

Matthew 16: 13-20

August 21, 2011

Rocks and Gates and Keys---Oh My!

I used to know a little boy named Jordan. His hero was a WWF wrestler nicknamed The Rock. Day after day I heard about the Rock. I saw Jordan imitate his gestures, his facial expressions, his movements. I drew the line when he wanted to wrestle like the Rock, but he did show off his moves with a pillow instead of an actual opponent.

The Rock was tough, solid, and strong. He seemed unstoppable.

My main concern that Jordan would pick up the anger and the violence, so he and I had a few talks about the Rock and how he was just pretending to be angry, that no one really got hurt, that it was just the way he acted when he was on tv. I was never sure that Jordan really understood that it was all pretend, that the Rock was really just a guy named Dwayne Johnson, who is an actor, and that he was playing a part.

The Rock---the nickname came from how hard this character was, how tough, how unbeatable.

In this week's reading from the Gospel according to Matthew, we learn about Jesus giving Simon Peter his nickname. Peter is our version of the Greek word for "rock". It was a play on words. It wasn't a name back then, but rather a description.

But a description of what?

In the very next passage of Matthew Peter gets very upset when Jesus predicts that he will be killed when they get to Jerusalem.

He blurts out, "No, Lord! This must never happen!"

So much for the Rock! He crumbles almost immediately after he gets his nickname!

And I think that most of us can relate to this. If we had been there, wouldn't we have been just as horrified? Just as determined to avoid this ending?

Wouldn't we have been just a little confused by the thought of the immortal son of God being killed?

So this gives us some kind of hope when we learn that Peter wasn't so different from us. He had his faults and his weaknesses, and still Christ called him to be a disciple and chose him to be the Rock on which He would build his Church!

If Christ can use Peter in such a powerful way, maybe we can also be a useful part of the church!

And if Peter, with all his human weaknesses, can receive this revelation from God that told him that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, then maybe God speaks to us as well.

After all, we are the Church that Christ built on Peter, the Rock. You could say that we are Peter's spiritual children, that we are only here this morning because of the revelation that Peter received from God and boldly spoke out loud---that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the Living God.

So here we are, the part of the Church that meets in Linda Vista, and this passage tells us that “the gates of Hell will not overcome the Church.”

This might make us feel very safe and protected. Hell is not going to win!

But then, when I think about it, something seems rather backward about that!

Gates of any kind are not an offensive weapon! The Gates of Hell are not trying to get in to the Church!

Gates are DEFENSIVE! Gates keep what is inside inside! They keep what is outside outside!

The Gates of Hell shall not prevail against the Church!

The Church, outside of Hell, is busting down the Gates to let those trapped inside get out.

And the Church is winning! The Church *is* freeing people from the hellish places they are in by bringing them hope and teaching them peace and surrounding them with love.

At least, that's God's plan for the Church.

Because the next thing Jesus says in this passage is that he will give Peter, and from him to the Church, “the keys of the kingdom of heaven,” that whatever the Church binds on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever we loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

So the Church has the keys of the kingdom of heaven. We can unlock the kingdom’s gates and let people in, or we can lock it up tight and keep people out. We can invite people in or we can slam the door shut in their faces. We can make church a warm, loving place people want to be, or we can make it cold and judgmental.

We, as the Church, hold the keys of kingdom of heaven. If we have broken down the Gates of Hell and let those trapped inside come out, but we don’t open the doors of the kingdom of heaven, where will those people go?

After Moses brought the Israelites out of Egypt, but they weren’t in the Promised Land yet, they had no food out there in the wilderness.

They were ready to go back to slavery in Egypt, because at least in Egypt they weren’t hungry!

If the Church batters down the Gates of Hell, and I believe those gates are indeed smashed down, but then if the Church has not followed through and unlocked the doors to heaven with the keys it has been given, I believe that people will choose to stay in Hell, because at least it's a familiar place, a place to be, rather than being in the limbo of somewhere between heaven and hell.

The Church needs to use those keys to the Kingdom of Heaven to show people that they can choose to leave hell, that they will have a new place to be, that they can come into the place that Christ has prepared for them.

The Keys to the Kingdom of Heaven---what are they?

One of my colleagues actually posted this question on Facebook this week. She invited humorous as well as serious responses, and here are some of them---

"I think they would be skeleton keys - God would be able to see us all the way to our bones so to speak."

"Working for God"

"Love and acceptance, grace and diligence, discernment and prayer, willingness to follow, service and surrender "

“I think they are like the ring of keys a janitor carries.....to unlock the hearts & minds of each of us. “

“I didn't know the kingdom of heaven was locked and you need a key to get in...”

“The key for me was understanding that Christ's Kingdom is not a future event or place, but that we live in His Kingdom every day and He is in control.”

“The keys of G and C, because they are the easiest on the guitar.”

“The key to the kingdom of heaven is realizing that it's where God abides. If God abides in your heart, then the kingdom of heaven is within your heart... “

“Well, if the gates are made of pearl, maybe the keys should be, too! Or maybe the key is to bribe St. Peter? Maybe we don't need keys---we can just pick the lock! Or break in through the stained glass window! “

“Love! “

“the fruits of the Holy Spirit, which if Jesus Christ is our Savior, these "keys" get buffed and re shined here on earth.. God opens the door. and the greatest of these..LOVE ♥ “

“Solidarity with the poor. “

“humility... “

All of these responses, even the funny ones, have some wisdom in them.

The keys to the kingdom of heaven are found in many places in scripture, and they can be understood in different ways by different people.

I believe that the keys to the kingdom of heaven are found in having a close relationship with Jesus Christ, who embodied God's grace, who is the way of peace, who demonstrated God's forgiveness and mercy, and who gave himself to lead us out of hell and into the kingdom of heaven.

So we are the Church, built upon the solid rock, which has battered down the Gates of Hell, and the keys to the kingdom of heaven are ours to use, binding and loosing whatever we choose here on earth, and those same things will be bound or set free in heaven.

All of this sounds like a lot of power to have. Who are we to unlock the kingdom of heaven? Who are we to determine what should be bound or freed on earth, especially if those decisions also affect what will happen in heaven?

What if we get it wrong? What if we open the door of the kingdom of heaven to the wrong people? What if we set something free that should be bound and tie up something that should be free?

We can get stuck worrying about making a mistake. We can choose to remain weak and ignore the power that we have been given by our lord and savior Jesus Christ. We can equivocate, vacillate, and abdicate our responsibility as the Church and leave the kingdom of heaven locked up.

Or we can claim the power we have been given to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, and by doing this we will unlock the kingdom of heaven for others.

We will bind the powers and principalities of evil in this world and in heaven, and we will set loose those who have been trapped with nowhere to go but hell.

So the question is, Do we want to claim this power? Do we want to believe we can do all this, or are we more comfortable thinking that it's someone else's job, that only God can set the captives free and conquer evil.

God IS the only one who can do that, but God has given us the power to act as the Body of Christ. God has built the Church on the Rock that is Peter, on the foundation that comes from receiving revelation from God.

Christ has given the Church the power to break down the gates of hell and open the gates of heaven wide. Christ has given us a lot of power, and as the Body of Christ, we must use it or we are neglecting our responsibility!

So how do we do that? How do we claim our power and take care of our responsibility?

It isn't complicated, but it is a challenge!

We have to take seriously what it means to be the Church! We have to listen to the words of Christ in scripture and serve the poor and needy, the Last, the Least, and the Lost. We have to open our minds to understand the parables and to see ourselves in those images shown to us by Christ.

We have to open our eyes and our ears to hear what God is saying to us, revealing to us today. We have to stand firm on the Rock the Church is built on, remembering every moment of every day that we are God's beloved children and living into that identity. We must not lose the knowledge that God loves us because when we stand firm in that awareness, we can share that love with others.

We break hell wide open when we live out the gospel of Jesus Christ--when we forgive others, when we show mercy, when we help others to know that God loves them without condition,

when we lead others to know that they are God's beloved children by treating them as members of the family of God, when we extend the grace of God to all those we see.

We use the keys to the kingdom of heaven when we invite the poor, the needy, those who are rejected by society to the banquet table of Christ, when we practice radical hospitality in our congregation, when we spend time with people who are not like us, listening to their stories and accepting them for who they are, seeing Christ's eyes in their eyes.

To do all this takes power. We need to let go of the thinking that says we are weak. Individually, we are weak, we are sinners, we can not do much if anything.

But AS THE CHURCH we have been given tremendous power to set people free from hell and welcome them into heaven.

AS THE CHURCH we are even tougher and more unbeatable than Jordan's hero, the Rock! We can take down the gates of hell and then open the kingdom of heaven wide enough to let all who want to come in, with no fear and no regrets, no doubts and not a moment's insecurity!

Here at Linda Vista, we have begun to claim our God-given power by going out in mission, by bringing food to the hungry, by welcoming the visitors who come to join us in worship. We have made a good start.

Let us continue to grow in power and knowledge and obedience, knowing that we are built on the solid Rock,

that we are capable of breaking down the Gates of Hell to set free those who are oppressed,

and that we hold the keys to the kingdom of heaven for the salvation of all nations.

Amen.