

August 8, 2021
The 11th Sunday after Pentecost
Pastor Matt Duerr

“Other People’s Mail-The Church of Philadelphia”

As we continue with our sermon series dealing with Christ’s letters to the seven churches in Revelation; I would like to remind you again of the set up. It’s what we would call bookended. The first and the seventh churches were very poor spiritually and the second and the sixth churches were very strong spiritually. The three churches in the middle were churches that were mediocre. Last week we had the church number five Sardis, and we end the mediocrity and now we go to the extremes again. In this case, extremely good, the city of Philadelphia.

In the book of Revelation, the churches are kind of in a circle, in a course. Philadelphia is 25 miles south-east of last week’s church, Sardis. It was at the intersection of the intersection of the major East West Trade Route, and it was known as the Imperial Post Road, or the Imperial Post Road ran through it. Philadelphia, itself was known as the “gateway to the East.” You might say, ‘I thought it was the city of Brotherly Love,’ well we will get to that.

The first thing though that I think we need to look at is Philadelphia is different from the cities we have seen so far in another way. It was the youngest and the smallest of the cities. It was relatively young; it was founded in 140 B.C. by Attalus the II. So, at the time of the writing of Revelation it was only about 200 years old and compared to the other cities in the Greek Roman Empire, you know this was a young city.

But this Attalus the second, had a nickname. His nickname was Philadelphus of Pergamum. That literally means the brother loving one of Pergamum. He was given that nickname because he really did love his brother. His brother was older than him, so his brother was first in line to ascend to the throne of his father the king and his brother did. There was no animosity between them. Attalus the II was a commander in the army, in fact, the highest-ranking commander and was very successful and completely

followed what his brother told him to do. Unfortunately, on one occasion, his brother went to Rome and on the way back, his entourage was attacked, and he was killed. And so Attalus the II, rose to the throne. He followed the culture of the time, and by the way it was even the culture of the Jews at the time from what was written in the Old Testament; he married his brother's wife. But as time passed by, a messenger ended up coming to him and saying, your brother is not dead, he actually survived. He is in poor shape, but he is coming home. Attalus immediately stepped down from the throne, and gave the throne back to his brother, divorced his brother's wife, and gave the wife back to his brother and he went back to being commander in the army.

Throughout history we see fights in families about the power and who is going to ascend to the throne, and we do not see it here. He loved his brother, respected his brother, and he was given this nickname. His brother was in poor shape, his brother ended up dying; he remarried his brother's wife that he had divorced because it was the proper thing to do. In Greek culture it was said, Attalus was one of those guys of who they would say, he was a good guy. He was a really good guy.

He is the one who founded this city and the name of Philadelphia, the city of brotherly love, was given to this city out of respect for Attalus. He didn't want his name on it, but the people wanted his personality on it, the city of brotherly love.

Originally it was set up as a missionary outpost, not for any particular god, but for the mission of spreading the Greek culture and the Greek language throughout the empire. The people of Philadelphia were very dedicated to it. They were very loving and very likeable people, and they excelled at this. The area around them which was known as Lydia became totally Greek speaking within twenty-one years. If you think about it, if we were to try to pull off making the entire United States nothing but English speaking in twenty years, do you think we could do it?

Now Philadelphia was also similar to us here in California. They lived on a terrace. It was a terrace that was there because it's on an earthquake fault, an uplift fault where things lift up. It was on the first terrace about 650 feet above sea level. The next terrace that was above it was volcanic in nature

which goes along with the fault lines kind of like here in California, Mount Lassen, and Mount Shasta and Mammoth Mountain. Kind of like we have here, and as a result, they had earthquakes. In 17 A. D. they had a massive one that just demolished the city. They began to rebuild, but for twenty years they kept having earthquakes, major earthquakes. So much of the population lived outside of the city in tents or had tents there so that they could leave the city when they had an earthquake and things started to fall again.

Here's where we find this small church. In a smaller city, a younger city and it fits. Small church, small city, like its beginning and we have letter number six. It follows the typical pattern, there's a greeting followed by the title of Christ. In this case the title comes in three phases which is very unique because again, three is the number of God. That is exactly what this title deals with.

The first phase is, Jesus says He is "the One who is holy." That is an audacious claim! Why do I say that? When we look to Isaiah 6:3, we see "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God, Almighty. The whole creation is full of His glory." Holiness, it's an attribute of God. It is what is repeated "Holy, holy, holy," by the four living creatures that surround the throne of God in the book of Revelation. It's what Peter said about Jesus when other disciples were leaving Him, and Jesus asked will you desert me? He said, "Lord to whom shall we go, you have the words of eternal life, you are the Holy One of God." And it's what the Angel in Revelation 16 says about Jesus as the cups of wrath are being poured out, He is the "Holy One." This makes Jesus' claim very bold, He is saying, I'm God. I'm the holy one, I'm God. If you have ever run into people, there is quite a number who will say, Jesus never said He was God. Yes, He did. Here it is right here.

What does holy really mean? It literally means set apart. Set apart from what? This also comes in three parts. Number one, set apart from sin. God is perfectly flawless. He is faultless. He is the very essence of purity. It is unique that God, the totally sinless One, the perfect One has no gripes with the people of Philadelphia. There is no rebuke like the other churches got. Perhaps some of that is because it was the city of love and in this city of love there was a temple to Dionysus. Dionysus, the god of wine and fertility, the worship of the god was, shall we say rather rottenness. But the small little church in

Philadelphia didn't go for it, they had separated themselves from it. They were following the Lord and being wholly separated from it.

But as I said, God is holy, He is separated from sin, or set apart from sin, but He is also set apart from other gods because these other gods are made from stone and wood, they are the imagination of man. As He showed in Egypt with those ten plagues, He wiped out the ten gods or multiple gods in Egypt. Each one was a strike against the god. Or when you have the Elijah and the prophets of Baal. For the prophets of Baal, Baal doesn't do anything, Elijah's God, sends fire down from heaven to consume the sacrifice. So, He is set apart from other Gods because He is the living One. And finally, and this is the part of holy that we really should embrace. He is set apart for us. He has set Himself apart for our salvation. So, Jesus saying that He is the One who is holy, He is saying I am God. I am set apart from sin, I am set apart from other gods because I am God, and I am set apart for you.

And the second thing in this introduction or title, He is the One who is true. True, yes, He is the original, He is not a copy. He is authentic, not the imitation. There were lots of imitations. John sums it up in 1 John 5:20, when he says, "And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life." It makes me think of that song, "You can't touch that." You can't touch this. This is what separates Jesus from everyone else. He is eternal life. He is the true version of it. He is the One who came, and died and rose and ascended into heaven for us. He is the answer. He alone. He is the One who is true.

Third, He is the One who has the key of David. What's the key of David? We go to Isaiah 22, which we are studying in our Sunday morning Bible class. Israel had been invaded by Assyria. No one likes to be a nation under occupation and the Jewish people are no exception. Do you know what's worse? When the occupiers take one of your own people, and that person is adopted by them and loves them and works with them and then uses their position to make the occupiers happy at the expense of everyone else and by the way to line his own pockets and make himself wealthy and powerful and all that. That is what was happening with a guy named Shebna. He was a travesty. God says through the prophet, I am going to remove Him. I am going to replace him

with a guy named Eliakim. And this is what God says. I will give him, Eliakim, the key to the house of David, the highest position in the royal court. When he opens doors, no one will be able to close them. When he closes doors, no one will be able to open them. The key here is honor, authority. He has the authority of the king and in this case of God Himself. And in this case when Jesus says, I am the One who has the key of David, He is saying, I have the highest authority, I am God, and I am about to open a door for little Philadelphia. And He skips the rebuke, goes straight to praise. "I know all the things you do; I have opened a door for you that no one can close. You have little strength, yet you have obeyed my word and did not deny me." Has He opened the door? Yes, of course, He has opened the door to heaven, and no one can shut it because He is the One who died, who rose, ascended to heaven and is preparing a place for us.

But, throughout the New Testament we also see that open door is a metaphor for ministry, for serving our LORD and sharing the Gospel. It's Paul who in 1 Corinthians 16 who says, "There's a wide-open door for me to preach and teach here," a wide-open door for ministry. Or in Colossians 4:2-3 where he asks the people of Colossae to pray for him. He says, pray for us that God would open doors for telling the mystery of Christ. Where was he? He was in prison. He wasn't asking for God to open the door so that he could walk out of prison. He was saying pray for us, this is a tremendous mission field! That God would open the doors for us to reach the hearts all these lost people.

The people of Philadelphia were a small church. They hear open door. We are supposed to be doing ministry. Like us, we are a smaller church, they may have asked; but can we? The answer is, "Yes you can." The answer was in the letter to the people of Sardis. The first step in revival is recognizing who you are and recognizing who you need. You need the Holy Spirit. Jesus says, He will come with power. We have the power of the Holy Spirit, the seven-fold Spirit in us. Jesus is opening the door, no one can close it. Especially those who were against Him, which evidently was the Jewish people in the synagogue there, who would not let them worship there. Even though they worshiped the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God who fulfilled the promises and prophecies of the Old Testament.

But there is that old saying, “When one door closes, another door opens.” That is exactly what God did. He opened the door for this little church in the city of brotherly love, a church of loving people. Interestingly, this little church is the longest lasting of the seven churches in the book of Revelation. All the others fell fairly quickly, a time of testing did come, but they stood for 1400 years. I believe we need to take that to heart. You see, we are again, by no means, even put together; we are not a mega-church. But we have the seven-fold Spirit, the Holy Spirit, the Mega-Spirit in us and He is the One who will open the door and empower us and carry us through. We may see the economy fail; we may see nations fall. We may, literally living in California, see buildings and churches fall, collapse. God’s Church will stand forever. His little church will last.

Finally, as I said, there’s no complaints here, just promises. Three of them. The first one, I will force those supporting the cause of Satan and claiming to be mine... By the way, they were lying and saying they were His; we have got a lot of people who do that today too. I will force them to fall at your feet and acknowledge that you are the ones I love. What does this mean, that the Christians are going to go out with swords and defeat their enemies? No, that is not what the call is. The call is for them to love their neighbors as themselves. It was Jesus who said, “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” And so, the Philadelphians loved those who were persecuting them, loved those in the synagogue who said, no you can’t worship here. They repaid evil with kindness, with the love of Christ. What about the kneeling? They are going to fall at their feet as the people of Philadelphia are falling down on their knees too. It’s surrender not to the Philadelphian Christians, its surrender to Christ. And kneeling down before their Lord and worshipping Him together. That’s the love of Jesus in action. That’s the love I see in these churches. As I go to Lodi, I go to Jackson, I go to Valley Springs; I see the love of Jesus. It’s that love that makes a difference.

The second promise, “because you have obeyed my command to persevere, I will protect you from the time of testing that will come on the whole world.” A great time of testing did come, and the other churches failed. But the church of Philadelphia stood. I think that is so important for us today. I have to say that I think that we are headed for another time of testing. Don’t

worry. Christ will protect those who persevere. He may protect us physically like he did with Shadrach, Meshack and Abednego in the fiery furnace or Daniel in the lion's den; but we know for sure He protects us eternally, that door is open, and no one can close it. Heaven is ours! Or, as we heard last week, our name is in the book of life, and no one can blot that out. Jesus Himself says in Luke 12, everyone will hate you because of your allegiance to me, but not a hair on your head will perish, by standing firm, you will win your souls. We may die here, but we just pass from life to real life. Nothing can stop that.

Finally, and I just find this so neat. Our Lord appeals to their culture, to them personally and what they lived in. They lived in a city built of stone and marble, and names were etched in the pillars and earthquakes came and knocked the pillars down. Jesus says to them, all who are victorious will become pillars in the temple of my God and they will never have to leave it. I will write on the name of my God. They would be the pillars and they would bear that name of Christ. I would like you to think about that today. Every time you say, I am a Christian, I was baptized in the name of Christ, I bear the mark of Christ. He is the one who owns us. We are His.

So maybe, this is the perfect letter for us, a smaller church like Philadelphia. Maybe, we would almost think of ourselves like one of the sons of Philadelphia, Rocky Balboa. If you have seen any of the Rocky movies, you know he is always the underdogs. We have the Holy Spirit. We are not the underdog, but we are dogs. Oh yes, we're dogs. We are sheep dogs. Our Shepherd is the Good Shepherd. I think it's time to realize He is the only Shepherd. He is the true Shepherd. He is the Holy One, Almighty God and as His sheep, his sheepdogs, maybe it's time for us to start barking.

In His name, Amen.