

Unlocking the Church

Matthew 16:13-20

By

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

Some things can't be known, they can only be learned! Driving a car, for example, must be learned. When our children each turned 15 years old they learned to drive a car. We had a 1985 Volvo DL four door for the occasion. It was a perfect mixture of over-protection and under-power with a four cylinder engine and a body built like a tank. The car was as old as the children themselves (16 years) when they learned to drive, a source of embarrassment to them and pride for their parents.

I can remember handing each one of them the keys for the first time after successful completion of their driver's examination, always on the day of their 16th birthday – not a day later. I could see in their eyes those keys meant power; power to expand their world, to go where they had never gone before, to reach out beyond the limits they had known to places they had never dreamed of. We bought our first cell phone when our eldest daughter received her driver's license so she could call home in an emergency. She quickly discovered how to use it to filter our calls. The only phone calls the kids never answered were those of their parents.

Many of us can remember being given the keys to the car for the first time and the feeling of power and responsibility that came with it. It is one of the rituals of growing up, of coming of age, of entering adulthood. Today, we have a story of Peter, the Apostle being given the keys to the "Kingdom of Heaven," the "rock" upon which Jesus Christ has and is building the Church. It is a story of growing in faith and of power and responsibility. And it is a story of remarkable confidence shown by Christ in one whom we will see next week was not always trustworthy – who did not always

have the right answer or say the correct things, who later would deny he ever knew the same Lord, who he confesses so eloquently in this text.

A few years ago I spent two days at the battlefield in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, where a decisive event took place during the first few days of July, 1863 during the Civil War. President Lincoln dedicated the memorial there with the Gettysburg Address later that same year. One can still envision and relive some of the decisive assaults: "Picket's Charge," "Devil's Den," and "Little Round Top," to name a few. Union forces ultimately prevailed, which ended the advance of Confederate forces into the North. The largest number of casualties in the Civil War occurred during the Battle of Gettysburg.

This text in Matthew feels a bit like a Civil War historical site. Protestant and Roman Catholic scholars have raged in conflict over these texts in previous centuries but now the debates have quieted. What did Jesus mean when he gave the keys to the Kingdom to Peter? What does that infer about apostolic succession of the ministry? What does it mean "to bind and to loose?" There is only enough time this morning to delve into a few issues raised by the text. Like a tour of the Battlefield at Gettysburg, with limited time, one must choose where to focus one's attention.

I'm particularly interested in the remarkable confidence and trust Christ places in Peter, despite his fickle and wavering faith. Christ seems to place trust in one who proves time and again to be untrustworthy, like a parent handing the car keys to one who occasionally exercises poor judgment or who has had an accident while texting. Christ believes in Peter even if he doesn't believe in himself. Faith cannot be known, it must be learned. And Peter has learned faith, even though he still has much to learn about faith. He knows enough because he has discovered, by God's grace and self-revelation,

that Jesus is more than just a significant historical figure, or another in a long list of prophets and super-religious people who make a mark. Jesus is God's representative, the Messiah, the son of the living God, God in the flesh! With that confession, Peter becomes the pre-eminent paradigm of faith for all disciples. He becomes the "rock" upon which Jesus builds the Church.

The question about the identity of Jesus is first raised and then ultimately answered by Peter, "What are others saying . . . what do you say?" Peter then receives a blessing, a name change, and then a commissioning.¹

Some things can't be known they can only be learned! Faith requires that we learn first who Jesus really is, and then learn to live by his power and direction. If we know who Christ truly is, then we have what we need most. There is a direct connection between the confession of Peter in this text and his commissioning; a direct connection between apprehending Jesus Christ and receiving the power and responsibility of the keys to the Church. When we truly understand the identity of Jesus Christ we are on our way to new power in life and new responsibility given by God.

Obviously, this morning our church is in the midst of a renovation unlike any seen for several decades. Over the course of many decades, many have received keys of one kind or another to the church. There are all kinds of different keys for different doors. The staff have keys, some ushers do too. So do the wedding coordinators, some small group leaders, even facilitators of the two AA groups who meet here have keys. We'll be "re-keying" the church in the next several months as part of the renovation. That will inevitably require developing some criteria for determining who should get new

¹ Suggs, M. Jack, Interpretation of Matthew 16:13-20, pages 291-295

keys to the facilities. The criteria will typically include concern for the safety and preservation of the Church. We simply can't give keys to those who forget to lock the doors, or who might hand them to their grandchildren so they can play in the renovated sanctuary. We will quite naturally want to preserve and protect our investment in the Church and give keys to those who will use the church appropriately.

Maybe we also should ask the question, "Who is prepared to unlock the Church for others?"

"Who is confessing faith in Christ in such a way that their life is a witness to the power and direction of God?"

"Who is learning to live in new ways that build others, who does justice, loves kindness, and walks humbly with the Lord?" Maybe we need to distribute the keys not only to those who preserve the Church but to those who know what to do with it! Let's empower those who understand the nature of Christian faith; those who believe that God has commissioned us to be the Church in this place; those who are committed to accomplishing something for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven! These classrooms ought to be filled with children learning about Jesus Christ and the power of God in human life. When they are renovated, we plan to do much more than just preserve them. This sanctuary ought to be used every weekend for weddings as well as Sunday worship. These pews ought to have much more use than they get currently. We ought to wear out these pew pads more often in the worship of our Lord. We need people like Peter to have the keys to the Church, people who are learning how to use the place, how to confess the faith in ways that make a difference, and who believe enough to understand that we have all been given a commission to be part of the Church of

Jesus Christ. Confessing the faith must not be disconnected from being active in the life of the Church.

In 1976 the typical supermarket had 9,000 products to choose from. Today the typical supermarket has well over 30,000 products. There are more choices today than ever before. According to Peter Berger, "A new religious denomination forms every week." In 1955, only 4 % of the adult population had left the faith of their childhood, by the mid- eighties one third had, and I bet it is closer to two thirds today. There are more choices all the time regarding Church but most Americans are choosing no church at all. Being given the keys to the Church doesn't mean you own it anymore than when my parents gave me the keys to the car for the first time they intended to pass along the registration. The Church belongs to Christ. And Christ intends to empower us to collaborate with him to build the Church.

Let's use the keys given to us by Christ to unlock the Church together. We live in a time when many are searching for a more authentic way of living with greater integrity and love. Those who confess that Jesus is the Messiah, the son of the living God, are learning to live in ways that build up rather than tear down. Many are learning to live in harmony and peace together rather than selfishness and strife. Christ is teaching us how to avoid some of the accidents others are making in their lives. Let's live with greater purpose and joy, and let's unlock the wonder and mystery of faith in this Savior so others can join us here in these pews and these classrooms, serving Christ and living into the reign of God. Some things can't be known - they can only be learned! We can learn what the Lord intends in the Church and we can become more together than we dare imagine. Amen