

August 24, 2014 - Matthew 16:13--20
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Keys to the Kingdom

After college I lived in New York City, right in the middle of Manhattan. For a young woman from a small town in the Midwest it was so different, so many different kinds of people, so much going on in that city that never sleeps. I loved it. I tried to see as much of it as I could. One Friday night doing just that, I stayed out rather late, and when I came home to my apartment and put my key in the lock, and it wouldn't turn. I jiggled it. Nothing. My key simply would not work. I was locked out. My roommate was out of town for the weekend and it was 1 am.

As I said, this was just after college, and I am older than you might think—this was before cell phones. In a way that didn't matter, because I was new enough to the city that I couldn't think of anyone nearby that I could call, anyway. Suddenly, instead of feeling excited about the big, big city, I felt very, very small. I felt alone, and uncertain, and not a little vulnerable.

But there were these business cards tacked up in the front entry of my apartment building. The cards said: Locksmith, and it listed a phone number. So I went to the pay phone on the corner (Remember pay phones on the corner?) and made the call, and not long after the locksmith showed up. He said, "No problem. I can get you in. This happens to these locks sometimes. You'll need a new one, but I can get you in." I vividly remember the overwhelming sense of relief and gratitude that I felt when in a matter of minutes, he used his tools to open the door to my apartment. I was in. Of course, I had to pay a hefty sum for it...

If you have ever been locked out of anywhere, maybe you know the feelings I'm describing. Maybe you've been locked out because your key stopped working. Or maybe you yourself have locked your own key inside. I've had that one happen, too, just last spring. I've had the experience of looking in the windows of my locked car, looking in the window at my car key, which is hanging from the ignition, while the car is running. (At this point in this sermon you are wondering what became of the responsible person you hoped to call as your pastor.)

Being locked out leaves you with bad feelings—with feelings of frustration, and isolation, with feelings of helplessness, even unworthiness. Even worse is when you are locked out not because of a faulty part, or your own flightiness, but because someone has changed the locks on you. Your key no longer works because you are not welcome in.

On the very opposite side of the spectrum, think about how it feels when you are given a key. Think about what that says, what that means, what that conveys, being given a key. Maybe it's a key you give to a child who is getting older. There's a sense of responsibility that is conferred, a confidence that they can let themselves in, keep an eye on themselves and on the home front for a while. Or maybe it's a key you give to someone you care for, someone who has become significant in your life. That's a pretty big step, that giving of the key; it conveys a sense of intimacy, and trust. Getting a key means you can get in, means you are in.

Jesus gives a key to Peter today. Jesus says, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven." There's a church tradition that recognizes this verse as Peter becoming the first head of the church. Certainly, Peter was a foundational part of the early Christian movement, a key leader in it, and the confession Peter makes just before it he gets the keys is crucial as well. Peter says, correctly identifying Jesus, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

But, of course, Peter wasn't without his less than stellar moments. He'd also looked through the window of his locked car at his keys in the ignition, in the distance he heard the cock crowing. Peter leads, and Peter fails. Peter is like any one of us. Peter's courageous announcements and his all-too-familiar fears and failures speak to us. When we see what Peter does and says, it makes us wonder: Would I—do I—deny Jesus? Do I know—who do I say—Jesus is? Peter speaks to us.

And so, when Jesus speaks to Peter, Jesus is also speaking to us. Who do you say that I am? When Jesus gives Peter the keys to the kingdom, Jesus is giving them to us as well. Like the keys we give to children and loved ones, when Jesus gives us the keys to the kingdom, it's a gesture packed with meaning. This giving of keys is a statement of confidence, and intimacy, and trust. Jesus is saying, "Here they are!" and "Blessed are you!" Jesus is saying "You can do this, you can bind and loose, you can be loving and forgiving, you can be a church!"

Because of Jesus, we are in. Jesus has loved us and forgiven us. Because of Jesus, we are in. Jesus is like that locksmith back in NYC that let me in, but we don't have to pay any hefty fee. The grace of God is completely free—freely offered to you and to me: the forgiveness of sins, the power to live a loving life. We get that, we are offered and reminded of that, right here, in this apartment of God. What a sense of relief and gratitude that brings. We're in. We have the keys.

We need to remember, though, that these keys are not like your usual set of keys. They're not exclusive, not one key for one lock for one person, and they're not used to lock other people out. Rather, I think the keys to the kingdom are like a particular kind of key that we have and use right here in church. I want to credit Marie Damask for prompting this thought. (Some of you know Marie—she and her husband Lloyd are often the first ones here, they get the coffee going and unlock the doors. Just recently Marie had a knee replaced, so while she's doing well, we might not see her for a bit as she recovers.)

So here's the story about Marie and what the keys to the kingdom are like. They're like this key. Have you seen or used one of these? I think it's called an Allen wrench. We have one hanging on a hook near, well, there's one hanging on an inside hook next about every door to this building, or there's one in the light switch cabinet by the door on Belle Plaine. Every one inside this place has access to this key. To use this kind of key, you stick it in the hole near the crash bar and depress it, then you give the key a turn, and the doors stay open. One Sunday morning, as Marie was opening the doors, I saw a Sunday School child come in and I heard Marie say to the child, "Do you see this key? This is the key that opens the door to any church anywhere."

She's absolutely right. And we all have access to it. We all have the keys of love and forgiveness. We have the keys to the kingdom. We can use these keys to open doors, and keep them open, so that everyone can be overwhelmed and overjoyed with gratitude and love by grace of God.