

Keys to the Kingdom

Matthew 16:13-20

Second Baptist Church, Memphis

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This is a well known story in the scriptures—where Jesus asks his disciples, *Who do people say that I am?* And they give various answers: some people say John the Baptist, others Elijah or Jeremiah. And then Jesus puts it to them directly and says, *But who do you say that I am?* And Peter finally comes out and says, *You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.*

Powerful moment. And it's an important moment, too. One way you know that is that this is one of the few incidents that is found in all four gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

Let's say you're going to teach a Sunday School lesson on this story or preach a sermon about it. There's a whole lot in there, so you're probably going to have to make some choices about what you will and will not deal with. You've got the dramatic power of Jesus questioning the disciples, the variety of titles that are given for Jesus in this text, the special blessing of Peter, not to mention the words right after the reading about Jesus' suffering and death and about

the disciples bearing the cross. That's too much for one lesson or one sermon.

When you have something like this that is found in all four gospels, one way to achieve a clear focus is to ask, What is distinctive about Matthew's report? In other words, this story is in all four gospels, but today I'm reading Matthew's account, and is there anything distinctive about Matthew's version of this? What is unique about Matthew's account compared to the accounts in the other gospels?

And the answer to that is clear. Matthew alone includes verses 17-19, and this is the part where Jesus connects Peter's confession to the power of the church. This is the part where Jesus says:

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. 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.

Every sermon I've ever preached on this story has focused on Jesus questioning the disciples about who they say he is and Peter's dramatic confession: *You are the Christ, the son of the living God.*

But maybe we need to pay attention to this other part that Matthew thought was important enough to include even when Luke, and Mark, and John did not.

There must be thousands of jokes out there featuring St. Peter at the pearly gates in charge of letting people into heaven (or keeping them out). Here's one of my favorites.

Jesus is walking through heaven one day, a little bored, when he passes the Pearly Gates and sees St. Peter talking with an elderly gentleman and decides to go over and hear the man's tale.

Where are you from, old man? Jesus asks.

Well, I lived my life on the shores of the Mediterranean, the old man replies.

Hmmm. I spent some time there myself, says Jesus.

What did you do for a living?

Well, I was a poor carpenter, says the old man.

Wow. So was I, says Jesus. *And so was my father.*

And I had a son, says the old man. *Well, he wasn't my son really, but a miraculous spirit came into him and*

he became a very famous person.

Jesus can't hold back any longer. *Dad!* he cries.

The old man falls into Jesus' outstretched arms. *Pinocchio!*

There are a million of these St. Peter/pearly gates jokes. Did you ever wonder where we get the idea anyway that St. Peter is the gatekeeper for heaven—that Peter is at the gate of heaven with a list deciding who gets to go in? I never understood that. I always thought God's grace was what got us into heaven, not Peter's list.

The idea comes from our scripture passage today—that part where Jesus says to Peter: *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. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven.* So there is this image of Peter being the one to let people in to heaven (or deny people entrance).

I don't think, though, that the significance of this image of Peter and the keys is that of Peter as the doorkeeper to heaven as the jokes imply. I think what we have here actually gives us a very important insight into what the church is supposed to be doing here on earth.

When I was flying from Memphis to Atlanta a few weeks ago on my way to England, the older woman sitting next to me asked me where I was going. I told her I was going to London. She asked me what I was doing there. *You are a business man, I assume*, she said. *What business are you in?* Why she assumed I was a businessman, I don't know. Maybe it was my normal business-like appearance— shorts and t-shirt— that gave me away.

Anyway, I was travelling to London by myself, and I did have a briefcase type thing with books and papers in it. So she wanted to know what my business was. I of course told her that no, I am a pastor, and I'm going to take some theology courses at Oxford.

In situations like this, when I tell people I am a pastor, I get a lot of different responses.

Sometimes people are happy or excited. *Oh! Wonderful!* they say.

Some people want to talk to me about religious issues. Very often the person will begin to explain to me why they haven't been attending church but are planning to start back again.

Some people get real quiet, as though maybe if they don't encourage me, I will leave them alone—almost

as though they have run into a bear in the forest and the same principles for escaping without being attacked apply:

Don't run.

Don't turn your back.

Just back away slowly and quietly, and maybe he won't even notice you're there.

Often people ask me questions about what exactly I do. You might be surprised to know how generally baffled people are about what exactly a pastor does all day every day. Many of you are probably confused about that as well. And the sad part is that I sometimes have trouble explaining it myself.

What is your business? was basically the question this woman asked me. I say I'm a minister or the pastor of a Baptist church. But what does that mean, exactly? Most people don't really know what that means outside of a few images they have their head.

What is the business of the church? How would we define it to someone who doesn't know, who isn't familiar with all of our generalizations and clichés. What if you were called on to define "from scratch" the business of the church? What would you say? What is our business, our product, our specialty?

One way to answer that is to look at Jesus' words that we're talking about today. Peter confesses Jesus as Lord, and then Jesus says that upon that rock he will build his church and will give to Peter and to the church the "keys to the Kingdom" so that whatever the church binds on earth will stay bound and whatever the church loosens on earth will stay loosened.

What in the world does that mean?

Some have interpreted this to mean that the church has ultimate authority in spiritual matters—that the church has the authority to determine who will and will not receive the grace to get into heaven. And that's why Peter, who is thought of by some as the leader of the church, is pictured as the gatekeeper deciding who gets in to heaven. I can't go along with that, of course. It is God, not the church, who is the arbiter of salvation.

It seems closer to the truth to say that while the church does not have absolute power over people, it does play a crucial role in the spiritual realm as an instrument of God. The church or church leaders cannot save other people; only God can do that. But it is true that by what we do or fail to do, by our actions and attitudes, we, as God's church, play a crucial role

in contributing to whether people are bound or loosed from their sins.

Think about powerful things like forgiveness and hope and reclamation. What the church on earth does or fails to do has reverberations clear up to heaven and on out into eternity.

This truth was borne out quite clearly to J. W. Stevenson when he left the seminary and went to be pastor of his first little church in the highlands of Scotland. He writes about a tenant farmer who was caught one night in the act of stealing, and thus confirmed a suspicion that the community had held for a long time that he was basically dishonest.

The man was sentenced to prison and served out his term. The day he was released, the young minister met him at the prison gate with better news than this tenant farmer had ever expected to hear. A farmer named David Sims was willing to take him on and give him another chance to make good.

The ex-convict was skeptical at first and asked the pastor: *Does he know about me and the fact that I have been in here?* The minister assured him that he did; in fact, he said that it was because of his problems and a desire to help him back on his feet that Sims was doing this.

Then the convict asked fearfully, *But what about the rest of the community and the church? Will they let me come back?*

Here the young minister displayed his idealism and naïvete, for he quite confidently exclaimed, *Of course they will, especially the church. We Christians stand ready to help you in any way we can to begin again and make a right start in life.*

Stevenson writes that the following weeks proved to be a jolting experience, not only for the tenant farmer but also for Stevenson's own Christian idealism. For as soon as the word spread that David Sims had brought the burglar back into the community, there was a public outcry.

What was he thinking? the neighbors wanted to know. Did he not realize that in just a matter of time the thief would be back to his old ways and the community disturbed again? The young minister writes that he was overwhelmed by the negative reaction to this effort at reclamation, and what shocked him the worst was the fact that *it was the church people who led out in the movement of protest!*

He says he saw with his own eyes the effect that their attitudes and actions were having on this tenant farmer.

Instead of loosing him, instead of freeing him, instead of encouraging him to become a better man than he had been, these church people were binding him tighter and tighter to his old ways by their withholding of hope and compassion and forgiveness.

By saying in effect, *You have been a thief; you will never be anything more than a thief*, they were effectively stifling what faint spark of desire might have been there within that man to struggle upward. They were, instead of setting him loose from what he used to be, they were binding him more tightly to what he had been.

This is, I think, a classic example of what Jesus was talking about when he said, *What you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and what you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.* It's quite a heavy responsibility we have, when you stop and think about it, that while we don't have absolute power over each other spiritually, we do have real power to make it easier for a person to be freed from his past or to be bound more fully to it.

[This story and the connection to "binding and loosing" is found in a sermon by John Claypool preached at Crescent Hill Baptist Church, Louisville, Kentucky, January 12, 1969]

Jesus said that he gives to the church the keys to the kingdom. When we think about Jesus giving to the church the “keys to the kingdom”, it helps to understand what that means if we remember what Jesus said when he returned to his hometown as he was just beginning his ministry.

He read words from the prophet Isaiah that described what his business was. He said, *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.*

So when Jesus talks about giving the church the keys to the kingdom, I read that in light of Jesus’ declaration back there in Nazareth about the nature of the business he was in, and I see it as a call for us to continue in his liberating, freedom-giving ministry.

He talked there about releasing captives and setting free those who were oppressed, and that fits this image of a key perfectly. The purpose of those oddly shaped pieces of metal we call keys is to open locks, and that is the purpose, the business, of a church and of its members—to open locks. The church, and really each one of us, is a key—uniquely fashioned by our gifts and experiences to fit some lock and be the

agent of setting someone free. To be agents of setting people free.

Our business is to join in the work of Jesus who came to earth to free people—not to bind them. Sometimes we forget this. And I think sometimes our natural tendency is to have an attitude toward problem people kind of like those Scottish Christians had toward that tenant farmer: hopeless in their expectations, unforgiving in their attitudes. And so we become instruments of binding instead of instruments of loosing.

I think that might be our natural state. That’s how we are in the wild, you could say.

But when we have experienced in our own hearts and in the core of our own being the incredible wonder of what God is like, when we realize that God really is a lover of sinners, and a God of hope and restoring and love, the one who came in Jesus Christ to loose and not to bind, to set free and to liberate not hold down—when we experience the incredible wonder of what God is like, then we are changed. We are transformed. And when we are transformed like that, that’s when the church really can become a ministry of loosing and freeing and calling people upward.

[Claypool]

If I were to sit down next to somebody on a plane tonight, and they asked me, *What business are you in?* I think I might answer it this way: This is my business. To go out in the forgiveness and the hope and the love of Christ and make it easier for some person who is bound to be loosed.

In one of his novels Frederick Buechner depicts a scene in which a man is begging his pastor to declare God's forgiveness to a woman whose life has recently fallen apart because of adultery. The pastor says, *Well, she already knows that I have forgiven her.*

To which the man replies, *But she doesn't know that God forgives her. That's the only power you have, pastor--to tell her that. Not just that God forgives her for her poor adultery, but that God forgives her for all the faces she can't bear to look at now— all the eyes whose glances she cannot meet.*

Tell her that God forgives her for being lonely and bored, for not being full of joy with a household full of children. Tell her that her sins are forgiven whether she knows it or not. Tell her that, pastor, because it's what we all need to know more than anything else. Tell her she's forgiven. What else on earth do you think you were ordained for?

What else on earth do you think our business is?

To proclaim grace and forgiveness. To put these cross-shaped keys that we've been given to good use—to unlock grace for others. To, in the forgiveness and love of Christ, make it possible for some person who is all bound up to be turned loose and set free.