

"The Key to Heaven"  
Matthew 16:13-20

August 27, 2017

12<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost

[Show a key.] Can you see what this is? It is a key. It is a very tiny piece of metal. It doesn't look very important. But, if your car is locked and it's raining, you really desire this little piece of metal. It can get you into the car and out of the rain. If you are ready to leave on vacation and you are going to leave your house and everything you own behind, you really desire this little piece of metal. It can keep out those who wish to rob you. A key, small and insignificant as it might appear, is very important because it has two very important jobs. It can open up things - cars, homes, and so on. And it can also lock up these things, too.

Our text for today talks about keys -- keys for the kingdom of heaven. Why do we need keys for heaven? The reason is because heaven is locked up. Why? Is it because God wishes to be all alone? Not at all. God doesn't want to be alone in heaven. He loves all people and wants all people to live with Him in heaven forever. Sin is the problem. God is a holy God and we are sinful people. We are born sinful in nature and we daily commit sinful actions. We sin against God by not obeying Him. We do the wrong and fail to do the right. We sin against others. We think things that hurt others. We say things that hurt others. We do things to hurt others. Our sin creates a wall of separation between us and other people as well as causing many problems and much suffering in our world.

But the worst thing that sin does is affect our relationship with God. Sin builds up a wall of separation between a holy God, Who cannot accept or tolerate sin, and us, who are, by nature, sinful and commit sin daily. This state of separation between God and us is bad enough now, but the situation gets worse after we die. Our sin locks up the kingdom of heaven, leaving us stuck on the outside looking in with no way to enter.

The only other option available is the door to hell and it is wide open. It is easily accessible and all sinners are headed for it. This leads to an eternity of sadness, punishment, and pain apart from God. Heaven offers an eternity of joy, peace, and contentment with God, but we are locked out. What is the solution?

Going back to the illustration of the key, if heaven is locked, then we need a "key". In our Gospel lesson for today, Jesus talks about "the keys of the kingdom of heaven". What are those keys? If sin locks up heaven, then the forgiveness of sin opens up heaven. Forgiveness of sins is the key to heaven.

But how do we get that "key"? Have you ever locked your keys in the car? It is a frustrating experience. What can you do? You could wish that you hadn't done it, but that doesn't help. You could try to get in by a different way without a key, such as using a clothes hanger through the window. However, with the advancement of car technology, that is getting harder and harder to do. There is only one solution. Someone else has to give you a key. In all my years of driving, I have never locked my keys in the car – until about a year ago when I locked them in the car twice in a single

week. Of course, I wished I hadn't done it, but that didn't get me in. I didn't even have a clothes hanger with me so there was no way for me to get in on my own. I simply called my wife and she was gracious enough to come down and bring me a key (and promise never to reveal my stupidity to anyone). With the key given to me, I was able to get in.

The same is true in our effort to enter a heaven locked tight because of our sin. We could wish that we didn't have sin or that heaven was open, but wishing doesn't make it so. We have sin and it bars us from heaven. We could try to gain entrance without the key of forgiveness. Some have tried to enter by a different way – through their good moral lives, their religious heritage, or their conviction that heaven is open to all, no matter what. However, like trying to get into one of today's cars with a clothes hanger, this becomes impossible to do. We need someone to give us the key of forgiveness to open up heaven for us.

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, obtained the forgiveness for all of our sins when He died on the cross. Jesus' resurrection to life is the proof and guarantee that this forgiveness has been secured. But how do we obtain that forgiveness? Every person who repents of their sin and trusts Jesus Christ has forgiveness. Each of you can silently confess your sins to God, ask for His forgiveness, and you will have it.

But sometimes it is easy to doubt that forgiveness. We want to see that forgiveness. For example, suppose you are broke and desperately need money. If I go to the bank, open an account in your name, and deposit \$1,000. Then I tell you, "Don't worry. I have put \$1,000 in the bank for you." You may believe me or you may doubt me because it seems too good to be true and you can't see the money. However, if I give you \$1,000 in cash, you are relieved because you can see the money.

In the same way, when Jesus died on the cross, He got all the forgiveness you and everyone else in the world needed. He tells you, "Don't worry. I forgive you and all of your sins." You may believe that or you may doubt. You may begin to wonder, "Does Jesus really love me? Does He really forgive me?" Perhaps you have done a really terrible sin that is plaguing your conscience and you feel very guilty. Years ago, an old man phoned me because he wanted to talk to me about something that was bothering him Jesus you are as Jesus you results saying Jesus as our sins are. As we talked, I could tell that he was very depressed and feeling guilty. When I inquired what it was that was troubling him so, he said it was because he had made some mistakes in 1929!

Perhaps you have done so many sins – either the same sin many times or a garden variety of different sins – that it raises the same doubts in you. You wonder, "Does Jesus really love me? Does He really forgive me?" You may begin to think, "My sin is too great. Jesus can't forgive me." Or, you may begin to think, "My sins are too many. Jesus won't forgive me." The end result is the same. You feel no comfort. You feel no peace. You want to see that forgiveness.

Jesus wants us to feel comfort and peace because our sins are forgiven. In our lesson, Jesus is talking to His disciples about the keys to heaven - the forgiveness of sins. Jesus says something truly amazing. Jesus says to His disciples, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in *heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.*" Notice what's going on here. Jesus is comparing sin with a burden that can either be bound to you and weigh you down or loosened from you and be taken away. In other words, sins can be retained or forgiven. The special power and authority – the key to heaven itself – belongs to Jesus. Here, He is giving this power and authority to His disciples and the Church which He would establish through them. By Jesus' own declaration, the Church has the right to open the kingdom of heaven to people who confess their sins and trust Jesus Christ. The Church also has the right to close and lock the kingdom of heaven to people who refuse to repent.

This happens here on Sunday. We confess our sins together and then I say, "I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." Notice what I said: I did not say, "God forgives your sins", but "I forgive your sins." Some people don't like that. People feel uncomfortable when the pastor says, "I forgive you." How is it possible for a man to forgive sins? When Jesus was here on earth, the same thing happened. One time, Jesus was at a dinner in the house of a Pharisee's and a sinful woman came in and began washing Jesus' feet with her hair to show her sorrow for her sins. Jesus said, "Your sins are forgiven (which is the Hebrew way of saying, "I forgive you your sins.")" The other people at the party began saying, "Who is this Jesus -- forgiving sins?"

Another time, Jesus was healing a paralyzed man. But first, Jesus said, "Your sins are forgiven." The Jewish religious leaders were angry and said, "Why does Jesus say those things? He is blaspheming God! Only God can forgive sins!" But Jesus had the right and authority to use the key to open up heaven and forgive sins. Why? Because He is God.

Jesus also has the right to give that key to heaven to anyone He wishes and it will work. Suppose I give you the key for my car. If you go out to my car and try to start the motor with my key, will it work? Or, will the car not start because it's not your car? If I give you the key and my permission, the car will work the same as if I did it myself. In the same way, if Jesus gives the key to heaven to His church, then the Church can forgive sins the same as if Jesus Himself was doing it.

When I stand up on Sunday and say, "I therefore forgive you all your sins", I am not speaking on my own behalf and with my own power. I am speaking on behalf of the Church and its with Jesus' power. These words effectively forgive your sins. It is not because I am holy or I have power within myself to forgive sins. His Word alone has power to forgive sin and I speak on His behalf. I say, "In the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ, and by His authority, I forgive you all your sins." These words are like a key that opens heaven to you.

That key can also close the kingdom to heaven to people. If a church member sins, our congregation has a responsibility to help that person see their sin and repent. If a member sins openly, we have a duty to warn that person. If the person continues sinning, refusing to repent and refusing to stop the sin, then our congregation must declare that his/her sins are not forgiven. That is a very sad duty called excommunication. This "key" closes and locks the way to heaven for such a person.

When Jesus gave the keys to the kingdom of heaven to His Church, that was a very serious responsibility. We must be very careful how we use those keys. Someone may say that a person can fool the pastor. He says he is sorry for his sins and confesses them, but inside he is not really sorry. Or, maybe the person sins secretly. What do we do? We accept his words. We can only judge actions. We cannot judge thoughts and feelings. God will judge those. Also, we don't want to be in a hurry to not forgive sins. Our job is not to gleefully punish bad sinners. Our job is to bring them the Good News about forgiveness. If we must retain sins and not forgive them, that is our last choice.

But even using that key can be helpful. If you sin and don't repent and I must lock the door to heaven by saying, "Your sins are not forgiven", that can be a "wake-up call" for you. It can help you wake up, see your sin and repent. If you repent and confess your sins, then I can open the door to heaven for you.

When you hear me say, "I forgive your sins, I am not speaking of forgiveness in general, but I am announcing forgiveness of each of you individually and personally. And you can believe those words. Luther wrote that when a pastor forgives sins, "this is just as valid and certain, even in heaven, as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us Himself." For it is God Who is speaking through me to comfort you and help you know that your sins are forgiven. There is no doubt, worry, or fear! Your sins are forgiven and you have peace with God.

So, what do you want? Do you want the door to heaven closed and locked for you or do you want the door to heaven open? Jesus gives the key to open the kingdom of heaven to His church. If guilt bothers you, come and confess your sins – privately to the pastor or with other Christians on Sunday morning. Consider your sins, repent, and believe Jesus' promise. Then, listen to me and I will forgive your sins. Jesus told His disciples, "When someone hears you, he is hearing me." When you hear me forgive your sins, you are hearing Jesus forgive your sin. Then you can leave church joyfully and at peace with God. The Kingdom of heaven is open for you! Amen.