

## **“Keys Of The Kindred”**

### **Matthew 16:13-20**

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi,  
he asked his disciples,

“Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”

And they said, “Some say John the Baptist,

but others Elijah,

and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”

He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?”

Simon Peter answered,

“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

And Jesus answered him,

“Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah!

For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you,  
but my Father in heaven.

And I tell you, you are Peter,

and on this rock I will build my church,

and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.

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.”

## **Keys Of The Kingdom**

Matthew 16:13-20

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### **I.**

For our last summer Sunday I would like to begin with a wee bit of heresy. Though a very real threat to the still coalescing 2nd century Christian church, the movement known as Gnosticism actually has roots which stretch back several centuries before Christ. More interesting, though, is that Gnosticism is still very much at work in our modern world, though in ways which are less obvious; unless, of course, you know where to look.

Named for the Greek word “gnosis, which translates as “knowledge, Gnosticism is a collection of religious ideas and systems which emphasized personal spiritual knowledge above the emerging orthodoxy, traditions, and authority of the early church. Gnostics considered material existence flawed or evil, and believed that the principal means of salvation to be *direct* knowledge of a hidden divinity, which was attained through mystical or esoteric insight. That is to say, secret knowledge.

### **II.**

Gnosticism, in one form or another, has proven itself to be quite popular over the centuries, including our own. Who doesn't love a good mystery and like to be in a secret? We *all* have the feeling that there is more going in the world than what we can see or are being told, and Gnosticism plays right into that hand. Understanding ourselves to be included among the relatively few who *really* know the score makes us feel powerful and serves to set us above everyone else. Which is always a nice feeling; just ask any conspiracy theorist.

Religiously, believing there is some kind of shortcut to salvation is more than enough motivation for us to spend our time and energy searching for it. Kind of like the attraction of flicking channels rather than actually watching a show or movie from start to finish. The mere pursuit of something makes us feel like we are getting somewhere, regardless of whether or not there is actually anything there to pursue.

### **III.**

Today's sermon text, Matthew 16:13-20, is a fruit of irresistible temptation for the Gnostic. This passage is most often and commonly understood as the moment Christ establishes the earthly church upon the rock that is Peter. For Roman Catholics, this establishes the line of Papal succession which serves to confer both power and authority to the church. Protestants go the other direction, however, understanding this to the occasion when the very onerous weight and responsibilities of the church universal are placed upon the very human shoulders of *all* the faithful.

In either interpretation, the rush to understand and connect the dots of our origin serves primarily to overshadow what it is that we, as the church, have been actually created and called to do. Namely, to bind or loose those things on earth which, correspondingly, will also be bound or loosed in heaven; the means of which are the "keys of the Kingdom."

### **IV.**

Unfortunately, the biblical record is woefully unhelpful in ascertaining the specifics of these "keys"; which, in and of itself, is odd. You don't just hand a teenager the car keys and say, "Go ahead, have at it." So, either the keys are used to access, operate and unlock things which are stunningly self-obvious, or somewhere there must exist a detailed user's manual; or, failing that and at the very least, a Quick-Start FAQ Sheet floating around.

Traditional orthodoxy takes the easy way. These "keys of the kingdom" are simply power and authority, in whatever form or forms. A Gnostic, however, would choose a different path. While I can make no claim that this was actually the case, historically, it is not a stretch to imagine that for the Gnostic such keys serve as a very tempting breadcrumb which leads the way to some deeper, hidden, and secret truth which grants to a mere few a power and authority unknown to most.

### **V.**

I spent a great deal of time this week thinking about these keys. The first thing to notice is that these are keys *of* the kingdom, rather than keys *to* the kingdom. While the former indicates a "belonging to" which conveys an

internal, all-accessibility, the latter indicates a simple “admittance” or the ability to operate from the external.

The second thing to notice is that there is more than one key; this could mean as few as two keys or, alternatively, a great many. While I don’t have a definitive answer, my gut tells me that rather than a couple of car keys (one to the ignition, one to the trunk) or house keys (one to the front door, one to the back) a better analogy is probably that big ring of keys which the school janitor always had hanging from their belt giving entry and access to every room, door, cupboard, and closet in the building. If you have ever seen such a ring of keys and wondered about the mysteries it unlocked, then you, too, might be a Gnostic.

## **VI.**

Holding that thought for a moment, I would like to tell you a quick story from my week. On Tuesday, I was rushing from one thing to the next and trying to get out the door to go visit some folks in the hospital and nursing home when I noticed the most recent edition of the daily devotional “These Days” had arrived and was sitting there on Lynne’s desk. The minimum order for a subscription is 10 copies, though to my knowledge only two people in the congregation currently avail themselves of it.

So, every two months we put eight copies on the table outside the sanctuary under the Deacon and Elder boxes, and mail one copy to Melba out in Montana with the other copy going to Betsy Robinson. Betsy would always walk down to the church when she was the lady about town, but the past few years I have enjoyed dropping them off to her at her house. Seeing them there I said, “Yeah, I’ve got time for that on the way to the hospital.”

## **VII.**

Always trying to fit in one more thing, I pulled into Betsy’s driveway, left the truck running and the door open, and climbed the steps to her house with the intent of simply dropping off her copy of “These Days” and, then, quickly be on my way. Places to go, people to see, things to do. When I knocked, Betsy was at her kitchen table, with a big window overlooking the river. We talked a bit while I stood, then I took a seat and we talked some more, then I said, “Give me a minute” and I went out, shut off the truck, closed the door, returned to my seat and proceeded to have a wonderful visit.

Anytime you can visit with Betsy Robinson it is the smart play, regardless of how much you have to do or how little time you have. As always, we talked about a great many things. As always, it did not take very long for me to remember that Betsy is a remarkable woman; generous, humble, adventuresome, unflappable, kind, wise, and disciplined in her spiritual journey; the current copy of “These Days” was sitting right on the table beside her bible.

## VIII.

Betsy Robinson, now in her early 90s, is also just *chock* full of stories. As is my custom, I caught Betsy up with what is going on at the church. Just an hour earlier I had completed an application for a “Use Variance” to the village Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA) so that we could site a new digital sign (EMC) which is not a permitted use in our zone. The current sign shares the same brick as the Christian Education wing, which I thought had been erected in 1950. However, she corrected me saying it was built in 1960. I was about to ask her if she was sure, when I realized, “Oh yeah, she was *there*.”

Which led us to a conversation about what the church was like back in the day when there were so many kids in church school that the church made the HUGE decision that an addition needed to be built. She said, lots of people helped, but Inez Butterfield ran the kitchen, and I ran the church school. Meaning, to whatever degree, we have Betsy to thank for the building we now enjoy; along with Inez a whole lot of other people.

## IX.

Returning, now, to the Keys of the Kingdom, rather than focus on the exact nature of these keys, or the specific number, I would like to suggest that we operate under the assumption that we have *all* the keys, to open *any* door, along with the accompanying and requisite power and authority to do *anything*...that we *choose* to do. While an argument may certainly be made that as the church, this is our *responsibility*, I would propose, instead, that we just start by seeing these Keys as an opportunity and our great privilege.

As followers of Christ, as the church, we have been given everything necessary to be *of* the kingdom such that we might shape, alter, bolster and create the Kingdom of God here on earth; and, in doing so, *literally* change the world. I can tell you right now, the addition of the Christian Education

building certainly changed *our* little corner of the world through Sunday School, bible studies, meetings, congregational dinners, nursery, dances, community events and coffee hours.

## **X.**

As it turns out, the Gnostics are 100% correct about a few things. There *is*, in fact, some secret knowledge beyond what we can see or are being told; and, ingeniously, it is hidden in plain sight right here in front of our noses. Gnostics are also correct that we *can* discover a direct knowledge of the divine which remains hidden to most. We do so through the mystical and esoteric insights derived from getting off our...couches, out of our ruts, and getting into the game which is our life together.

We do so by actually *using* the Keys of the Kingdom which have been given to us, each of us. They aren't hanging on the wall somewhere, they are housed in our hearts, and our minds and, most importantly, in our imaginations. What do we imagine our church to be? We do we imagine our world to be?

## **XI.**

For Betsy, Inez, and a host of our forebears in faith, it was kids cared for, a community served, and a congregation with the necessary space to work together, share our lives with one another, and serve our God with glad and joyful hearts. This morning, on summer's final Sunday, the Canton and Brick Chapel Churches *each* find themselves at a movement of epic imagining about what they will choose to do next with the Keys of the Kingdom which have been, respectively, given to them. While the folks on the Park may not yet have fully caught on to this, the folks at the Chapel are acutely and unavoidably aware.

The town church is in the midst of a changing of the guard; the people are there but the question is who, specifically, will fill the roles? The country church has few to whom the keys might be turned over, so the question becomes do we strive to preserve the past, or is it possible to move into the future in some new way?

## **XII.**

In the centuries that have elapsed since Jesus first handed over the Keys of the Kingdom to Peter, the church has unfortunately become ever more concerned with orthodoxy, traditions, and authority rather than unraveling the mystery and sharing the secret of all the doors we might unlock and the things we might do by being a little more Gnostic in our approach by emphasizing the importance and role *personal* spiritual knowledge. The kind of spiritual knowledge that comes from frequent prayer, daily devotion, dedicated service, and a life-long hope.

If you want to know what this looks like, go have a visit with Betsy Robinson. She will help you in discovering the secret knowledge that is right there, under your own nose, all the time, hiding in plain sight. We each have the power to bind and the power to loose. Amen.