

Jesus' Keys

Proper 16

Pastor Josh Frazee

Matt. 16:13-20

Grace, peace, and mercy be to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

According to one of its definitions the word “confess” means to repeat back what you have heard. As we’ve learned before, we make this kind of confession every Sunday. Almost every line of liturgy is taken directly from the Scriptures. We know that the Scriptures are the Word of God written down by men of the past as they heard from God. Every Sunday morning, then, we confess what we have heard from God’s Word, just as the original writers confessed what they had heard from God the Holy Spirit.

We also heard this last week: that all of God’s Word has been inspired by the Holy Spirit, and that through the preaching and teaching of the Word of God, people come to faith in Jesus.

This morning, we find this at work in Peter in our Gospel text. Jesus will point out that Peter doesn’t make the good confession himself or with the help of flesh and blood, but only from the Spirit. It is on this confession that the Church is built, from the Old Testament looking forward to the coming of the Christ, through His coming in the New Testament, to our looking forward for His return now following the events of the New Testament.

It is the confession that the Church has maintained up until this time; and it is the same confession the Church will continue to hold to until Christ returns. The Reformation theme this year is true: It is still all about Jesus. Jesus showed us this when He revealed it to His disciples on the road to Emmaus. As Luke records: “beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself (Luke 24:27).”

Turn with me, then, to our Gospel text and we’ll see how Peter was able to make the good confession that Jesus is the Son of the living God from God the Father.

Verse 1

“Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say that the Son of Man is?’ And they said, ‘Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.’ He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’”

Try to consider these questions from Jesus at the time He was asking them. He had not yet gone to the cross. The disciples and other people had only what Jesus said and did, and the Scriptures to tell them about Him. Remember, though, that the Word was not as widespread as it is today. The internet and Guttenberg’s printing press had not been invented yet. Most information was spread by word of mouth. On top of that, even the temple leadership were divided over Jesus’ identity. It wasn’t possible for the people to just put their trust in what the temple had to say because they received differing views from there.

Today, we have the whole Scriptures. We have the word about how Jesus would go on to the cross and die for the sins of the world. We have the word about how He would rise from the dead. And we have the word that one day He will return.

Just the same, Jesus’ question remains a good one even for us today: “But who do you say that I am?” Yet having Jesus pose this question to us this morning is not to make us judges over whether or not He is the Christ; He is whether we believe it or not. The question is whether we will live as He has commanded and instituted.

In the commandments, Jesus has commanded us to love God and to love our neighbors. We have covered before how we are incapable of living lives of love by our own power. That's why Jesus came and died for our sins. He took away the punishment we rightly deserve; and He called us to live in His kingdom through the waters of baptism. And He sent us His Holy Spirit so that we might live as new beings.

The first part of living as a new being is not only knowing but also believing that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. We are called to make the same good confession that Peter makes in our text in the next verses.

Verse 2

“Simon Peter replied, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.’ And Jesus answered him, ‘Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock, I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.’”

Simon Peter makes the good confession, but not of his own power. Jesus points out that it was not by “flesh and blood” that he could know who Jesus was—it had to be by the Holy Spirit. Again, putting ourselves into the time frame of the text, Jesus had not yet gone to the cross. He had not yet shown Himself to be the Suffering Servant. Despite this, the Spirit had worked the faith into Peter to know that Jesus was the Son of God. And the Holy Spirit was working the faith into him to follow Jesus in all things. He was making Peter a new person.

The Holy Spirit is at work in you as well. He is making you into a new creation in Jesus, His death and resurrection. Peter would, as you and I know from the Word, struggle with his humanity: falling asleep at the garden of Gethsemane, raising a sword against those who had come to arrest Jesus, and even denying Jesus Himself. Peter certainly was still a sinful human being. Yet Peter was also being worked in by the Spirit. He, along with the apostles and Paul—who would come along later—would go on mission journeys and speak about Jesus as the Savior of the world in and around Jerusalem. They would do this despite the danger to their physical bodies.

Peter wrote a couple letters that we have recorded, but when we think about the life of the new creation, we might also think of what Paul wrote, especially in his letter to the Romans. “How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life...(N)ow we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code. What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin...For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good. Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin...So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. (Notice what Paul writes here!) For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being (the new man!) but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord (Romans 6:2b-4; 7:6b-7a; 11-13a; 21-25a)!”

Verse 3

So it is that we are saints and sinners in this life. But the new man, the new creation begun in you, desires in your inmost being to serve our Savior, the Son of God, Christ Jesus. The new being trusts in Jesus as your Savior from sin. And the new you trusts that not even the “gates of hell” shall prevail against the truth that Jesus is your God and your Savior.

Because Jesus has made us into new creations, this is what He says: “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.’ Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ.”

Today we have the Office of the Keys. Jesus used the future tense in His statement to His disciples because He had not yet gone to the cross. Now He has gone to the cross, into the ground and back out, and has even ascended back into heaven, from which He will return. In the meantime, He has given us His Church His Keys.

As the Church, we use Law and Gospel. We heard from Paul that the Law is good; it is we human beings who go astray by sin. Sin continues to reign today in our members, and it is only God’s good and righteous Law which shows us that we are sinners. It is our hope and prayer as new creations that God would use His Law to show us that we are sinners and that we need Him. That’s why we pray: “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Luther wrote in his explanation in the Small Catechism that “God’s will is done when He breaks and hinders every evil plan and purpose of the devil, the world, and our sinful nature, which do not want us to hallow God’s name or let his kingdom come.” So we use the Law, and, when necessary, the binding key, so that God might show us that we are stuck in sin and that we need Jesus to save us.

But we also keep the Gospel, that beautiful truth that God does not count our sin against us when we repent, but that He forgives us freely for the sake of His Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. When He uses this Key through His Church, then we know that we are truly free—that we are truly loosed from the bind of punishment we rightly deserved. Jesus has paid the price, and you are now set free as His new creation. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.