

Sunday, August 27, 2017
21st Sunday in Ordinary Time
Matt. 16:13-20

BE THE CHURCH

Everybody knows a joke about St. Peter at the Pearly Gates, right? There are probably hundreds of them. My favorite from my former life—yes, it's a really old joke—was about the lawyer who died of stress related cardiac arrest when he was in his fifties. He gets to the Pearly Gates and sure enough there is St. Peter sitting at his pedestal desk perusing the book of life, kind of looking puzzled, saying hmmm. The lawyer gets impatient, but doesn't want to be rude to St. Peter, so he suppresses his natural inclination toward rudeness and says excuse me St. Peter, is there some kind of problem, maybe I can help you? St. Peter says, well, I just can't figure this out. I know you're middle aged, but according to your billable hours your 150.

Ok, I know everybody's thinking of a St. Peter joke now I'm sure. But did you know that this passage is the foundation for all the St. Peter at the Pearly Gate jokes. But that isn't really what it is about.

Speaking to Peter, Jesus says: ¹⁹ *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.*" This is one of several places where Jesus commissions his disciples to go out into the earthly realm and do the work of the kingdom of heaven.

For a long time, there was raging debate about this commissioning passage. At least by the early middle ages, and maybe before, the Church maintained that ordained priests were bestowed with the equivalent of divine power to forgive and absolve sinners. This idea that priests were somehow more holy, more favored by God and more empowered by God, was a major

bone of contention that lead to the Protestant Reformation. For today, just take my word for it that that debate is one that has largely been resolved across the different strands of Christianity and everyone agrees that God's forgiveness comes from God through Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. Priests and ministers are no more holy or divinely empowered than anyone else.

Still, this is a pivotal passage in Matthew's Gospel. It's not the first time that anyone has recognized Jesus as the Son of God, but it is the first time that it happens in a thoughtful way as opposed to in response to some extraordinary event – one of his miracles.

Just prior to today's story, Jesus had a run in with the Pharisees and Sadducees. He got annoyed with them because they wanted a sign, like he hadn't given them enough signs already. Think how he's feeling. He's walked on water, fed thousands of people with a couple loaves of bread and some fish, he's cured people of blindness and all kinds of illnesses. Cast out demons. All of that and the community leaders come up to him and say "well show us a sign from heaven." Jesus is like: "Are you kidding me?"

So, the disciples give him some words of encouragement. Some people say you are John the Baptist, some say Elijah and still others say Jeremiah. They are telling Jesus what other people are saying. And they are not comparing him to any ordinary prophet. There were lots of prophets, but each of the three named here were particularly important in their faith tradition.

That's helpful. Jesus may be feeling a little more reassured about his ministry. Maybe he has been more effective than he was starting to think. He pushes a little more: you guys have witnessed everything I've done and you've heard everything I've said. Do you get it? "Who do you say I am?"

He put the question to all of them and Peter's answer is on behalf of all of them. It's important to remember that here, Peter is the spokesperson. The leader to be sure, but he is answering for all of Jesus' disciples.

You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

It seems so obvious to those of us who know the whole story, but Peter's answer is extraordinary. He is saying, in effect, we understand that you are of God. And more importantly, we understand that you have come to save us. Save us from our own moral failures.

Because he is the Messiah, the Son of the living God, he is the one who can restore our otherwise broken relationship with our Creator. He restores the covenant in spite of our consistent failure to keep it. And, here is another important thing to remember: They, the disciples, we the disciples, don't figure it out because they or we are so smart. Even with all their experiences of seeing and hearing this man Jesus, they could not have known the significance of his presence without God's revealing grace and neither can we.

And Jesus is so relieved. It's the whole purpose of everything he went through. Walking on the earth, dying and rising, all so we can know who he is. All so we can see the face of God.

And Jesus is thinking: they get it, halleluiah. Don't stop there, lets seize the moment. Let's get you going –now that you get it. Now that you know who I am, I am going to tell you who you are.

You are the church. You are the guardians, and the distributors, of my message. You are the conduits for my Spirit-for the very Spirit of God. That is what makes you, all of you, the holders of the keys to heaven. And because of that, even though there will be hard times and conflicts and

attacks on us—attacks on us because we are disciples—not even the gates of hades will prevail against us.

It's good news. We don't have to lose sleep wondering whether the church will even survive all the changes that we are experiencing today. The church will always be here for us.

But that doesn't mean we can rest on our laurels. In this particular commissioning, Jesus sends us all out to be his Church on earth as it is in heaven. Be the Church. As the Apostle Paul explained in his letter to the Romans, we are all gifted in one way or another. And God gave us those gifts so that we would use them for his glory and the glory of his heavenly kingdom on earth.