

Park Hill United Methodist Church
“THE KEYS OF THE KINGDOM”
August 24, 2008 - Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost
Rev. John L. Thompson
Matthew 16:13-20

The world we live in would be an immeasurably poorer place were it not for those who call forth the gifts that are in other people. They challenge us to rise above our own expectations. Our ability to see good in others is merely a reflection of God’s discerning ways. God knows all about us, our strengths and our weaknesses. God is able to call forth the gifts in us that others may not see.

A characteristic of truly good people is that they can bring out the best in other people. Real goodness is contagious in two ways. The good person always **looks for the best** in other people, and the good person always models the best **for** other people. Goodness has a way of calling forth goodness in the lives of others.

Jesus was completely aware of Peter’s faults. He knew Peter was impulsive and frequently immature. But he also knew Peter’s potential. Trusting this knowledge, Jesus challenged Peter to become the leader of the early church.

A middle-aged man took his father to the hospital for a short stay. When his dad gave him his valuables to keep, he noticed there were only two keys on his key chain; one for his apartment and one for his car. The son remembered when his father had many keys - - a pocketful of mysterious keys that to a child were proof of his father’s importance. Now he reflected on how simple his aging father’s life had become. He needed only two keys. Today keys are being replaced by electronic devices. In many instances the electronic device is built in, in which case you only need a good memory. If keys are ever completely obsolete, something wonderful will be lost. The key has always been a useful metaphor. **“She has the key to his heart.” “Watson, I think I’ve found the key to unlock this mystery.”** Even Jesus spoke of keys.

The district of Caesarea Philippi is about as far north as Jesus is known to have traveled. This is not to be confused with the coastal city of Caesarea. Caesarea Philippi was located far above the Sea of Galilee at one of the sources of the Jordan River. Far removed from the crowds Jesus asked the disciples an important question, **“Who are people saying I am?”** They reported on what people were saying. Then Jesus asked, **“Who do you say I am?”** Simon Peter answered, **“You are the Christ (the Messiah), the Son of the living God.”** Jesus said, **“Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah (son of Jonah)! For flesh and blood (human sources) did not reveal this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.”**

The next three verses are probably the most controversial passage in the Bible among Christians, because some fervently believe Jesus was inaugurating Peter as the first pope of the Roman Catholic Church, while others believe Jesus was founding his church on Peter’s spoken confession of faith. **“Peter”** is a Greek noun for **“rock,”** and corresponds to the Aramaic **“Cephas.”** This was a nickname given Peter by Jesus. But Peter was not rock-like, rather he was impulsive, unpredictable, and often undependable. Jesus may have used the nickname, **“rock,”** with affectionate irony, or he may have used it as a promise of what Simon was to become. At any rate, Jesus indicated that this was the **“rock”** upon which he would build his church, and gave Peter **“the keys of the kingdom of heaven,”** keys being a symbol of authority.

Have you ever had a church key? Some of you, probably the guys with questionable backgrounds, may be thinking of a little device for opening beer cans that has a long tradition of being known as a

“**church key.**” Others of you may actually have a key to the church. The common wisdom is that a church needs to have all its locks changed every few years because of the short time it takes for half of the members of the congregation to have their own keys!

Whoever has the authority in a given congregation, is the person who has the most keys. There is an important sense in which we all have at least one key to the kingdom of God. A key does not always mean authority, but it always means access and someone nearby may have the key we need. Leslie Weatherhead told of wanting to see a house that was for sale. The house was empty, the doors were locked, and the windows were tightly fastened. By walking around the house he could get some idea of its general plan, but only the vaguest idea of the inner design and floor plan. Then Weatherhead noticed a card in the window of a downstairs room. On the card were the words: “**Key Next Door.**” He went next door, obtained the key, returned and entered the house. All that had been obscured was made plain. The beauty and design of the house could be clearly seen. Weatherhead said that we often only “*know in part,*” but someone as nearby as next door may have the key that opens up and reveals everything.

The Christian community is filled with spiritual gifts. Even if we have not yet discovered our specific gifts, it is certain that each of us has them. Spiritual gifts are to be used in serving and blessing others. Each person’s gift is like a key that can open up the love of God, or the will of God, or the power of God for someone else. To know this is true, all we have to do is remember the people who have unlocked the mysteries of God’s love and grace for us.

The keys that unlock the blessings of the kingdom for us do not always come in the form of pleasant experiences. Spiritual growth, like every kind of growth, never follows a perfectly smooth and easy path. Sometimes the truth we desperately need is difficult for us to accept. This does not make it any less important as a key to a new and different future.

Hannah Green wrote a novel about a sixteen-year-old girl named Deborah. The teen-ager had retreated into madness rather than face the conflicted life around her and within her. A superb therapist, Dr. Fried, forged an alliance with the healthy part of the young woman and together they made slow progress back toward the real world. At one point early in their relationship, Dr. Fried said this to her young patient: “**Look here . . . I never promised you a rose garden. I never promised you perfect justice . . . and I never promised you peace of happiness. My help is so you can be free to fight for all of these things. The only reality I offer is challenge, and being well is being free to accept it or not at whatever level you are capable. I never promise lies, and the rose-garden world of perfection is a lie . . . and a bore, too.**”

Who do we say he is? He is the Christ, the Son of the living God. He graciously shares his power and his love with us, and calls us to follow him in serving the kingdom of God in the world all about us.

Who do we say he is? Fred Craddock answered the question this way: “**Jesus is the one who came to reveal God. When you think of it that way, the gospel becomes a rather beautiful and comforting story, because this man, Jesus, was so caring and gentle, going around teaching and preaching and healing. He was a blessing to everybody he met, regardless of who they were. So we can say to ourselves, ‘This is the way God is; not cruel and judging and harsh, but caring and lifting and loving. It’s a beautiful thing to believe in such a God.’”**

Human beings are, in some ways, like computers. The physical hardware is pretty much the same for all of us, but the psychological software is very different. Children who are programmed to think poorly of themselves will usually behave accordingly. Children with a lot of positive input are likely to live up to those expectations. Seeing the possibilities in other people is the first step in helping them fulfill their God-given potential.

I would love to be your pastor, to help you who are perceptive in seeing the spiritual gifts of other people. I would love for this to be your church, where you receive the Keys of the Kingdom.
