

Seven Letters to Seven Churches Part 6: Philadelphia **by Rev. Eric Elnes, Ph.D.**

Pass-A-Grille Beach Community Church

October 11, 2024

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

I. Shelter from the Storm

Last week, we discovered how a sermon series planned long before Hurricane Helene hit us could speak with surprising timeliness and relevance as we struggled to respond to the storm. Now that we've been struck by a second hurricane, this week's subject will feel even more relevant! It's almost as if the Holy Spirit knew exactly what we'd need to hear right now ...

One curious parallel between the church in Philadelphia and our own is that our Mission Group would have just returned from Philadelphia this Sunday! While this is a fun bit of serendipity, it is far from the most striking parallel. No, what truly gives me goosebumps is that both the church in Philadelphia and our church at Pass-A-Grille Beach have been susceptible to natural disasters – and these disasters are directly related to something that made each area attractive.

People are drawn to our area because of our fabulous beaches, some of the best in the country, yet proximity to the Gulf of Mexico also makes us vulnerable to catastrophic weather, like the storms we've just experienced.

People were also drawn to ancient Philadelphia because of a natural feature of its environment, too, though Philadelphia was far from the ocean, situated on the edge of a great plain, 3,000 feet above sea level. What made Philadelphia attractive was its fine wine, produced from the volcanic soil of the plain known as Katakekaumene, meaning “burnt soil.” This soil created some of the best wines in the ancient world. Even today, the wines from this region are renowned.

Of course, living near a volcano comes with risks, just like being near the Gulf does to us. Although the volcano had long been dormant, the region experienced frequent earthquakes. Philadelphia sat next to a major fault line and endured some of the worst quakes in the region. Often, these earthquakes were followed by significant aftershocks, forcing residents to evacuate the city for extended periods to avoid being crushed by collapsing buildings. We know something about regular evacuations ourselves! Though, Philadelphia had it worse. The historian Strabo noted that a great earthquake in 17 CE was followed by aftershocks almost daily – for three years! The situation was so dire that Rome exempted Philadelphia from taxes for five years, a response you might call the world's first FEMA action!

These earthquakes are directly referenced in our 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: I know your works. Look, I have set before you an open door that no one is able to shut." (Revelation 3:7-8)

If you've ever witnessed a building collapse in an earthquake or seen the aftermath of one, you understand the significance of Christ claiming He can *open doors that no one can shut*. Christ also promises those who remain faithful, *"I will make you a pillar in the temple of my God; you will never go out of it."* (Revelation 3:12) Pillars hold up roofs – Christ promises His followers that they need not fear the collapse of what truly matters. There is safety in God's presence and no need to seek shelter elsewhere.

Translated into our post-Helene, post-Milton reality, this letter essentially says:

"I am the one who walks on water and stills the storm. Find shelter in me; no matter what storms may come, you will always find comfort and assurance. And I will make you a part of my shelter. Through you, others will come and find refuge in me."

We're already experiencing the truth of these words, aren't we? At our Zoom prayer service on the eve of Hurricane Milton's landfall, one congregation member wisely said,

"I think what I need to pray for is for God to be with us right now versus where I want the storm to go or what I want to happen. It's just stuff ... All of us here right now are safe. So, I should be praying for God to be present and to help us through, and not for saving our house or anything like that."

It's amazing what happens when people pray for God's presence in the midst of uncertainty rather than for a specific outcome. They find it. And when they do come to know God is with them, their fear of the future diminishes. They realize that, come hell or high water – literally or figuratively – they will be okay because they have what they need most.

When people become fearless in this way, they help not only themselves but those around them. When you're not consumed by your own losses or cowering in fear, you have more positive energy to devote to others. You can help provide them with "shelter from the storm."

Isn't this what we saw after Hurricane Helene hit? Members reached out to check on others, helped clean up debris, provided meals, and opened their homes to those who had to evacuate. Some even organized nearly 80 volunteers to help others in the St. Pete area the very Saturday after Helene struck. This event was so successful that another is scheduled for next Saturday.

In other words, the promises in this ancient letter to the church in Philadelphia aren't just pious platitudes. They are real promises with real effects, as trustworthy today as they were back then.

But wait, there's more!

Before we move on, however, I invite you to take a moment to examine your prayers. Is there something you've been praying for – perhaps a specific outcome you're uncertain about? Ask yourself: what's more important, receiving that particular outcome or sensing God's presence no matter what happens? Take a few moments to pray for what's most important.

II. Philadelphia Freedom

You may wonder how Philadelphia got its name. Philadelphia was founded in 189 BCE by King Eumenes II of Pergamum. Pergamum, which we studied a few weeks ago, is the city that had a library rivaled only by the one in Alexandria, Egypt, and invented parchment – which means “Sheet of Pergamos.”

Eumenes II, like his predecessors, appreciated education and higher learning, especially Hellenistic culture, which revolutionized the arts, literature, theater, architecture, music, mathematics, philosophy, and science. He believed this culture could bring peace to a violent world – a belief in the power of the pen over the sword.

However, not everyone was as enthusiastic. Some clung to the old ways, favoring the sword over the pen. When word came back that Eumenes had been assassinated during an extended trip to Greece, his younger brother, Attalus II, was crowned king. But months later, Eumenes returned alive, the rumors of his death being fabricated by his enemies. They figured that nature would run its course once Attalus II was installed on the throne. Attalus would surely execute or assassinate his brother to hold onto power.

Rather than holding onto power, Attalus immediately relinquished the throne to his brother. Rome even approached Attalus later on, promising to make him king of all Asia Minor if he seized the throne with their help, but he refused. His loyalty earned him the nickname “Philadelphus,” meaning “lover of his brother.” In his honor, Eumenes built a new city on the edge of his kingdom and named it Philadelphia – the “City of Brotherly Love.”

The city of Philadelphia was designed to be a missionary outpost to the wilds of Phrygia – a “Peace Center” promoting Greek culture and life. It even earned the nickname “Little Athens” for its cultural significance.

What’s fascinating about the “City of Brotherly Love” is that the church there seemed to reflect the same love and loyalty that Attalus and Eumenes shared two centuries earlier. Unlike most of the other churches in this series (except for Smyrna), Jesus had nothing negative to say about the congregation in Philadelphia. Instead, they were simply encouraged to keep up the good work.

I wonder if this congregation's love and loyalty for each other and Christ was strengthened by the trials they endured, particularly the earthquakes and aftershocks. Difficult times can either drive a community apart or draw it closer together. They can exacerbate underlying tensions or reveal the power of real community, where people learn to rely on each other for support.

What I find heartening about our church at Pass-A-Grille Beach is how you’re already showing that these recent natural disasters are bringing you closer together. This seems to be a sign of either the blessedness of God’s timing or some astonishing good luck. Imagine if these hurricanes had come a year ago! They might have dealt a crushing blow. But this year, they seem to be part of an incredible rebirth.

Of all the churches in this series, I believe Pass-A-Grille Beach is most like the church of Philadelphia. You’re not a perfect reflection of them, but you’re well on your way. While Pass-

A-Grille Beach is your location, Philadelphia might just be your destiny. Keep learning to care for one another in broader and deeper ways, and you'll get there.

However, a word of caution: If Christian Nationalism continues to grow in our country, there could come a time when you, like the Church of Philadelphia, begin to feel strong pressure from what the letter calls the "Synagogue of Satan." You may remember this term from the letter to Smyrna – it wasn't a sweeping condemnation of all Jews but a label for a specific group of Jews who insisted that those who believed in Jesus as the Messiah were not "true" Jews.

Suppose Christian Nationalism goes unchecked in our country. In that case, I can easily imagine a future where certain Christian groups begin to claim that communities like ours aren't "true Christians" – those who affirm LGBTQ equality, support a woman's right make her own reproductive decisions, take the scriptures seriously but not literally, embrace both faith and science, proclaim that people of other faiths can connect with the Divine, and affirm the separation of church and state. If these groups successfully infiltrate government, you may experience what the Church of Philadelphia faced far more intensely than you do now.

One final, more hopeful observation: If you grow into your full identity as a modern-day Church of Philadelphia, your love and loyalty could bless not only yourselves and those around you today, but also future generations.

As I mentioned, Philadelphia and Smyrna were the only congregations in the letters that received only praise from Jesus – no rebuke – despite neither being as prominent or outwardly powerful as other churches. Yet, in the centuries that followed, these two churches became the most distinguished in all of Asia Minor. Even when the Muslims invaded centuries later, Philadelphia, though far less fortified than cities like Sardis or Pergamum, remained standing. It was besieged many times but did not fall due to weakness or lack of courage. What eventually caused its fall was betrayal – by fellow Christians. Christians from Byzantium (modern-day Istanbul), jealous of Philadelphia's prestige, betrayed the city.

As one commentator noted, "The brotherhood of the faith betrayed the city of brotherly love. 'A man's foes shall be those of his own household,' said Jesus. Nobody hurts the church as much from the outside as the church hurts itself from the inside. Still, a thousand years of sterling witness and loyalty and faithfulness is not a bad record for any city – or church."¹

Investing yourselves in each other benefits you and the wider community and may very well bless your children, your grandchildren, and many generations to come should you continue becoming the church that the Holy Spirit seems to be guiding you to become.

¹ Bruce Van Blair, *Letters to the Seven Churches*, 2009.