

Proper 16 A August 23, 2020

The Church's Keys

The Rev. Deborah Woolsey Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH chogs.org

"Jesus said, '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.'" Matthew 16:19

One of the most solemn and important moments for me every time I begin serving a parish happens without ceremony. Usually there are not many people present, maybe just me and one other person. Nevertheless, it is one of the most significant moments in my ministry. It is the moment I am given, and I receive the keys to the church building.

The Rector's set of keys includes all the keys to all the doors of all the places in the building from the sacristy to the office to the furnace room to every broom closet. It includes access to doors very few people can open. These keys represent the rector's authority and responsibility. It is assumed with the giving and receiving of the keys to the building the rector is accepting the responsibility to oversee not just a building but the community connected to the building and the rector will treat this honor with respect and compassion as well as keeping a heart open for God's will. It is a moment that always makes me catch my breath.

It is a lot like the moment you might have received the keys to your first house or apartment. Or when you received the keys to your office at work. Or perhaps it was when you received the keys to your first car, and you realized now you had both the independence the car provides and the responsibility to care for the car. Whatever the keys give you access to, the moment you receive them is a powerful and transformational one.

This is the same powerful moment we read in today's Gospel where Jesus promised to give the keys of the kingdom of heaven to Peter and his disciples. But what was Jesus really talking about when he promised the keys of the kingdom of heaven? Surely, he didn't whip out small pieces of metal shaped to fit into locks and jangled them about?

Keys are tools we use to access entry points like doors or gates. But Jesus didn't promise the disciples keys **to** the kingdom of heaven, he promised to give them the keys **of** the kingdom of heaven. Which means obviously Jesus wasn't

referencing metal keys that open locks. The keys of the kingdom are made of something far more valuable and lasting and they don't open doors, they open the way for freedom.

To figure out what those keys consist of, we have to go back to the beginning of today's Gospel when Jesus gave what sounds like a pop quiz to his disciples asking them who people say he is and who they say he is. Commentators and historians like to remind us the geographical area Jesus and his disciples was passing through is important if we are to understand the context of Jesus' questions and the disciples' answers. We read in today's Gospel the area was called Caesarea Philippi. This was a diverse region with people who practiced different religions. Historians believe as Jesus and his disciples walked along, they would have seen the statues of pagan gods on the hillsides and it is in their shadows that Jesus asked who people believed him to be and who the disciples believed him to be.

The answer to those questions is that the people saw in Jesus prophetic figures of the past, not unlike the statues above them. But Peter, who in this section of Matthew's Gospel scholars tell us is acting as the spokesperson for all the disciples, said they had been paying attention to the miraculous healings and feedings of Jesus and listened to his teachings and therefore believed him to be the Messiah, God's anointed, the one who will restore Israel and humanity to right relationship with God. As they stood in the shadow of pagan gods, they recognized they were with someone who is more real and more powerful and who has already given more than what the statues represented.

Jesus seemed delighted by their answer, commending Peter not for his intelligence or powers of observation but for being able to pay attention to God, who is the one who gave him the ability to recognize who Jesus is. And it is that ability, to discern God's will that makes the foundation for Jesus' to build his church upon.

The word *church* is used sparingly in the New Testament. In Matthew's Gospel it is used only twice, and it doesn't mean a beautiful brick building with lovely windows, an altar, candles, organ, and rows of pews. One meaning of the word church is "local assembly"; another is "called out." In Matthew's Gospel this moment of confession of faith isn't about the revelation of who Jesus is, it is about the new community Jesus is forming. This community is made of people from all walks of life who are willing to follow him, believe in his unique relationship to God, and who are willing to live into Jesus' mission to show people the love of God on earth, to do the work with God of restoring the world to God's original intention for it, a world without hunger, injustice, and inequality.

It is to this community, one called the church, not just to Peter himself, as is sometimes commonly misunderstood, that Jesus gives those precious keys of the kingdom of heaven. The purpose of those keys, we read in today's Gospel is to bind and loose. In other words, those keys can give the freedom from sin that Jesus came to bring to the world. When we look to Jesus as our salvation from sin, the liberator from sin, we believe this happens through his death and resurrection, and one of the most powerful aspects of resurrection life is forgiveness.

Remember forgiveness is what Jesus embodied when he died on the cross, as he prayed God to forgive those who were killing him. Forgiveness is what he embodied after his resurrection when he greeted his disciples in peace instead of anger or disappointment for their lack of faith during his trial, crucifixion, and death. There is even a time in the Gospels where the thing that upset the pharisees more than his teachings or miraculous healings is when Jesus forgave someone.

Forgiveness is powerful. It is a liberating force. People like Nelson Mandela, former Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the Dalai Lama, and our Presiding Bishop the Most Rev. Michael Curry all have written about their experiences with forgiveness on individual and community levels and how they have seen people and communities transform before their eyes. All of them write that if there is to be hope for a peaceful world, a world of equality and justice, then it must start with forgiveness. Only forgiveness can liberate us from our past and set us free from repeating unhealthy and damaging cycles of violence. They remind us that forgiveness does not mean forgetting, as far too often well-meaning folks think. Forgiveness does not mean allowing ourselves to continue to be hurt by people or systems. Forgiveness does not forget the act that caused the harm. Instead, forgiveness frees us so we can learn from the harm, heal, change, and make a new and better way.

This is a key Jesus gives to the church; to forgive as we have been forgiven, as we pray in the Lord's Prayer. Forgiveness is a powerful expression of the love of God through Christ. It doesn't open physical doors but does open the doors of our hearts so that we, who are the church can forgive. There is both power and responsibility represented in this key.

Lord knows this is no easy key to use. People can be difficult and complicated, and systems can be unjust and uncaring. Diversity sounds grand until disagreements arise. Yet that is another key Jesus gave the church: community. As Bishop of Western North Carolina, the Rt. Rev. Porter Taylor has written, "We come together to experience again Christ's love in community... and discover Jesus as the in-between connecting us to one another." To Bishop Taylor, "churches are places

where people learn to love.” And as we clumsily learn to love, by practicing forgiveness, working through differences to work toward our mission, we can learn to see the value in such hard work, because forgiveness is the stuff of resurrection of life, the stuff of God’s kingdom here on earth.

In today’s Gospel we get a chance to see what the author of Matthew’s Gospel envisioned as the purpose of the church: to free or loose people from sin. The work of the church, before we feed the hungry, or provide spiritual inspiration or comfort, or work for social justice, - although those are all very good and right things to do and most definitely part of our mission - but before we do that work, we are to do the work of liberation, of freeing people so we can live together in a community that listens to God and works to bring God’s kingdom here on earth where no one is hungry, loneliness is a memory, where we share out of a sense of abundance and gratitude instead of hoard out of a sense of fear and greed, where all people are free no matter their age, gender, skin color, political affiliation, sexual identity or socio economic status to live into the love of God. Believe it or not these things can happen. It begins with learning to love one another and forgive each other.

As we head into an election year in the middle of a global pandemic with millions of people struggling with job insecurity and fears about the future, perhaps it’s also a good time to remember the keys that were given not just to Peter and the disciples so long ago, but are given to all of us at our baptism: the keys of the kingdom of heaven. They won’t do much good gathering lint in the bottom of a pocket or purse or gathering dust hanging on a forgotten hook. Perhaps now is the best time to remember them, and get them out, and practice loving each other and forgiving one another. Perhaps doing this will begin the needed work of healing so many divisions, bringing us all closer to one another and to God, through Christ, the giver of keys and salvation, who is even now, in our midst.