Keys to the Kingdom

The 14th Sunday after Pentecost, August 21, 2005

Isaiah 51:1-6 Psalm 138 Romans 11:33-36 Matthew 16:13-20

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. (Matthew 16:19)

By Friday, God-willing, Iza and I will own our own house. We went through a whirlwind of MLS-listings, open-houses, buyer brokers, real estate agents, lawyers, home inspectors, offers, negotiations and renegotiations, the purchase and sale documents thick enough to stun an ox. And then, if the title is clear, if the money comes through and nothing burns down, on Friday we will have the keys to a new home.

For the 3,000 miles from Seattle to Boston, this car key was the only key I had. And then, I got these keys: the keys to the apartment we are renting for another two weeks. And then, I got these keys: The keys to Messiah.

Now I make a satisfying rattle when I walk down the street. Having these keys makes me feel located, secure. But getting these keys took a long, long journey.

What did it feel like for Simon when Jesus gave him a new name –Peter, *petros*, Rock – and promised to give him the keys to the kingdom of heaven? Maybe he was nervous about the responsibility of being entrusted with such keys. Maybe Simon thought, in shock:

"Me, Simon? What if I lose them? I mean, I'm the guy who almost drowned back there on the Sea of Galilee, the one who blew it when Elijah and Moses joined Jesus on the mountain. I'm the headstrong one who keeps sticking his foot in his mouth!"

After all, in Matthew's gospel in the very next passage Jesus turns to Simon Peter in frustration and anger, saying, "Get behind me, Satan!" And it is Peter who will deny Jesus three times on the night of his arrest and trial. I can see why Peter could have been nervous.

Perhaps, when Jesus promised Peter these keys, Peter worried that Jesus had made a mistake, that he was promising more than he could give.

When we moved into our apartment, for example, we discovered that we'd been given the wrong keys. We had the right key to our rooms, the right key to the deadbolt at the front door, but the wrong key to the doorknob on the front door. We were locked out, but luckily it was a warm summer night, and our neighbors were home within an hour or two.

It's quite a promise of access that Jesus makes: Jesus tells Peter that with the keys come the power to bind and to loosen. In John's Gospel, binding and loosing refers specifically to forgiveness of sins, but Matthew is making a rabbinic argument about the church's authority to interpret law – to loosen the law: to be merciful and broad in interpretation, and to bind the law: to be specific and narrow in interpretation.

It is one of the places in Scripture giving the church authority to interpret Scripture. [As an almost unavoidable side note -- Anglican and Orthodox theologians believe that the power Jesus gave to Peter is shared by all bishops in the church Universal, the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church, and we look to Matthew 18, where Jesus grants to all the disciples that same power to bind and to loosen.]

When we embrace the living, changing tradition of the church -- in our decisions about human sexuality, about slavery, about divorce about environmentalism or evolution or economic justice -- we are carrying out that Petrine responsibility to bind and to loosen, changing the law as a community in order to be true to God's mercy and God's justice.

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But perhaps, being promised the keys, Peter felt like I do today about our house: Come on, give me the keys already!

Jesus' promise is in the future tense: "I will give you the keys…" Matthew, after all, is talking about church – his is the only Gospel to use the word *ekklesia*, church, and Matthew only uses it twice. Church refers to the community of believers after Christ's resurrection. During the time of the Gospels, there is no church, and in Jesus' mortal mouth the word is either anachronistic or prophetic.

Jesus is making a future promise: I will give you the keys, and then…

And then…

And then: there will be churches. And then: there will be great meals in remembrance of the Anointed One, the Christ, who was and is and is to come. And then: there will be persecutions and divisions. And then: there will be miracles and mystics and monastics. And then: there will glorious cathedrals and humble chapels. And then there will be Parish of the Messiah, in Auburndale.

And then there will be you. For the story of the Body of Christ, is also the story of each of us, from baptism until now. As Peter would learn, to be given keys is to enter the *beginning* of a story. To buy a house is only a start: to make it a home takes time.

In your baptism, God has given you the keys to the kingdom. And then…and then the Holy Spirit started to make a home. God has set you as a foundation stone, and with you God is building God's great kingdom.

At the offertory, I'd like to invite you to bring your keys as an offering to God. When we come forward for communion, come up and place your keys on the altar to be blessed. We will pray together that our homes and cars, our offices and all the doors and cabinets in our lives may be the foundation of God's kingdom, the gateway to God's justice and to God's mercy.

We will pray that we at Messiah become a whole key chain, a holy rattle of keys gathered together in one place, opening doors to God in one another's lives, in the hearts of our friends and in the hearts of strangers, opening doors to God's justice and God's mercy, opening the gates to the Kingdom of God.

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