

“The Keys to the Kingdom”

August 30, 2020

Matthew 16: 13-20

A Sermon Preached by Reverend Debbie S. Osterhoudt

When I was in high school, I applied for and was awarded a scholarship with American Field Service (an exchange program affiliated with the Red Cross); a scholarship which would afford me the opportunity to become an exchange student living with a host family somewhere in the world for the summer before my senior year. When applying for the scholarship, you had to indicate which hemisphere you were interested in experiencing. Because I had been studying Spanish, I chose the southern hemisphere, assuming I would be spending my summer in South America. To my surprise, I was matched with a host family in Sri Lanka, a tiny island country located off the southern tip of India. My host family members were practicing Muslims, living in the capital city of Columbo; they were a wealthy family and prominent leaders in the country – the father having been the mayor of the capital city at one time. So, as soon as my junior year in high school ended, I boarded a plane in New York City and off I went to spend the summer thousands of miles away from home.

One weekend during my stay in Sri Lanka, my host family wanted to show me the interior mountains of the island, by visiting a coffee plantation which was owned by an extended family member. One evening, at sunset, I was traveling in back of a flatbed truck, touring the plantation. My traveling companions were my host sister who was Muslim, a Hindu house servant, and a Buddhist friend of the family. As we enjoyed the incredible sunset spread around us amidst that lush coffee estate, the Buddhist friend asked me to share what I believed about Jesus Christ. I was accustomed to talking about my faith in church or with my immediate family, so I was taken off guard by the question of religion in a culture which was, in every way, so very different from my own. I began by trying to repeat all that I had learned in Sunday School. Frustrated with my stilted, parroted reply, he interrupted me and asked, “But I want to know who *you* believe Jesus Christ is.” I answered the best I could, but now, some 4 plus decades later, I am still pondering the question as I continue my journey in faith. Who do you say that Jesus Christ is? Does he make a difference in how I choose to live my life?

I am a member of our presbytery’s Candidates Committee. It is our responsibility to journey with and mentor folks who are considering the vocation of ordained ministry. During that 3 year candidacy process the

students are asked many questions, but the most important/crucial questions we ask them to answer are “Do you love Jesus? Who is Jesus Christ for you?” How we answer that question will define and shape our lives and our ministries.

Jesus asks the very same question of Peter in this morning’s scripture reading from Matthew’s gospel. As we read this morning’s narrative, I would invite you to consider how you would answer the question – Who is Jesus Christ for you?

Prayer for Understanding:

God our helper, by your Holy Spirit open our minds, that as the scriptures are read and your Word proclaimed, we may be led into your truth and discover your will, for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord and the ministry to which he calls each of us.

Read Matthew 16: 13-20

Jesus and his disciples have just come into the district of Caesarea Philippi, a town erected in honor of one of the Roman emperors, trailing miracles behind them: the feeding of the five thousand, the calming of a storm at sea, the healing of the blind and the deaf and those possessed by

evil spirits. Jesus has not only been healing, but teaching as well. Lessons about how we are to demonstrate our love, not just talk about it. Every now and then Jesus will pause and ask the disciples questions to discern if they are listening and truly getting it; how well they have understood him.

As Jesus and his disciples take a new path on their journey together – we are told that Jesus has now set his face toward Jerusalem and his ultimate destiny which will result in his death - Jesus pauses in the middle of the road and asks: Who do people say that I am? This is an easy quiz and the disciples are ready for the answer: John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah – repeating what they have learned in Sunday School. But the quiz isn't over. Jesus looks at them and says, “But I am not interested in who others say I am. Who do you say that I am?” That's the thing about faith – you cannot simply recite what every one else says. At some point in our faith journeys we have to answer the question of our personal relationship with Christ Jesus.

Peter, bless his soul, is quick to respond, “Why you are the Christ, the son of the living God!” Thank goodness for Peter – he was the first disciple to drop his nets and follow Jesus, the one who desperately wants to follow Jesus by walking on water, the first to volunteer his opinion on just about any subject. He wasn't perfect. He didn't have it all figured out. There was

plenty he did not know or understand. He was constantly wanting, in his passion, to control Jesus' agenda. But he was faithful, reflective about his own shortcomings, and willing to change and admit his faults.

Apparently, Jesus liked Peter's answer, because he declared him to be the rock upon which Christ's church would be built. Christ's church would be built upon the faithfulness of people like Peter, and you and I today, and our willingness to try and live into the profession of faith that Jesus Christ is Lord of our lives and son of the living God. But Jesus does something even more remarkable. He gives to Peter the keys to his kingdom. And this is part two of this morning's story. First, a public profession of faith that Jesus is Lord of our lives. Second, now what are you going to do about it? To signify this transfer of authority from Jesus to Peter, or from Jesus to the church, Jesus gives Peter a set of keys.

Now think about that for a moment. Do you remember the first time a parent gave you the keys to a car? I can remember the day I got my driver's license and my father handed me the keys to our old baby blue, battered family station wagon. I was just going to the grocery store down the road, when he entrusted that key to me, but I was awed with the responsibility that the key in my hand represented. The key was symbolic of my father's trust and confidence in me to take care of the family car. A few years later, I

would take that responsibility a little flippantly and drive too fast and wreck the car.

Jesus is giving to Peter the keys to the kingdom of God. With the public profession of faith that Jesus is Lord of our lives and the son of the living God, comes an awesome responsibility to make right choices – choices that will further the kingdom of God here on earth. Jesus trusts us with the care and furtherance of God’s kingdom here on earth. We can take our public professions of faith lightly, think they don’t really matter in how we chose to live our lives, and irresponsibly wreck what has been entrusted to us; which, by the way, affects not only ourselves but the lives of those around us.

Those same keys which have tremendous corresponding authority and responsibility have been passed down to us – to those of us who have stood before some gathering of folks and made a public profession of faith. The question becomes, what will we do with those keys? Use them to open doors, or to shut out and shut down.

I, for one, am glad that Jesus entrusted the keys of heaven to Peter. Someone like him might understand someone like me – someone who finds all the answers hard to come by; who finds it easier at times to repeat other people’s answers than wrestle with my own; someone who tries, but

sometimes sinks in my efforts to follow Jesus; someone who isn't always focused on what Jesus has in store for me up ahead; one who even though I love Jesus, sometimes makes wrong choices. If Peter is the rock upon which the church is built, then there is hope for all of us, because he is one of us. Peter shows us that blessedness is less about perfection than about willingness; to risk our answers, to go ahead and try, to get up one more time when we fall, to try again and again to live as though Jesus is indeed the Lord of our lives. And upon this rock, even the very powers of death shall not prevail.

Back to my Sri Lanka story. I finally answered my friends. For me to say that Jesus is my Lord, the son of the living God, reflects a commitment to live as he would have me to live. Later in the gospel of Matthew, chapter 22, Jesus will be asked to name God's greatest commandment. Jesus reduces the Jewish law and God's commandments down into one great commandment – You shall love God with your whole being – heart, mind, and soul; and you shall love your neighbor (not just some of them, but all of them) as yourself. You cannot love God without loving self and neighbor; you cannot love self without loving neighbor and God; you cannot love neighbor without loving self and God. These three – God, self and neighbor are woven together in a fabric of love. To hold the keys to the kingdom of

heaven which Jesus the Christ entrusts to us, means that we pursue this goal of love in our lives. This is at the heart of what it means to profess Jesus as Lord and Savior. That is how I ultimately answered my Sri Lankan friends and that is the profession of faith which has shaped my life choices. How would you answer the question, “Who is Jesus Christ for you? How has it shaped and continues to shape your life?”