

“Keys to the Kingdom” *Matt 16:16–19* Pentecost12 8-27-17

Nineteen years ago this month, I stood in front of this congregation as your newly installed pastor. Having served 12 years in ministry I knew that my responsibilities, in both the broad and narrow sense, were to administer on your behalf the Office of the Keys.

You vested me with an authority and responsibility given to you by God to apply His Law and Gospel to your souls. I do that in the broad sense by leading the Divine Service in which God guides, admonishes, and forgives you through His Word, prayer, Baptism, and Communion. I also do that in private visitations and pastoral care conversations.

In the narrow sense these Keys lock and unlock the doors to God’s kingdom when I forgive in Jesus’ name, the sins of those who repent and warn those who do not that their public sins are not forgiven as long as they do not repent. This is not a license to judge the heart or pry into one’s personal life to find something to condemn.

I also vowed to keep in complete confidence all sins confessed to me. The only purpose in hearing them is to forgive them in Jesus’ name so that penitents know that God also forgives them. Our Sunday corporate confessions are a dialog with God about our sins that ends with His full absolution.

Keys given to you at work represent a limited authority and responsibility that you were hired and trained to fulfill. You only get keys to rooms that require your access. Likewise, the Keys given to a pastor is delegated authority only for matters about which the Word of God speaks. I have no authority to decide what kind of flowers we need or what color of paint to use.

So 19 years ago, I was surprised when the congregation president handed me the keys to the lawn mower. He did it with a smile, so with a smile I handed them back. Not that I minded mowing the yard, but the keys I was called to use are different. Besides that, the lawn is in much better shape because I did hand that key back.

The Church delegates the Office of the Keys to a pastor to use for their good. But all Christians have the authority to forgive each others’ sins in Jesus’ name. Luther used the term “priesthood of all believers” to describe that authority.

But who gave the Keys to the Church? Jesus, the Christ, the son of the living God”. In a Nazareth synagogue one day Jesus read this from Isaiah 61 and applied it to himself: *The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has ²anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and ³the opening of the prison to those who are bound.*

Paul wrote that He ascended bodily to heaven so that He could fill all things by His Spirit. This is the Spirit that He gives his church in our Baptism so that in His name we can open the prisons where guilt-ridden souls are bound. He gave us the keys to those prison doors.

These include the Keys of baptism and His Word, when He said, “All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. Therefore go make disciples” with those keys. He gave the Keys of Communion when he said to the disciples, “Take eat, take drink”. This is my body and blood for you for the forgiveness of your sins. Do this in remembrance of me.

The Greek grammar in our text indicates that Jesus gave the keys to all disciples, not just to Peter. We are those disciples, the Church. So what does this mean for us today?

When the church is attacked we remember that the Living God has promised that nothing can destroy it. He builds it, defends, and guides it with his Word and Sacrament. When hell threatens people with the fear of death and locks doubting souls in prisons of guilt and shame, the keys given to the Church unlock those prison doors. The gates of hell that lock people in spiritual strongholds cannot prevail against the Church that proclaims God’s grace and holds people accountable to live a godly life.

Let us use these Keys to the Kingdom first for ourselves so that we may live as people set free from sin. Then let us use them to unlock the prison doors with the Gospel, so that others may also be free.

The Call that I received to be your pastor years ago remains the Call Christ gave to the whole Church to give freedom and accountability. May God keep our focus always on our highest responsibility: to use with wisdom and love the Keys of the Kingdom. Amen