

Good Sunday morning from a cool, partly sunny, slightly cloudy hill in Rockport.....

‘Do not look back on happiness -- or dream of it in the future.
You are only sure of today; do not let yourself be cheated out of it.
If you can eat today, enjoy the sunlight today.....
May every sunrise hold more promise, every morning more peace....
No matter what looms ahead, if you can mix good cheer with friends today,
enjoy it and bless God for it.’”

~ words of Henry Ward Beecher, American congregationalist, clergyman, social reformer, and speaker known for his support of the abolition of slavery, and his emphasis on God’s love. He lived from 1813 to 1887.

I hope each of us can hold onto Beecher’s words as we go forward into a very uncertain future. “No matter what looms ahead,” we can enjoy ice cream together this afternoon!

Join us at 3 p.m. today as we come together (safely!) to share in another ice cream sandwich social. I know we all enjoyed our time together, safely in masks and from short distances, in July at our first ice cream gathering! Please remember these important guidelines again this afternoon.....

Blessings to all this cool Sunday morning of late Summer..... Susan

p.s. I will download this morning’s scripture reading and sermon to my Facebook page shortly: [freerangepastor](#) for anyone who wants to tune in..... and I believe Margie is also downloading my sermon to Federated’s Facebook page....

p.p.s. A few of you have taken me up on my offer to come chat with you in your yard or open garage, on your porch or deck, etc..... wearing one of my many masks, bringing my own libation, and carrying my own lawn chair.... and maybe bug net, too! Be in touch if you’re interested – call me at 207-322-1948 or send me an e-mail to freerangepastor@gmail.com.....

p.p.p.s *Thank you to those of you who send me your e-mail responses to my writings. I don’t always get a chance to write back to each one of you, but I appreciate all your responses! They keep me motivated to keep writing.....*

**A simple online worship service for Sunday, August 23, 2020
as prepared by Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet
Pastor of the Federated Church of Thomaston**

A Call to Worship

If not for God,
we would be searching for a purpose in lots of dead-end places.
If not for God,
we would be burdened with the idea that all of this life is up to us.
If not for God,
we would look at the hard and mean things and say,
“That’s the end of the story.”
Even though we worship today through cyberspace,
we tell God’s story and receive renewed
purpose, release, and hope. Amen.

A Prayer for Today -- “Enough”

Worry and stress are not hard for us, God,
we do them without thinking.
There is always the potential of threat
to our security, our comfort, our health,
our relationships, our lives,
and we foolishly think that we could silence the fear –
if we just had enough money, enough insurance,
enough toys, enough stored away for a rainy day.
It’s never enough, though;
the voice of our fear will not be dismissed so easily.
But in the small, silent places within us is another voice;
one that beckons us into the foolishness of faith –
that points our gaze to the birds and flowers,
that, in unguided moments, lets our muscles relax,
and our hearts lean into loved ones.
In unexpected whispers we hear it,
calling us to remember your promises, your grace,
your faithfulness;
and suddenly, we discover that it is enough.
Amen.

~ By John Van De Laar, appears in *Weavings*, Vol. XXV, Num. 4

A Reading of Scripture – Matthew 16:13-20

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do you 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.” Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

A sermon based on Matthew 16:13-20
“the keys of the kingdom of heaven”

Will you pray with me. God of prophets and doubters, key holders and key losers, show us how to get into your household. Help us to unlock our private closets of fear and mistrust and walk into your open home which has no locked doors. Amen.

Have you ever locked yourself out of your house or your car? I think in my lifetime, of seventy-two years as of day after tomorrow – which is SO hard to believe, I’ve done that about ten times. I’ve either locked the keys inside the car, or forgotten the keys when I’ve left the house. Fortunately, I’ve always gotten back in the car, because I’ve been a loyal AAA member for over forty years, or because I’ve left a key outside the house hidden in some likely place, like under the front door mat or under a rock by the front door. I’ve never been completely locked out of my car or house. I have always had a way to get in – one way or the other.

Our passage from Matthew this morning talks about Jesus giving Peter “the keys of the kingdom of heaven.” (Matt 16:19) It is important to note that while this “episode is found in all of the Synoptic Gospels [meaning Matthew, Mark and Luke] and in [a slightly different form] in John 6:66-69, there is something distinctive about the way that Matthew handles this episode.

Matthew alone has the verses of 16:17-19, the verses that connect Peter’s confession of Jesus as Messiah and Son of God with the church. This is one of the only two occurrences of the word *church* in the Gospels, along with Matthew 18:17. The church, it appears, is the gathering that is linked to this confession of

Jesus as Messiah, Son of God. The church is that group that is able to say aloud [to Jesus, with Peter] ‘You are the Messiah, the Son of God.’”¹¹ What distinguishes people who call themselves Christians, from people of other faith traditions or no faith tradition at all, is they profess that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. Many of us, most of us, in our church would make that profession in one form or another, I believe.

It seems likely that Matthew added these verses to what Jesus probably said to Peter. Remember always, Jesus was born a Jew, lived a Jew, and died a Jew. He was not a Christian because there was no Christian church in Jesus’ lifetime. The Christian church was born after Jesus died. But that doesn’t mean that verses 16 through 19 of our reading for this morning aren’t important. They’re very valuable, it seems to me, whether Jesus said them, or Matthew added them to Jesus’ words. For the keys of the kingdom, or *to* the kingdom in some translations, are of great consequence for us to consider.

When you think of “keys,” what comes into your mind? If we were together this morning, I’d ask you to tell me. But since we’re not together in person, I’ll tell you what comes to mind when I think of keys. When I first considered this passage, I wasn’t imagining unlocking doors at all. I was thinking of keys as a number of steps or conditions or ways to become faithful people – as in “here’s the things you do or ways you behave if you choose to consider yourself a person of faith, a Christian.” Here are the “keys” to faith. When I first read this passage, I heard Jesus saying to Peter, “Here’s how you are to behave and how you are to teach others to behave if you want to be my followers.”

But taking the passage more literally, it means using keys to keep people out or let them into the kingdom of heaven, or the kingdom of God. Holding the keys, as Matthew probably wants to imply, means Peter is being called to become the gatekeeper of heaven, the leader of the Christian church. Holding the keys to the kingdom *can* mean you have a lot of power over other people and their futures.

At this point, I’d like to ask Jesus, “Which did Matthew mean? Keeping people out or letting them in, or advising them as to the best behaviors which would model Jesus’ way of living?” My guess is, from what I understand of Jesus’ teaching, he would have leaned toward the latter rather than the former. Holding the keys to the church in such a way that people feel they have the right to determine who’s in and who’s out has been the downfall of organized Christianity for centuries, it seems to me.

Jesus let all kinds of people into the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of God. They didn't have to be church or synagogue goers. They didn't have to follow all kinds of dietary rules or sacrificial religious rituals. They only had to treat one another right -- extending hospitality to strangers, assisting widows and orphans in need, healing the sick and dying, showing compassion to those in despair, loving God and their neighbor as themselves.

Matthew says of Jesus, or for Jesus, "Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." (Matt 16:19) These are not familiar terms for us today. But in Jesus' day they probably related to how to "interpret Jesus' teaching. The whole community had [then and has now] the task of appropriately implementing Jesus' teaching."^[2]

Therein is the substance of our passage for today, it seems to me, along with Peter's proclaiming Jesus to be the Messiah. The keys of the kingdom of heaven don't relate to locking people out or letting them in based on our religious expertise, but of always, always, having an extra key hidden under the rock by the front door so *everyone* can always get in, no matter *who* they are.

Heaven, heaven on earth, is not a prize to win, or a locked room to get into, but a gift from God, given freely to all of us. Jesus didn't come to keep us out, but to invite us into the household of God which knows no boundaries and has no locked doors. Once we take down the sign that says "restricted area" that some Christian folks would like to put up, we discover that questions about who's in and who's not are irrelevant. It's simply not our job to determine who's in and who's out of God's household. God is the host, we are all the guests, no matter what part of the world we come from, or which political party we're in, or which church or synagogue or mosque we choose to worship in, or not.

The keys to the kingdom of heaven might have been given to Peter by Jesus, but duplicate keys abound for the rest of us. All we have to do is choose to use them to unlock the door to God.

Let the people say, "Amen."

To hold in our prayers this day.....

Please hold in your prayers all those affected by the coronavirus and the families of those who have died from the virus.... and all those affected, which should be every one of us, by the cruel condition of racism.... and all those who have worked

tirelessly for the building and rebuilding of our nation into one people, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.....

From our most recent bulletin and more....

Ann Foster, Carol Moss, Fred Bagnall, Harriet Williams, Julie Pollitt, Zeke Bryant, Sally Harjula, Elliot, Trish Perry, April DeVarney, Helmut Steger, John Flaherty, George Ng, Doug and BJ Thomson, Heather Van Buskirk, Muriel's grandson Jared, and Jackie's 92 year old friend Genevieve Micali, Michael and Gail in southern Maine, Pricilla O'Hara on the death of her husband Wally.... *Please send me the names of those you would like for me to add to this list next Sunday!*

A Benediction

Go into this day with peace and love in your hearts.

May God bless you and keep you.

May God's face radiate upon you and flood you with grace and tender mercies.

May God smile upon you always and cover your life with peace.

Amen.

Readings from the RCL (Revised Common Lectionary)

for Sunday, August 30, 2020

Exodus 3:1-15; Psalm 105:1-6, 23-26, 45b; Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28

Words to ponder today about keys.....

"Six essential qualities that are the key to success: sincerity, personal integrity, humility, courtesy, wisdom, charity." ~ Dr. William Claire Menninger

"Gratefulness is the key to a happy life that we hold in our hands, because if we are not grateful, then no matter how much we have we will not be happy because we will always want to have something else or something more." ~ Brother David Steindl-Rast

"The key to everything is patience. You get the chicken by hatching the egg, not smashing it."

~ Arnold H. Glasow

"The key to enjoying the journey is being open to the unknown." ~ Kristine Carlson

"You may not appreciate the value of a key until you encounter the door it locks or unlocks."

~ Ifeany Enoch Onuoha

^[1]William Willimon in “Jesus, Mesisah, Son of God,” in *Pulpit Digest* for July, August, September, 2002, Vol. 30, No. 3, p. 33-34.

^[2]In *The New Interpreter's Study Bible*, 2003, p. 1776.