

Matthew 16:13-20 Pastor Bill Uetricht 8/21/11 9 Pentecost

I want to show you something. In my hands lie the keys to the kingdom: keys to the outside doors, the inside doors, the van, the sacristy, the elevator, the janitor's closet, the storage space in the men's bathroom, the garage, the pew candle stand cabinet, Little Learner's shed, the counting room. In my hands lie the keys to the kingdom. And man, do I feel important.

I am sure that you have met some of the same men that I have come upon—those men who have a big wad of keys clipped to their belts. When you want to get into someplace, these are the guys to see. These are men of authority. They held the keys to the kingdom!

Today we are told that Peter has the keys of the kingdom. He is the main man. Jesus, after Peter confesses him to be the Messiah, says that upon Peter, a name that means rock, he is building his church. And according to Jesus, this community that he is building is so rock-strong that even the gates of the underworld, the realm of death—Hades—will not be able to prevail against it. And Peter is told that he plays a very special role in this new community. He has authority. He is given the keys of the kingdom. He has the authority to bind and loose, which in the Old Testament world was the power to interpret the ancient law in light of modern situations. Jesus in Matthew is giving Peter (and some would say the whole church) great authority.

Now some of you might realize that this particular passage has created quite the little stir in church history. It is one of the passages that has contributed to the division between Protestants and Roman Catholics. The Catholics have seen in this passage Biblical warrant for the office of the Pope. Peter is viewed by official Catholicism as the first pope. And all of the popes to follow are a part of an office that

gets its authority from Peter. There is for Roman Catholics a sense of historical continuity in the church, which for them is essential for the understanding of the role of the church in life and society. And that role, for them, includes a great deal of authority. Since what has followed in church history is built upon Peter, the church is thought by official Catholicism to have great authority when it comes to matters of faith and life, when it comes to interpreting what the faith means in light of contemporary situations.

Now Protestants, on the other hand, thought that Catholics gave too much authority to Peter. Traditionally for Protestants, Peter is not the main issue, but rather his confession is. For Protestants, the church is built not so much on Peter, but on his confession that Jesus is the Messiah. It is that confession, Protestants have said, that has created the church of every place and time. The church and its unity is not dependent upon an office or a person, but is based upon the on-going enchantment that believers have in the person of Jesus.

Now while I have been a Lutheran all of my life—a denomination that *generally* has been lumped in with the Protestants—I suspect that in this case the Protestants may have misread Matthew. Matthew doesn't say anything about the church being built upon Peter's confession. Matthew says that it is built upon Peter, who admittedly confessed, at least initially, correctly. I suspect that Matthew has a very strong view of the person of Peter and his school of thought.

The early church was very much like the contemporary church. Not everybody agreed. Not everybody followed the same leader. There was without a doubt a group of folks in the early church who were drawn by Paul's message that the Christian faith, while deeply connected to its Jewish roots, shouldn't be controlled by them. And yet

there was also a group of people who felt that the Jewish roots of Christianity needed to play an overwhelming role in the development of the church. These folks probably followed Peter and his disciples. And it appears that whoever wrote Matthew might have been one of them. Matthew seems to like Peter. He gives him a highlighted role. Now I would point out that some of the other gospel writers and Paul do not give him as much good press. But still, from Matthew's perspective, Peter rocks! So in one way I can understand the Roman Catholic perspective.

But I think it is a long way from a highlighted Peter to two thousand years of papal rule. It is interesting to me how in church history so often our sacred texts have been read through the lens not so much of authority, but power. All of a sudden, a highlighted Peter, whose character is less enthralling to other New Testament writers, becomes an institution, a boss, an office with amazing political and religious powers.

Frankly, Protestants haven't done any better with all of this. Our emphasis on Peter's confession has also often been read through the lens of power. We would find ways to get people to confess Jesus as the Messiah, even if it meant coercing them or running all over them and their traditions. A church built upon a confession became a power-hungry institution wanting to win the world to Jesus by any means possible, expecting people to speak the faith in the same doctrinaire way that we do. And if they didn't, well, they aren't our friends, or they couldn't have communion.

I don't know how many of you remember when we Lutherans would fill out communion cards. Now I understand that this was a process that in fact helped congregations keep track of their

membership, but it was rooted in a desire to make sure that the wrong people weren't taking communion. Only the people who had the "right" confession of faith were to be taking the Lord's body and blood. Seeing through the lens of power we used "confession of faith" as a means to keep people out.

I suspect that *both* Catholics and Protestants evaluated this story about Peter through the lens of power. Maybe if we would keep reading the story in Matthew we would be prevented from doing so. After Jesus tells Peter that he (Peter) is the main man, he begins to talk to him, as we will discover next week, about his upcoming suffering and death, and Peter then rebukes him. "This can't be," Peter says. "Suffering and death cannot be a part of your way." Then Jesus says to Peter: "Get behind me Satan; you don't know the ways of God." The guy who was said to be the rock upon which the church is built is now said to be a stumbling block, a partner of evil. Jesus here is making it quite clear. The ways of God are not about power or control. They are about compassion, about suffering love. "If anybody wants to follow me, they must let go of themselves, take up their cross and follow me. Those who attempt to protect their lives will lose them. Those who lose them for the sake of compassion and love will find them."

To hold the keys of the kingdom is not necessarily to be in control over people or to impress them with how much power we have over them. It is not to be the gatekeeper who gets one's jollies out of *letting* people into rooms or making sure that they don't get into them. The authority that the church has, and *indeed* it has a big authority, is a servant authority—an authority to open the doors of God's forgiveness to hurting people in light of the complex character of modern life, in light of tough decisions that people have to make. The authority of the

church is the authority of compassion. It is the authority of suffering love. It is the authority of the cross of Jesus.

Hear this loud and clear! These keys of the kingdom, this authority that we as the church built upon Peter have been given, are not for the sake of keeping people out. They are for the sake of inviting them in, inviting them into the forgiveness, compassion, and forgiveness of our God.