

To the Church of Philadelphia, a Small Fish in a Big Pond

Revelation 3:7-13

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In 1993 a movie was released that was to be voted the 54th most inspirational movie by the American Film Institute. There's irony in there somewhere, because the movie was Rudy, about a college football player who could never quite make the top.

I'm sure that Bruce has told us about Rudy before, but the movie seems to parallel this letter to the church in Philadelphia really well, so I'll give us a brief recap:

Rudy was a kid with a dream of playing for the Fighting Irish, Notre Dame's college football team. But, there were significant problems.

He wasn't academically qualified for college at one of the top institutions in the world. He couldn't afford the cost of schooling. He was too small for collegiate football. He had no talent. What he did have was perseverance, and he was granted a place on the practice squad. He found himself as a small, irrelevant fish in a big, deep pool, filled with other, bigger fish than he. The movie follows Rudy through his college years, as he struggles with dyslexia, sneaks onto campus for free boarding, and plays hard through his years at college. With the help of many people, and the requests of the senior players, Rudy is finally allowed to dress for the last real game of his senior year. He sacks the opposing quarterback, and is triumphally carried off the field by his teammates.

Everybody feels pretty good at the end.

In many ways, the church in Philadelphia resembles this movie.

It starts with the city itself. The city was built on a major fault line, and routinely damaged by earthquakes. One ancient historian, Strabo, said that "few people live in it, but rather as farmers in the surrounding vineyards. Those who did live within were constantly forced to leave during quakes." People who lived in Philadelphia lived with an ever-present fear of their lives, and with constant displacement. Their homes were literally built on shifting ground.

And then there is this odd reference to the Synagogue of Satan, a repeat of a phrase from the letter to the church of Smyrna. What appears to have been happening in Philadelphia was similar to Smyrna – The Romans were fine with locals practicing their own religion, as long as it didn't threaten the Roman occupation. Jews and their synagogues were afforded a measure of safety under this system. But Christians were not – they followed someone that Rome had executed as a rebellion leader. And here is the rub – Jews of the synagogue were closing the doors to Christian Jews, removing the protection that the synagogue would provide from Rome. In fact, without the shelter of the synagogue, Christians were denied participation in trade, they were required to perform emperor worship, and they were considered traitors to their own

communities. So the Christians became even more vulnerable and marginalized than they were previously. They were literally locking them out.

So, the Philadelphia church found themselves on the outside of everything – no status with the government, no entry into the synagogue, no resources, friends, or wealth to curry favour or influence. They were not strong enough to win over the obstacles facing them.

Just like Rudy, the Philadelphia church was a very small, insignificant fish, in a very large pond, with other very large fish in it.

Philadelphia, again like Rudy, needed both internal and external resources to overcome their obstacles. Jesus tells the church that they need to find the internal will to persevere, and in the end, Jesus himself will vindicate them.

This is, to me, where this letter gets really, really cool. Because Jesus tells the church not to focus on what is being taken away from them, and what they are suffering, he tells them to look through the appearances of reality to the truth.

In English, we have a couple of sayings about this phenomenon. IN the early 19th century, it was fashionable for men to wear powdered wigs made out of wool. Sometimes, in an image of pulling their wig over their faces so that they couldn't see, unsavoury people, especially lawyers, would be said to have pulled the wool over their eyes so that they couldn't see reality. That is, they made the truth hard to see with distraction, misdirection, half-truths, and outright lies.

First, there were some truths about the church of Philadelphia.

They were the have nots – not much strength, not much wealth. The church was vulnerable and homeless.

Neither was their home secure. Nature itself was fighting against their sense of belonging, of place. At any moment, an earthquake could strike, destroying their homes.

Their blood relatives had shut the doors on them, locking them out from the protection of belonging. And they couldn't open the doors shut against them.

The big lie that was being pulled over their eyes was, "You can't win because you are following Jesus. You do not belong here. You are not our people. You have no power to stop us from destroying you. If you just gave up on this, then you could have our help, and your life would be better."

And human beings, at our most basic, are a combination of our people, and our place. Take those away from us, and we get shaken. Two cores of our identity get pulled away, and we begin to crumble. As anyone in their situation would experience, the lie was stopping them from seeing the truth, from seeing themselves as Jesus did. They were in danger of accepting the lie as their identity, and stopping living as the people of God in Philadelphia.

Into this instability and vulnerability, Jesus walks alongside this lampstand, this light in the darkness, with these incredible words.

Jesus confronts the lies with cold, hard, truth. It is Jesus, in Revelation, who holds the keys to the locked doors. The rabbis of the synagogue are not the gatekeepers of the Kingdom of God. The Messiah is. The others are just stewards. And Jesus is going to unlock the door so that the Church of Philadelphia can belong.

Then, Jesus will write their names on the pillars. They will not only be allowed in, they will be honoured, and loved!

Imagine with me, if you were in that situation, what would Jesus' words mean to you?

I see you. I see your situation, your struggle, your hurt. I see that you are not provided for, not cared for, not noticed. I see you.

And this is not God's will for you. You do belong to me. You belong to humanity, who are each created in my image. You, yes, even you, are created in my image. I know you by name. And even more, whatever names other people call you, whether it is outsider, or squatter, or problem, I will give you a true name. You are mine.

And I will also open the door to you, to the place that you need, a place that cannot be taken away from you. You can't be shuffled down the street again. Your name will be on the doorpost!

In every way, the Church has found their patron, their benefactor, their big fish who will defend them against the other big fish in their pond. Imagine how that would feel.

All of the letters to the seven churches, indeed all of Revelation, is about drawing back the wool that has been pulled over our eyes. The letters show that Jesus knows how the churches see themselves, and the world around them. Then, step by step, Jesus tells the church what is really happening. Finally, Jesus tells the church how to live into reality.

We, too, can feel like small fish in a big pond. Likely, no one is locking the doors against us, so that we face death. Similarly, our homes are generally stable places, enough so that when tragedy does strike, it is seen as out of the ordinary. For many of us, we have place, and we have people. We feel safe, and secure, and in control within this system.

Yet, we also have the wool pulled over our own eyes. We know this because there are cracks that are showing in recent days.

There are a few terms that I've started to hear.

Climate anxiety. The big lies: either we can't break it or we can fix it. People are coming to the realization that there is a huge price to pay for our consumption of earth's resources in a wanton, irresponsible way. And worse, the conversation has switched from stopping climate

change to avoiding the worst-case scenario. People are no longer confident in the liveability of their lives.

Political anxiety. The big lie: government can and will establish just and good rule. No matter who wins elections, someone, somewhere feels more anxiety!

Financial anxiety. The big lie: we can have enough wealth to provide for ourselves, and never feel the vulnerability of exposure to need. Inflation and global events are making the cost of living unattainable for millions, even while others can still drop thousands on sports tickets, extravagant holidays, and fancy cars.

And this says nothing of global famine and poverty, of the threat of nuclear weapons being used in Ukraine, or Pakistan, or North Korea.

We face two big lies: one, that we can fix the problems on our own. The other, that we can't do anything, so just give up and go with the flow. If it's all going to hell, then may as well make the trip worth it!

All of these ideas and systems, the plans we've built on, are being revealed as incapable of keeping us secure and safe. The problems we face are bigger than we are. We are small fish in a big pond.

So, what do we do? Do we simply give up, go along with society, and let God sort it out at the end?

That is not what the letter to the Philadelphians tells us to do.

Rather, it says "I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown."

To me, this sermon is a mere continuation of what Bruce told us last week, and the reason that I found his stories of First B "saints" so refreshing, and indeed, inspiring. Those stories, those people, have rested with me all week like a warm, glowing coal glowing and bringing joy and hope. Because these lives lived, these stories told, may not be as bog as the problems that we face, but they are real, tangible acts of defiance by people who simply, flatly reject the lies we are told by the world around us. And despite being small fish in big ponds, their defiance shows that they will hold on to the hope that the biggest fish in the pond is Jesus.

Just like the Philadelphians, every meal served to guests, every text or email, every package of baking, every prayer was an echo of Jesus' message to the church of Philadelphia: I see you. You are my people. You belong here. And every time one of these friends of ours, indeed, every time one of us, declare these truths, we declare God's truth to people who really need to have the wool pulled off of their eyes.

So, when we are in danger of being small fish in a big pond, remember, we are God's people. Remember what we have been given: this legacy of faithful, everyday saints declaring their

defiance of the lie. And remember the stories of God's faithfulness and goodness. The situation is not out of his control. And neither are we beyond his care. Just as he has written the end of the story, he has also woven your own story with his presence, his invitation, and his goodness. You belong to him, and you belong in this church.