

There is a proverb, of unknown origin that says:  
"To every person is given the key to the gates of heaven; the same key opens the gates of hell."

Today we hear about what might look to us to be a strange encounter between Jesus, and Peter and the disciples. In that exchange, we are confronted with the central question of the Gospel, "Who is Jesus?"

We Americans are the most individualistic people in all of history. From early on we are trained, coached, and expected to go out and make an identity for ourselves. In Mediterranean culture, one's identity is defined by the members of the group to which one belongs. So, it isn't unusual for Jesus to ask his disciples what others were saying about his identity, or to ask his disciples what they thought.

This is where Peter steps in, and speaks for all of the apostles: the Messiah, the Son of the living God, that's who you are. Jesus knows that they don't yet fully understand what it really means to be the Messiah, and they won't know until after he dies, is raised from the dead, and ascends into heaven.

But Peter is rewarded for his proclamation, something not of his own making but of the Father, with the keys to the kingdom and the power to bind and loose.

Keys . . . we all have them . . . we don't often give them much thought, unless we've misplaced them. We all use them, in some form or other. Things that used to require keys, like access doors or even our cars, now have key-fob's. Doors and garage door openers now take advantage of key-pads. Who leaves the house without keys?

Controlling keys is the sign of authority. The key, in whatever form, actual or metaphorical, symbolizes jurisdiction, whoever is in legal control. Jesus tells Peter in the Gospel today, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven." No physical keys were ever actually exchanged.

[Father Patrick, could you join me here at the Ambo?]

Meantime, I have to tell you that one of my earliest memories is centered around a key. When I was a toddler, we lived upstairs from my Grandma in an older house in West Allis. All the inside doors used skeleton keys. My uncle also lived downstairs, and used to babysit me. He would hear me when I got out of bed before my parents, and would come up the stairs and talk to me through the locked door. The key was always in the lock on the inside. He would slide the "funny papers" under the door and tell me to take the key out of the lock, put it on the paper. Then he'd slide the key under, unlock the door, and we'd go downstairs and have a grand time. Gave my parents fits. For me, a first experience was that keys opened doors to adventure.

[HANDCUFF THE PASTOR and invite him to return to his chair]

Keys have two functions. First:

- They CLOSE. They lock out. They lock up. They bind.
- They can be a part of punishment in that they take away someone's freedom. This is done to keep us safe, to protect us.

- They protect our property or our home.

The second function of keys is that they UNLOCK. They OPEN. They ENABLE.

- Keys give us access – they let us pass. They let other people in, if they have the right key.
- They give us mobility – the keys to the car.
- They give freedom to those who are locked up.

I've had some experience with keys of all kinds. Keys were a major part of my work in the jail and as a deputy sheriff. Whoever has the keys has the power and the authority. Whoever has the keys has the ability to decide the rules or enforce the rules.

Back when I was teaching, I invited Stan York, CEO of the Winnebago Mental Health Center, near Oshkosh, to address my students on the topic of leadership. Winnebago is part detention facility and part mental health center. It's a secure facility. Stan told us that because there were no uniforms, it was difficult for visitors to tell the staff from the residents. The one sure way you could tell the difference was: keys! The more keys you had, the more power you had. And at that point he pulled a huge ring of keys out of his bag, an indication of how much power he actually had.

Metaphorically, keys that bind can come in many forms. We don't always need a physical key to lock people out. We do this quite easily with our biases and our stereotypes; through blatant or subtle discrimination; by degrading attitudes toward others, usually fueled by fear, often fear of those who we perceive as "other than." Keys can represent the withholding of resources, or the denial of access to goods and services. They can represent closing our minds to new or different ideas or change, or even growth.

[REMINDE THE PASTOR HE CAN TRY TO TAKE THEM OFF ANY TIME]

In giving Peter the keys to the kingdom, Jesus is giving Peter and the Apostles the responsibility to open doors as he had done all through his ministry. Peter and the Apostles were sent forth to be leaders, not just authority figures. The Church which Jesus will build, on Peter the Rock, is not Peter's church. Jesus says, ". . . I will build **my** church." It is this church that will welcome the outcast and the sinner. And notice, Jesus doesn't choose a known religious leader of his time for this mission, he works through Peter, portrayed in the gospels as the most human of all the apostles. One minute he gets it, the next minute he's being rebuked by Jesus (stay tuned next week). At one point he's on the Mount of Transfiguration with Moses and Elijah, at another he denies Jesus three times.

Peter still needed to grow in his own understanding and faith, just like you and me. The people God chooses for leadership and authority are fallible humans who have as much need of conversion as all of us. Religious leadership is a sacred trust, not to be assumed by anyone, but received, accepted as a responsibility conferred by God. Religious leaders are chosen from among the people, appointed by God and accountable to God for the spiritual well-being of the people. Good religious leaders are

really servants of the people. In the first reading we heard how those who break that trust are removed and replaced.

The challenge for those not in leadership is to be able to recognize and acknowledge the humanness of our leaders, because it is common for us to have unreasonable, **higher-than** expectations of them. We can sometimes think we are the only ones who have needs and opinions, and that the focus of our leaders should be us and our needs, and that they should take care of us right now, should agree with what and how we believe things should happen or look like.

Remember, all through the scriptures and even today, God works through those who are weak so there's really no question about where any success they experience might come from. It also makes it clear that we can't use our own weakness as an excuse for not being committed to the service of God and others.

We actually hold a lot of keys ourselves, each and every one of us. We have the power to open and invite in, or lock and close out. We can enable, and we can prevent. We can open our minds and hearts or we can close them off. We loosen and we bind.

[INVITE THE PASTOR TO COME FORWARD ONCE AGAIN]

Sometimes we need others to unbind us.

It's just a matter of going to someone with the right key.

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What keys to you hold?

Do they Open or do they Close?