

The Open Door

In the name of the Holy One, the True One, who holds the Key of David, dear friends in Christ: We've come to the penultimate of our meditations on the letters of Jesus to the churches of Asia Minor. So far we've looked at five churches with a variety of strengths and weaknesses. On the positive side, we've heard the Lord commend congregations for remaining steadfast in the Word, for enduring persecution, for growing in acts of love and charity, and for maintaining high standards of behavior among the members. On the negative side, we've heard him rebuke congregations for tolerating lying teachers and false doctrine in their midst, for being lax on moral behavior, for being overly legalistic and thus sacrificing the Gospel itself, and for lacking in the performance of the good works that flow from having a right relationship with the Lord. And I remind you that our goal has been to see ourselves in these congregations so that we can identify and root out similar problems that Jesus sees in us. At the same time, and with the help of his Spirit, we want to strive to emulate the actions that he praises. May he give the grace to do this as we consider his words to the church at Philadelphia.

Ah, finally, a church in a city with a name we recognize. It comes from two Greek words: "*philos*" meaning *love* or *affection*, especially the kind that family members feel for one another; and "*adelphos*" which means "brother". Thus "Philadelphia": the city of brotherly love. For what it's worth, the city was named for Attalus II, a one time ruler in the region whose close relationship with his brother Eumenes earned him the nickname *Philadelphos*. In the first century, the city was a busy place. It was a major trade center on the overland route connecting the western half of the Roman Empire to the eastern half. In fact, just as in American history, St. Louis was known as the *Gateway to the West*, in ancient times, Philadelphia was known as the *Gateway to the East*. It was also an important cultic center for a wide number of religions – which is what you would expect on a major hub in the trade between east and west since there would be people from many nations in residence and others passing through all the time, all of them seeking the blessings of their various gods on their business ventures. And divine blessings were especially needed here because the city's location that gave it such an advantage with respect to trade condemned it to another problem: it was built on a seismically active volcanic plain. Several times in its history the city was knocked flat by powerful earthquakes.

We've no record of when the first Christian congregation began in Philadelphia. What we know is that it shares with the congregation at Smyrna the honor of being a church where the Lord finds more good than bad. Specifically, he praises the church for its patient endurance in the face of violent and determined persecution. Though the details are a little sketchy, it can be inferred that the Jews who lived in the city were especially opposed to the Christians there. The Lord calls them the "synagogue of Satan". From similar situations mentioned in the book of Acts, we suppose that the Jews in Philadelphia were spreading lies about the Christians and stirring up others to hate and attack them for their faith in Christ. We can also gather that the congregation was quite small compared to the total population of the city, and so it's easy to see how the members felt weak and besieged by all the opposition they faced.

So the Lord gives them a word of comfort and encouragement. He promises that those who are now causing them so much misery will have the tables turned on them, and how in the end he will make their enemies bow down before their feet. He promises also to preserve the members of the congregation from the worst of the coming trials. They'd already been tested by

the fires of affliction. They'd shown their faithfulness. They had nothing more to prove in that regard. And finally, in recognition of their unwavering faithfulness, the Lord Jesus promises to make them "pillars in the temple of God" – perhaps a way of saying that they will be squarely on the inside, close to God's glorious presence, and helping to uphold and support the faith of others. With these promises, the Lord encourages them to hold fast to what they have received and to preserve it so that no one takes the crown of life away from them. We too should find comfort and encouragement in difficult times from these precious promises of our Lord.

Just as we should also pay close attention to the criticism the Lord has for the church at Philadelphia. Last week when we looked at the church at Sardis, we heard how the Lord chastised them for looking backward. They were a congregation that wanted to rest in the present on accomplishments achieved in the past. They *had been* a vibrant and active fellowship, eagerly growing in the Lord and in the good works of faith – but not any more. But they still thought of themselves in terms of what they had once been. With evident disgust Lord told them, "You have the reputation for being alive, *but you are dead.*" They were trying to coast by on old effort. They were living by reminiscing. But a church cannot move forward if its focus is in the past – just as you can't drive down the road only looking in the rear view mirror. If you try, you'll soon be upside down in the ditch.

Though less severe, the church at Philadelphia had a similar problem. Not that they couldn't go forward because they were looking back, but that they were fearful to step forward as they should. The Lord tells them that they have but little strength. He says that he's placed before them an open door. The problem was that they felt weak and were hesitant to go through it.

What's the open door? The term can operate on several different levels. Other places in Scripture, like the reading we heard from 2 Corinthians, when it speaks of doors being opened or closed, it has to do with opportunities for spreading the Gospel. St. Paul uses the term several times to speak of mission fields suddenly opening up before him. And then there are other occasions when St. Paul and his fellow missionaries are trying to go a certain area where they want to spread the Word, but they are prevented from going there by the Holy Spirit. Sometimes the doors are closed. So it's no coincidence that in this letter, Jesus introduces himself as the One with the Key, who opens and closes the doors. The point is that he is guiding and controlling his church on earth, and he is directing how, when, and where the Gospel is spread. He's opened such a door for the congregation at Philadelphia. He's trying to coax them to go through it; but they're dragging their feet.

And there's probably more to this idea of Jesus being the one who opens doors. The tip off is that he says he holds the "Key of David". It's a term that shows up in Isaiah. There it has to do with a man named Eliakim who was the chief steward or treasurer under King Hezekiah. Eliakim was said to carry the "Key of David". It meant was that he was in charge of the royal palace and all the treasuries of the nation. He controlled the assets and resources. So when Jesus speaks of holding the Key of David, he's saying that not only does he open and close doors of opportunity for the church's mission efforts, but that he also possesses and distributes the gifts and resources required to undertake and make the most of the opportunities. That is to say when the Lord opens a way for his church to go, he also provides the means to make it happen. And here we're speaking primarily of the spiritual gifts needed to extend the kingdom of God through the spread of his Word; but we don't want to exclude other resources: missionaries have to eat too, you know.

And it's easy to see why Jesus would say these things to the church at Philadelphia. Here it was: small, persecuted, surrounded by hostile Jews and a wide assortment of pagan faiths. It's no surprise that they thought of themselves as weak and incapable of doing anything more than surviving. They were just trying to hang on and defend themselves from the dangerous world they lived in. So they had a "circle the wagons" mentality. Like a threatened tortoise, they were pulling back into their shell. The last thing they were thinking about was reaching out to others with the Gospel of Christ.

It was exactly the wrong way to go. There's a lot to the adage "the best defense is a strong offense". This church was suffering from a problem of perspective. Instead of focusing on themselves and how weak and puny they were in the middle of this sea of paganism, they should have changed their focus to see the wide-open mission field right at their doorstep. The more unbelievers there are, the more potential converts there are. It's a David and Goliath thing. If you look at David, you think, "You gotta be kidding. He's just a punk kid." But if you're David, you look at the Giant and think, "He's so big, how can I miss? Besides, the battle is the Lord's. It's up to him to win it. All I have to do is launch the stone." Similarly, Christians are directed to share their faith in their words and actions; but it's up to the Lord to convert hearts through the witness of his people. He determines when and where the Word hits home. And here in Philadelphia, besides the large pagan population, there were travelers from all over the world coming and going everyday – travelers who would be especially grateful for some genuine hospitality and care from strangers. Who better to show it to them than people motivated by the Saviors love? And what a mission opportunity when they asked, "Why are you being so kind to me?" Do you see how these travelers could potentially take the Gospel with them to their destinations and to all points in route? Talk about an open door! The church at Philadelphia had one you could float an aircraft carrier through.

But again, it's a matter of perspective – and the same is true for us two thousand years later. The question is: how do we see ourselves? Are we a small, weak, insignificant, shrinking rural church in an economically depressed corner of Iowa, where the percentage of unchurched people is growing even as the general population declines as people flee to the cities and suburbs in search of jobs? Is that who we are? Is the world becoming more hostile to our message? Should we try to avoid the heat by maintaining a low profile? Is it time to circle the wagons and make a last defensive stand? One thing I can guarantee is that if we see ourselves this way, as a dying church about to be overrun, it will be a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Or has Lord opened a door for us? Perhaps more than one? Maybe if we look at the opportunities available to us rather than our own apparent weaknesses we will find them. Yes, we're a comparatively small church. And it's fair to say that our community (reflecting the national trend) is becoming increasingly less Christian and more hostile to our message. It's also true that as time goes on, much of what calls itself "Christian" doesn't deserve the title. Which is all the more reason for we who have a solid, confessional Christian faith – who know the Lord Jesus and his power to save – to be at the vanguard of efforts to reach the lost – the lost who live right next door to us. Or again, it's no secret that a lot of people are getting fed up with the public school system, and we are right to see the Lutheran School as an outreach for the Gospel. The question is: Are we taking full advantage of it? Could it be that the door is open a lot wider than we think it is? Are there other opportunities? Are there doors that the Lord has opened for us that we are too self-focused to see? Or just as problematic, are there open doors that we know about but are too hesitant or worried to walk through?

If so, then we, like the Christians at Philadelphia, need to get the focus off ourselves and our inherent weaknesses and worries, and redirect them to the Lord who opens doors. He does

not open them to us in vain or with the intent that we fail. We need to see the desperate need as the Lord sees it, and how he is giving us the opportunity to fill it. And we need to trust that where he opens a door for us, he will certainly also provide from his infinite treasury of gifts and abilities the means to take advantage of it. Please don't misunderstand me. I'm not saying that we should be foolish or reckless in our efforts. God has given us skills of wisdom and discernment – we need to exercise them. But too often the open doors he presents us both individually or collectively are never entered because “Oh, I could never do that” or “I'm not very good at evangelism” or “I don't think we could get enough of our people to support that” or whatever. What's called for is less of the timid fear of the Philadelphians, and more bold witness for Christ.

We have good reason to be bold because the Lord Jesus has opened for us yet another door. It's the door to eternal life that through his sacrificial death and resurrection he has unlocked for all who trust in him. It's a door that he has promised that no one ever can shut. He's opened it to us and bids us to help others find their way in by sharing the good news of the Gospel – because those who don't find it will eventually be locked behind a door that can never be opened. May he then give us the courage, the gifts, and the grace to enter the doors he opens and to be his faithful witnesses. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!