

The Keys of the Kingdom
Matthew 16:13-20

I guess you can tell, to your utter disappointment that Holly Smith is not here this morning to deliver the sermon. I talked with her Friday morning we decided the prudent thing to do is for her to stay home and avoid the possibility of floods and traffic jams. I will do my best to fill in for her.

One thing I have heard from this congregation about Holly is that she a wonderful preacher and we are very proud of her, especially since she came from our ranks. I only wish I did not have to be away for her to be invited here, for I never get to hear her preach.

I apologize to all of you who were expecting to hear Holly this morning, only to now realize that I have decided to stick around Nacogdoches one more day before I depart for North Carolina for the Montreat Pastor's Conference. And of course we will keep Holly and Matt and their family in our prayers.

Looking at the sermon title, I assume Holly was going to preach about significance of Peter calling Jesus the Christ. I cannot preach her sermon; I will use the same text, Matthew 16:13-20, and I invite you to hear the Word:

¹³Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" ¹⁴And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." ¹⁵Jesus said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" ¹⁶Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." ¹⁷And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. ¹⁸And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. ¹⁹I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." ²⁰Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

There in Caesarea Philippi, where there was a meshing of Judaism, Greek culture and pagan religions, Jesus made it clear to his disciples who he was, for in the context of Jesus' day there seemed to be a misunderstanding.

I am sure we are all painfully aware of the hurt and problems that are caused by misunderstandings. There are family members who simply will not talk to one another; they have not seen each other in years, and often times it can be traced back to a misunderstanding.

A young man purchased a very expensive parrot for his mother. It was for no particular reason, just a demonstration of his love. On the day of the surprise, the son let himself into the house, put the parrot on the kitchen table and left a note, "I hope you enjoy the bird! Love you, Johnny."

Later that night mom called to thank Johnny for the bird. "Son, I love the surprise you put in the kitchen. I certainly enjoyed it, but it was a little tough."

"Well, mom, what do you mean it was a little tough?"

"I guess I should have cooked it with dumplings."

"Cooked it with dumplings, what do you mean?"

"Well, son, you know when a bird is too old and you fry it, it can be as tough as shoe leather."

"Mom, that parrot cost a fortune and could speak seven languages. Why on earth did you fry it for dinner?"

His mother answered, “If it spoke seven languages, why didn’t it say something?” The gift was misunderstood.

One of the basic problems with communication is misunderstanding. Like purchasing flowers for your wife, only to hear in response, “You have been up to something.”

“No, I just wanted to show my love.”

“That’s not true, for every time you show up around here with flowers, you’ve done something.”

Misunderstanding was a constant part of Jesus’ life. He healed a man and the Pharisees said it was by the power of the prince of darkness.

Jesus said, “Tear down this temple and I will raise it up in three days.”

“Jesus, you can’t build a temple in three days. It has taken decades to build this temple and there were a lot of people working on it.”

Jesus was misunderstood. He spoke of the Kingdom of God. He fed the five thousand, and his followers wanted to make him king. Well, once again Jesus was misunderstood for had no intention of being an earthly king.

Early in his ministry, Jesus spent most of his time in the North Country—Galilee. But the day came when he was about to pack his bags and lead his disciples to Jerusalem. He was in the district of Caesarea Philippi. It was right on the border of the rest of the gentile world. The scene could have been set in a place where you could see the shrines to pagan gods. And maybe to see if anyone had caught on, Jesus asked his disciples, “**Who do people say that I am?**”

“Well, Jesus, some say you are John the Baptist raised from the dead, and you ought to see the reaction of Herod when he hears that one. Some say you are Elijah or Jeremiah, the one who would come before the Messiah. Some say that you preach a pretty good sermon, so you must be one of the prophets.”

Then Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” and you could hear the silence. No one wanted to commit. No one wanted to give the wrong answer.

You’ve been in that situation. Someone asks a question and no one wants to answer. Ask any question about religion, about what you believe and only a few bold people will tell you what they think, because if I answer the question I will have to reveal something about myself and that is scary and, who knows, I may be proven wrong, so I will just keep silent.

But Peter spoke up. He was the bold one, and Peter said, “**Jesus, you are the Christ; God’s anointed one, the Messiah, God’s very own Son.**”

Maybe someone was getting the message. Peter was hankering on the cusp of the truth. He did not yet understand Jesus’ purpose. There was still a lot of room for misunderstanding of what Jesus came to do, but at least he knew who Jesus was – the anointed one, the Messiah, God’s only Son.

And Jesus said to Peter, “**Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah,**” Then Jesus said something that seems a little strange to us, “**And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. ¹⁹I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.**”

This is certainly one of those texts that lead to misunderstanding. All that stuff about Peter being the rock upon which the church is built and being given the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven had been misunderstood for centuries. Our Catholic brothers and sisters see in this text the Scriptural evidence for

Apostolic Succession, the infallibility of the Pope, and the authority of priests to absolve sins. And if you want to know more about this come to Sunday school.

We Reformed Protestants are leery of popes, bishops and priests, and especially the part of another human being vested with the power to absolve sins.

I obviously come down on the Reformed side, but the bottom line is we are one holy catholic apostolic church. No matter the misunderstanding, we are the church, but Catholics and Presbyterians or whatever brand you carry, we are the people of God, and rather than focus on our misunderstanding and arguing who is right, let's simply join together as servants and disciples of the one Peter told us is the Christ.

I may be wrong, but what I think is going on here is that Jesus is giving the church a new beginning. So let's go to the Cokesbury Catalogue and purchase a brand new church register. You know that book we have in the office that has the name of all the members of the church and assigns them a number. Did you know that even in the church you are assigned a number? But no matter, in the new register on the first line write, "Member number one – Peter, then beside his name put in the date of his public profession of faith. He was the first to publicly profess, **"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."**

Now what was Peter to do? Well, Jesus said this to Peter, **"I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."**

I think I know what that means, but once again, I could be very wrong, for people have interpreted this text in so many ways, so who is to say I am right?

But as I understand this context, Peter is the one who has been given the keys to open and close the church. He is the one to get up early on Sunday morning, drive down to the church, unlock the doors, turn on the heat or the air conditioning, make the coffee, and check to see if things are presentable. And when it is all over, he locks up the building. Peter was certainly not the master of the house, but he was the steward and had been entrusted with the keys so he could open the doors.

The keys don't belong to Peter. They belong to Jesus, and it is Peter's job, as the steward of the keys, to open the Kingdom to others. Maybe John was put in the register as member number 2 and also given a set of keys. Then maybe Mary became member number 3 and was given a set of keys.

In the last church I served back in Mt. Pleasant it seemed that every member of the church had a set of keys. I know that many of you have a set of keys to this church. So many have keys that we jokingly say that you must not be a member in good standing if you do not have a set of keys.

But a set of keys was given to member number 4 when she joined, and another set given to member number 5 when he joined. You see every member is responsible for opening the doors of the kingdom to those who would enter. We are all responsible for telling the good news. We open doors to the Kingdom by the way we live, by what we say, and by how we give.

Once again, I may be wrong, but there is a warning. You see, if you have the keys you can bind the doors. Now I don't see any evidence in the Bible that members of the church are commissioned to bind the door. We are to open the doors, but it is sadly true that by the way we live and by what we say and by how we give we can also lock the doors, keeping others from wanting to know Jesus.

Our job is to open the doors, and Peter had his set of keys. On Pentecost Sunday, the door opened and 3,000 new disciples or members poured in. I am just guessing, but I bet the church had to go back to the Cokesbury catalogue and purchase another church register in order to record on the church rolls the names of all those new members. Each had a name, and by each name the date of their profession of faith was recorded.

And all those new members were given the keys of the Kingdom as they went into the world and shared the love of Jesus Christ, and more were added to the rolls of the church. More people came to understand that Jesus Christ is Lord and more sets of keys were given out.

There is an ugly side of Church History, one described by the word Christendom where the church wielded political power, and those people seemed to lock the doors of the Kingdom.

But still there were Christians in every age who, using the keys, worked to open the doors of the Kingdom of heaven by feeding the poor in the name of Christ, giving shelter to the homeless in the name of Christ, clothing the naked in the name of Christ, visiting the prisoner, setting the captive free, giving hope where there was no hope in the name of Jesus. That's the history of the church, and it started with Peter, but now has been passed on to us, and we have the job as steward of the keys to open doors to God's love.

I wonder, can you reach into your pocket and find the keys? If you are a Christian the keys are there. Don't let them just jingle in your pocket, but use them to open doors to the love of Jesus Christ.

I know you have the keys. Every time I hear a report of a child who is given hope through the mentoring program at Raguet Elementary school, a key is used to open the door.

Every time someone is visited about a need by a Love INC volunteer, I know a key is used to open the door.

Every time a patient is seen by the Community Health Clinic or Health Horizons and we remember our support, a door is opened.

Every time we provide and organize medicines to assist Project Belize in the care of people we don't even know, a door is opened.

Every time we assist an orphan in Romania through the NOROC program, a door is opened, and how wonderful it was to have Erin work in the program earlier this summer. And all of us need to mark September 27 on our calendars when we will have a dinner here at Westminster, and break out the movie screen and see Erin's pictures and her story of taking the keys of the Kingdom to Romania.

Every time a hungry family is fed through our donations and work at Project HOPE, a door is opened.

Every time an elderly person in our community receives a telephone call through the Telephone Reassurance Program of the Senior Center which our church funds, a door is opened.

Every time someone is trained in useable job skills through Christian Women's Job Corp or Christian Men's Job Corp, a door is opened.

Every time a house is built for a family through Habitat for Humanity, a door is opened.

Every time a child or youth hear about the love of Jesus through our Christian Education Program, a door is opened.

Every time you invite a friend to be part of the church, a door is opened.

And every time you share God's love in Christ in word or deed, you use the keys entrusted to you, and you open the Kingdom of God to someone. They may or may not walk through the door, but our job is to make sure the door is open.

You have been given the keys. You are the stewards of the keys of the kingdom, and you will never regret using them use them to open the doors to Christ's love. Amen.