

## **Proper 16 – August 21, 2011**

One of our high school people announced to me last week that he began driving. He was as proud and happy as could be! It got me thinking about my first car and when I first got a drivers license. It is, if memory serves me correctly, it was the first time I really had keys – keys to call my own, keys in my own possession, keys not only to a new car but to FREEDOM and the beginning of what it meant to feel like an adult. I was as free as a bird sprouting its wings ... and I was suddenly responsible for the care and maintenance of this car, part-time job so I could fill it with gas, driving responsibly and much more. With freedom came responsibility. A new set of keys suddenly made life a little more complex. I distinctly remember how I felt when I received that set of keys. I was excited and nervous, happy and frightened.

Can you imagine how Peter must have felt when Jesus gave him the keys? These were not just any keys. They were the keys to the kingdom. Peter makes the amazing declaration that Jesus is indeed the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. Once this declaration of faith rolls off of Peter's lips, Jesus blesses him and then sort of puts Peter in charge. He says "You are my rock and on this rock I will build my church." Jesus then says that he will give Peter the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Now, that sounds like quite a responsibility! Contrary to popular jokes it doesn't suggest that Peter stands at the pearly gates determining who is in and who is out. Instead, it applies to the exercise of leadership and authority in the church as we know it. I wonder how Peter felt when Jesus handed him these keys. Did he feel that the job Jesus gave him to do was a privilege? Did it go to his head? Did he get a little weak in the knees? I wonder if he asked himself, "What do I do with these keys?"

It isn't Peter alone who faced these questions. Generations of pastors and leaders after him have been entrusted with great responsibility of using the keys of the kingdom. In some ways, all of us in the Christian community are called to ministry. What does it mean? What are we to do with these keys? Well, let me try to put it as plainly as possible: It is to let the power of heaven rule in earthly things. *To let the power of heaven rule in earthly things.*

In other words, we are entrusted with the ministry of letting God's ways determine how we live as Christians and in Christian community and how we do ministry. To allow the activity of the living God fills our hearts, imaginations, wills motives, desires and decisions. How does that happen?

When Jesus explains that the ministry of the keys is about binding and loosing he is hearkening back to the tradition of the Rabbis. You see, rabbis were entrusted with the task of applying God's law –the Torah – to specific circumstances and situations. They had to determine when the law was bound and when it could be loosed. Since life is complicated, the intricacies of the law could not be applied in an absolute way in every circumstance. The law needed to be interpreted. When and in what circumstance is the law bound and when is it loosed? How does it apply in given situations – for the good of all involved and in ways that deeply honor God?

Jesus himself does this. He takes God's law so seriously that he binds it in ways that people had either forgotten or never before imagined. When he declares, "You have heard it said ... but, I say to you..." he is usually taking it a step further or, rather, deepening its function. So, for example, in saying "You shall not murder," he clarifies what it means by saying that if you are angry with another that is tantamount to killing. In affirming the great commandment to love neighbor he even extends that commandment to love of enemies. On the other hand, when Jesus "loosens the law," it is when he does things like helping people on the Sabbath. Yes, the law said that you could not heal on the Sabbath but Jesus went ahead and healed on the Sabbath anyway in order to help the one in need. Either way, binding or loosing, he confounds the scribes and Pharisees with something greater. As far as I can tell, this is what he is doing. Jesus is putting people first. Always putting people first ... putting human need and love of neighbor in the forefront. He makes mercy the heartbeat of God's law and reclaims love as its center. Jesus let the power of heaven rule in earthly things.

*Allowing the power of heaven to rule in earthly things.* That is our task and calling.

I've been thinking about this lately as I approach the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Ordination because Pastors have a specific ministry here in the realm of word and sacrament ministry, as do other leaders in the community and in some sense all of us and we all must ask: Do we allow the power of heaven to rule in earthly things? When do we get in the way? When have we been humble to allow the power of Jesus to have its sway? When we take ourselves too seriously the ministry to which we've been entrusted may take us on a power trip or we get enamored with control. When we don't take it seriously enough, we ignore, at our peril, our calling and commission. What do we do with the keys? How do we remain open and vulnerable to God's calling and let the power of heaven rule our lives?

I know of one congregation that was racked with conflict and it seemed that gossip was everyone's favorite spiritual exercise and in some instances bald faced lies intended to hurt others. It led church leaders into serious conversations with folks and it meant confronting a couple of the worst perpetrators, asking them to stop. The behavior was not acceptable and the door to such behavior needed to be shut and locked for good if the congregation was going to open or unlock the door to something healthier and holier. *It was a way of allowing the power of heaven to rule in earthly things.*

I know a Pastor who took a daring step one Sunday. A small congregation was situated in a very busy neighborhood filled with challenges for ministry. Yet, the church did nothing to reach out. They were exclusively inward focused. When they came to church one Sunday morning the doors were locked shut. Instead of going inside to worship, they went on a tour of the neighborhood to see who was in need and where they could extend the compassion of Jesus to their neighbors. It led to a period of great discernment and the establishment of a drop-in center and many other ministries to the community. *It was a way of allowing the power of heaven to rule in earthly things.*

I have a friend who spent years at a church near Seattle. The buildings that belonged to the congregation burned to the ground. It was the act of an arsonist. It wasn't long before the arsonist was identified and jailed. Naturally, you can understand the anger toward him in the face of this deep loss. Well, the leadership there took the bold step of ministering not just to the grieving congregation but to the arsonist himself. That led to some consternation and resistance, but over time they began to see their calling in a Christ like way of ministering to and loving the perpetrator which led to many visits in the prison and a kind of transformation of the community. You see, here the law of love was binding in a most intense and Jesus like way. *It was a way of allowing the power of heaven to rule in earthly things.*

How do we tap into this power? Well, as we know from our Gospel reading today with Peter, it is no power within us. Peter was no paragon of virtue or faithfulness. He wasn't all that clever or smart. He made the declaration that Jesus is Lord because it was revealed to him. "Blessed are you, Simon Peter for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven." It was revealed to him. Peter testified to what he knew.

And it is what we know. We know what Peter knew, the experience of the living God. What we know is, as St. Augustine once said, “The Kingdom of Heaven is built not from virtue, but from the forgiveness of sins.”

So we are called to listen. Called to bend our ear to the living God. Called to pay attention to the Holy one among. So, we turn again to this Table where we get to experience again the power of heaven ruling earthy things. May it be so among us. Amen.