

JESUS HAS GIVEN US THE KEYS TO THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

August 27, 2017

Mt. 16:13-20

Last Sunday we learned that we are to be looking for those who have strayed from the flock. Our Father in heaven wants all to be saved and those who have wandered away from hearing the Good Shepherd's voice, who don't feel that church is very important any more, are in danger of losing that wonderful gift of everlasting life.

In Revelation 2 the Lord says to all: "Be thou faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life." Being faithful means to keep your eyes on the goal of eternal life and staying on the one road that will get you there; namely following the Savior, listening to His voice and worshiping with like-minded folks weekly. That is what is taught in SS and Confirmation.

So that we in His earthly church can help those who need help along the way, Jesus has given to His church the Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven. This is not a key like the one you have for your car. This key is the key of authority.

The Small Catechism puts it this way. The office of the keys is that special authority which Christ has given to His church on earth to forgive the sins of repentant sinners, but to withhold forgiveness from the unrepentant as long as they do not repent.

Luther did not make this up. Jesus breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven(John 20:22,23)"

Jesus speaks of two keys. The first is used for binding or locking the gates to heaven. Scripture itself gives us a striking example of this use of this key. A member of the congregation in

Corinth began living in incest with his father's wife; probably his stepmother. Apparently, this fellow was not willing to stop living in this sin. St. Paul warned the congregation, 'purge the evil person from among you(1 cor. 5:13)'

The warning worked as it was intended; it shook up the entire body of believers in Corinth and brought the sinner to his knees in grief and fear (2 Cor. 2:5-11).

Jesus makes it clear that we have enough logs in our own eyes and need not go around snooping to discover the specks in the eyes of others. Nevertheless, some sins compel us to confront the sinner. Just as compassion compels a doctor to care for an injured person who has fallen unconscious, so believers must deal in compassion with those in their fellowship who live in sin, seemingly oblivious to its consequences.

First of all, we pray for those who show no concern for their own souls. We visit with them about the danger they are in with the intention to get them back in church. If they come back, we and the angels of heaven rejoice.

At other times, heaven weeps over sinners who refuse to acknowledge their sin and who continue to reject God's Word. Such people may even come right out and say, 'I do not believe anymore. Just take my name off the membership list.'

In cases like this, we must tell them the truth. Since they are rejecting Jesus and His offer of free salvation and forgiveness of sins, wanting no part of living the Christian faith, we have no choice but to say that the gate of heaven is locked to them, until such time as they have a change of heart.

Now, someone may say to us, 'only God can look into a person's heart to see if there is faith there. That is clearly true. But Jesus has directed us to----commanded us---to deal with the facts as we know them. And Scripture says, 'by their works you will

know them.’ The use of this key serves as the strongest possible warning that no sinner dare take sin lightly or treat it flippantly.

Happily, Christ speaks of another key. “Whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” This second key looses, or opens the gate to heaven. We use this key whenever we tell someone your sins are forgiven. Christ authorizes every Christian to share this good news of the Gospel whenever a troubled sinner shares a burden.

Congregations call pastors to use this key in public on their behalf. The pastor uses this key almost every Sunday after a general confession of sins.

Scripture promises that we can trust the Absolution spoken in the stead and by the command of Christ by the pastor as confidently as if we heard our Lord Jesus Himself speaking from heaven.

How thankfully we should use the keys Christ has given us as we extend His pardon to others and also receive that pardon for ourselves.

In the Small Catechism on p. 29 we have this. I believe that when the called ministers of Christ deal with us by His divine command, in particular when they exclude openly unrepentant sinners from the Christian congregation and absolve those who repent of their sins and want to do better, this is just as valid and certain, even in heaven, as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us Himself.

May the Good Lord bless our walking and working together to the furtherance of His Kingdom and to the saving of precious souls.

Amen

