

Matthew 16:13-20  
August 23, 2020

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen.

In our home, it seems one show, more than any other, is displayed upon the screen of our TV. 5 months ago, when forced to retreat to the confines of our homes, businesses closed, nowhere to go and little else to do we must have watched all 10 seasons of this show three to four times. That show is Friends.

In one season 8 episode, Chandler, recently married to Monica, decides it is high time he find out what his highly organized wife who meticulously keeps their New York apartment clean and tidy has been hiding behind a locked closet door she has vowed he can never enter, nor have the key to. He and his best friend Joey try and try but fail to gain access. One day, while Monica is gone, Chandler finally finds a way to open the closet door unlocking a side of Monica he, nor any of the other friends, ever knew existed. Inside the closet was a collection of miscellaneous odds and ends that were piled everywhere seemingly thrown in the closet with reckless abandonment, locked away from the world to see the cluttered mess it was.

I decided to switch things up a bit today inserting Eugene Petersons, *The Message*, translation of our gospel text rather than our standard translation from the *New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)*. That decision was the result of my own sense of seeing what was behind a locked door earlier this week. I was opened to a new understanding of God's living word in a way I perhaps had not noticed or heard before. However, instead of finding a disheveled pile of items no longer used, the Holy Spirit revealed joyous words of expansive promise, opportunity, identity, and freedom.

In past readings of this passage I have often found myself stumped asking questions such as, "What does Jesus mean when he names Peter a rock on which he will build his church?" Or just what are these keys of the kingdom of heaven Jesus gives Peter?

Or what is this binding and loosing on earth and heaven the church is now privy to through this exchange as in the NRSV Jesus states, “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” (v.19) These are tough questions that have been interpreted many ways and will continue to be debated among theologians and scholars. Truth be told, we may never know or fully understand in our earthly life. It is all too easy to get caught up in this age-old debate and perhaps lose sight on what God is doing in this passage. I do not mean to imply that these questions are not important or that we should not take time to carefully discern and discuss them. However, there comes a point in time when we may actually bind ourselves by becoming so absorbed with seeking the correct answer, of having control of what is right and what is wrong, that we may fail to truly see what is important, where God is at, who Jesus is, and what that means in our daily lives.

What unlocks this passage, what unlocks the new identity Jesus bestows Peter with, what unlocks the future of Christ’s church, what unlocks new opportunity and life, what unlocks new understandings and images of God’s kingdom, is the gift of knowledge and wisdom imparted to Peter and the disciples through the living God, Jesus’ father in heaven. Peter could have simply said, “You’re the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God” but, he does not. He states, “the Son of *the living God.*”

The addition of the word “living” is critical to unlocking what it means for the church to confess who the Triune God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It may seem odd that of all places, it is Caesarea Philippi in which Jesus takes his disciples and Peter’s profession of faith is a further epiphany into who Jesus truly is. This is, after all, gentile territory beyond the boundaries of Galilee in which Jesus’ ministry normally took place. It was a lush, fertile, and bountiful location that sat at the foot of Mount Hermon. A stream of fresh water that began within the recesses of a cave inside the mountain was the beginnings of and source of water for the Jordan River. Yet, Caesarea Philippi was also the home of pagan worship.

It was in this place the first king of Israel Jeroboam, the northern kingdom of God's people following a split nearly 1000 years prior, would lead the people into idolatry. It was in this place the Greek god Pan, thought to be a great seer and revealer of hidden wisdom, was located, and worshipped by the Romans. It was in this place that bore the name of Caesar, the title used by Roman Emperors, who were oft thought to sit in the place of God and ruled over the people with power, might, which often kept them locked within a life of poverty, inequality, and hopelessness. It was in this place Jesus comes, amongst stone idols, false promises, empty teaching, and unjust emperors, and once again unlocks the true teaching that gushes up from the living God who created this beautiful place abundant with resources, beauty, and vitality.

The God confessed by Peter who makes Godself known in Jesus Christ is not dead like the gods of old that have been worshipped on this mountain, but rather, is a God alive and on the loose in the world. The key to our understanding, insight, and confession of this God is the rock of Peter's confession, the rock of our confession, the rock on which the church is founded. It is the rock that unlocks the good news of this entire passage, "You are the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

It is this truth that unlocks who we truly are, gives us a new identity just as it did Peter. We are God's. We are children of the living God. We, too, are joined to Christ's church, "a church so expansive with energy that not even the gates of hell will be able to keep it out." We belong to the one body Paul speaks of to the church in Rome. This is pure grace. Sheer gift. Unearned. Freely granted through the source of all life who sent his Son into the world to unlock to all people the kingdom of heaven, the forgiveness of sin, and the unconditional love a father or mother has for his or her beloved children. This is the key that unlocks expansive possibilities, abundant opportunity, and the life-giving energy the Spirit unleashes on Christ's church in which not even the evil forces of the world will be able to stifle it.

Over these last several months, many of us have probably found ourselves resonating and reflecting on so many things. Wrestling with questions such as, "When will life as we once knew it return?" "How could God let all this happen?"

“How do we be the church in these uncertain times?” “Will our nation ever move beyond the divisiveness it finds itself in?” “Will all people be seen for who they truly are and no longer defined by the color of their skin, the person they love, the bars they are locked behind, the nations they come from that stretch beyond the borders of the country we live and love, their gender, age, clothes they wear or even the tattoos and piercings upon their skin?” These are important questions without easy answers.

Yet, if we truly believe the word of God has the ability to move mountains, do the impossible, transform our lives, free us from all sin and evil, open the door the kingdom of heaven and eternal life, reconcile us into the expansive love of God, then we have been given all the insight we need into how we, as the church of Christ founded on the rock of forgiveness, grace and love that sees beyond the disheveled lives and closets we all come with to see us as we truly are – children of the living God, is equipped and able to be the one body of Christ full of energy in the world in which we live. There will be no virus that can slow the mission of God we are joined to down. There will be no door which cannot be unlocked. There will be no identity we often label ourselves with, are heaped upon us by another, or we place upon another that will no longer define and bind us.

When we confess, with Peter, that Christ is the Lord. Jesus is the Son of the living God. Christ had died and Christ has risen. Christ is alive, let all people sing. When the Spirit instills in us the gift of faith, the power to believe, the eyes to see, the voices to proclaim, the hearts to love, the fruits of love, joy, peace, kindness, goodness, gentleness, self-control, faithfulness and forbearance we have all we need to unlock the door into the kingdom of God and be a people whose mission it is to live out, proclaim, work for, and be vessels of those very things that signal the kingdom of God are near as found on a banner before the building behind me in which the people of God have gathered for 125 years. They are -- protect the environment. Care for the poor. Forgive often. Reject racism. Fight for the powerless. Share earthly and spiritual resources. Embrace diversity. Enjoy this life!

Jesus is Lord, the Son of the living God. In him alone do we find life. In him alone do we find forgiveness. In him alone are we given the keys to unlock all that binds us. In him alone do we find who we truly are. In him alone we are joined to his church that not even the gates of hell will be able to derail. This is the word of God for the people of God. Amen.