 degrees, not 90. So, once I was at a 45-degree angle, I started trying to descend the cliff that way."

"Eric!" my companion called out. "I said perpendicular! If you don't lean back until your feet are flat against the rock, all your entire weight will be on the tips of your feet rather than on the rope. Your feet are going to slip right out from under you and you'll slam against the cliffside. You've got to trust me and lean out!"

"Dear God," I muttered under my breath, "pleeeeeease, keep me safe," thinking these might very well be my last words.

They weren't, of course. Once I finally achieved that 90-degree angle and realized that I truly did have safer footing, my next words were, "Woah! This is so cool!"

Part of what made it so cool was that, at that fully-committed angle, I could do far more than simply make my way down the cliff. The cliff's face was there to be explored. Within a minute or two – and a little encouragement from my mentor – I got playful, jumping back and forth, even jumping straight out while simultaneously letting a little rope out so I could drop several feet at a time.

What seemed totally impossible and terrifying a couple of minutes ago had suddenly become easy and fun. A rush of exhilaration washed over me. The face of a cliff became a breathtaking piece of topography not only of my outer world but my inner one as

well. My world became a little larger; the horizon a little broader. Once I reached the bottom, can you guess what my first comment was?

"Can I do it again?"

You might call the act of leaning out backwards over a cliff for the first time a "threshold experience." A "threshold experience" acts like a doorway, only it's a mental or spiritual one. A "threshold experience" is one that opens your mind or heart to a whole new level of awareness, or a new way of looking at life. It's an experience that, once you have it, there's no turning back. It's with you forever.

Do you remember your first kiss? Not the one you gave your mother or Aunt Bessie, but your first desired kiss. Didn't it open up a whole new level of relationship with the person you kissed, indeed a whole new world?

Of course, before you crossed that threshold, you probably experienced a period of turbulence. If you were the instigator of that first kiss, for instance, you probably spent what felt like an eternity weighing the pros and cons, and assessing the likelihood that the kiss would be reciprocated. If you were the receiver of that kiss, you may also have spent what felt like an eternity wondering if it were ever going to happen. That's the thing about threshold experiences. They are incredibly uncomfortable until you step through to the other side. In fact, even if the other side doesn't go as well as you'd hoped, it normally feels better on the other side than it did when you were straddling the threshold with a foot on either side.

Incidentally, even someone like Jesus knew the frustration – and danger – of putting just one foot through a threshold without following with the other foot. When approached by a person who said he wanted to follow Jesus but take care of a few things before he did, Jesus responded, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." I doubt Jesus was scolding the man so much as being compassionate. Given the level of both joy and turbulence this would-be disciple would experience, Jesus knew that being only half-committed would expose the man to all of the turbulence but none of the joy or satisfaction. He might enjoy the enthusiasm of a crowd who witnessed Jesus healing a leper, but what about a crowd who witnessed Jesus showing compassion for a prostitute or tax collector, or a crowd of religious leaders whom Jesus castigates as being "snakes and vipers," or a crowd who calls out for Jesus's crucifixion ...

Jesus knew it would do neither a disciple, nor Jesus himself, any good at all if he wanted only to share in the glory and not the suffering. In this respect, I'm always amused at how churches try to grow by promising their flocks only happiness and success if they

follow in the path of Jesus. Are they not aware of the fact that the most familiar symbol of Christian discipleship is a Cross?

This afternoon, we're ordaining Will Howell to serve as our first ordained Minister of Youth and Family Life. The occasion will surely be marked by smiles, pats on the back, and offers of congratulations, and gift-giving. A festive meal will follow. Yet as much as ordaining a new minister is a happy thing, it also feels a bit like leading a lamb to slaughter. Will has just planted both feet into a profession that has led some of his predecessors to being burned at the stake, or being imprisoned or set in front of a firing squad. Short of physical harm, a great number of his predecessors have had to suffer countless spiritual back stabbings, betrayals, and public humiliations because of their faith and values. They have lost good friendships, good jobs, good marriages. Perhaps hardest to bear of all, they and the faith they represent have been written off as wholly irrelevant in the modern world.

Of course, you don't have to be ordained to experience any of these things when you try to live out the faith and values of Jesus. We all know this. So did the members of the church in Laodicea. In fact, given the pressures of their day, in which you could be killed for being a Christian and refusing to make a burnt offering to the Emperor as a god, the members of Laodicea knew this better than most of us. That's why when Jesus came knocking, they apparently weren't willing to open the door to him – not fully open, in any case. They wanted to share in the glories of faith but in none of its sacrifice.

To these folks, Jesus effectively said, "you make me sick." Either open the door, or walk away so far you can't even hear me knocking. Don't just stand there hearing me knock without responding in any way.

Yet as I mentioned at the beginning, Jesus did offer a word of hope as well. "Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne."

Happily, these words of encouragement must have overcome the harshness of Jesus's other words. We don't know much about the church in Laodicea around the time of John's letter, but we do know that centuries later an important Christian Council was held there, and that by then there were scores of churches in Laodicea. So, apparently some folks did open that door in response to Jesus's knocking, and his promises came true for them, and their descendants, and generations to follow.

May Christ's promise come true for us, and for Will, as for them.