

"Keys of the Kingdom"

Ezekiel 33:7-11, Romans 13:8-14, Matthew 18:15-20

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..... I was thinking about these things and thought about having had the opportunity to be at the Vatican in Rome some time ago. The Vatican is amazing. I had never really seen a picture from above - I was surprised - it almost looks like a key hole from above. It is a beautiful place. As you approach the front of St. Peters Basilica you have to be taken with all of the statues And in particular the huge statues of Peter and Paul that flank the main entrance. I love the statue of Peter to the left of the entrance - it stands around 17 feet tall and when you get closer it is interesting to note what he is holding. KEYS! Even inside St. Peters Basilica you will find another statue - this one made of bronze - on high festival occasions they will even dress this statue and many will come to touch its toes which is all that is really reachable. But note again In his hand are the keys. Of course it makes sense Matthew 16:18-19 But, let me come back to that later.

I am glad to be back with you after having been gone for a couple of Sundays. It is always uplifting to be gathered together with the children of God To have the opportunity to hear and reflect on the word of God and to join with others as a family in listening to and praising God.

For me, some of the most important parts of this time together actually happens during the week as I have the privilege of listening closely to the Word of God in preparation for the sermon. Without that opportunity to reflect at length on the Word it is difficult for me to really hear much of the depth of what God says to us. And that Word is incredible.

Ezekiel is sent out with the word from God. He is told that the people need to hear it. It is important - it is a hard word to speak or to hear. But it is God's word - turn from your sin and live." Ezekiel is responsible for speaking the word. The people are responsible for listening and responding to that word. The question for the people and for the prophets was always What is the word from God. Sometimes it was a word of comfort - sometimes a word of judgement - sometimes forgiveness - sometimes guidance. But the fact that that word was from God was the key. Knowing the word from God was the critical element for their lives. Knowing, speaking, hearing, listening, responding. What is the word ... What is key? Walk with God and live.

Today, the Word from God again is critical. It is key to opening the way into the life that God wants for all of God's creation. To simply read through these scriptures one might not imagine that they are really all that significant - but, it seems to me that here is the key.

I came to this thought as I listened to the language of the Gospel text for today. The text is part of a longer teaching moment as Jesus tries to help the disciples understand what it means to be the church.

To be the church means to be a member of a community where you have the privilege of living among other A privilege that can often times be strained by the difficulties of relationships. But Jesus says, here is the key {PP Slide - KEY} - to bind and to loose - to chasten and to forgive.

To hear these words has to draw us back a couple of chapters to Matthew 16 when Jesus speaks directly to Peter to ask who Peter thinks that Jesus is. "You are the Christ - the Messiah." {Back to slide #5} And in response Jesus says - Right! You got it - now let me give you the Keys to the Kingdom! - in relationship don't forget to bind and loose. I give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven whatever you bind will be bound - whatever you loose will be loosed

There you have it. That's the key. {Key slide} Keys are important. We are always looking for the key to things. {Slide - keys - to unlock, open, allows us to enter, reveal a secret}. We are always looking for the password - the code - the way - the key. And Jesus just hands it to us.

So Did you hear it Did you see it Do you have the key. God doesn't want even the wicked to parish. Here is the key to unlock that door to life. Walk with God and live. Love one another and live - it is the master key that open the way to the fulfillment of all of the commandments. Love one another enough to talk to each other to guide and forgive - it will open the doors that we slam behind us as we struggle with living in relationships with each other.

The key is yours {Slide}. It is the key to the kingdom living as God's people today And walking as a child of for eternity.

I think that too often we talk about all of this church stuff as though it is so heavenly directed that we convince ourselves that it doesn't really have anything to do with the concerns we face in our everyday lives. But this is down home, practical, everyday stuff. You want to live as a child of God? You want to really experience the kind of life that God wants for you and me here and now? Pick up the keys and use them. Love God - love one another enough to confront and be confronted - love one another enough to forgive and be forgiven.

Let me share a few images at you to guide your reflection:

Comus, a Duke of Florence, had a saying that indicated the limitations of his religion: "You shall read that we are commanded to forgive our enemies, but you never read that we are commanded to forgive our friends."

In his book *The Great Divorce*, C. S. Lewis, the great Christian writer, draws a stark picture of hell. Hell is like a great, vast city, Lewis says, a city inhabited only at its outer edges, with rows and rows of empty houses in the middle. These houses in the middle are empty because everyone who once lived there has quarreled with the neighbors and moved. Then, they quarreled with the new neighbors and moved again, leaving the streets and the houses of their old neighborhoods

empty and barren. That, Lewis says, is how hell has gotten so large. It is empty at its center and inhabited only at the outer edges, because everyone chose distance instead of honest confrontation and forgiveness when it came to dealing with their relationships.

One of the wise folk sayings of the Russian people is this: Make peace with men, and make war with your sins." Unfortunately, we usually do the opposite!"

There was a church where the pastor and the minister of music were not getting along. As time went by, this began to spill over into the worship service. The first week the pastor preached on commitment and how we all should dedicate ourselves to the service of God. The music director led the song, "I Shall Not Be Moved." The second week the pastor preached on tithing and how we all should gladly give to the work of the Lord. The director led the song, "Jesus Paid it All." The third week the pastor preached on gossiping and how we should all watch our tongues. The music director led the song, "I Love to Tell the Story." With all this going on, the pastor became very disgusted over the situation and the following Sunday told the congregation that he was considering resigning. The musician led the song, "Oh Why Not Tonight?" As it came to pass, the pastor did indeed resign. The next week he informed the church that it was Jesus who led him there and it was Jesus who was taking him away. The music leader led the song, "What a Friend We Have in Jesus."

What is the key to life lived in the kingdom of God. Obviously we are not very good at walking with God in forgiveness and love. Walk with God - love one another enough to confront and be confronted / forgive and be forgiven. This key is given to us so that we might live in the Kingdom of God.

AMEN