

Sermon – 08/14/22 (Office of the Keys)

Text – John 20:19-23

So Jesus said to them again, “Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.” And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

Theme – “Who’s In and Who’s Out?”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Years ago, at my first church, a woman from the altar guild was helping me clean up and put things away after the communion service. She was a wonderful Christian woman, dedicated and active in the church, regular in her attendance at worship and Bible study. She had been a member of that church for almost 30 years, joining after her marriage to one of the men of the congregation. So, here was a woman whom we would assume had the answers. One who would know what our church taught. And why. But as we visited that day, it became apparent that there was at least ONE part of our church’s teaching and practice that she did not understand. And it came out like this: “Pastor, you know it has always kinda bothered me when, in the liturgy, the pastor forgives the sins of the gathered assembly. Why do we say that?” So, how would you answer her question? (pause)

Today will move to the first section of the fifth part of the Catechism: the Office of the Keys. Let me quote to you from the Catechism as to just what this Office of the Keys is:

It is the peculiar church power which Christ has given to His Church on earth to forgive the sins of penitent sinners, but to retain the sins of the impenitent as long as they do not repent.

Let's start with that word, "peculiar". To most of us, the word "peculiar" means something like "strange, weird, bizarre, or not-quite-right". However, that is NOT the meaning here; rather it means "unique, one-of-a-kind, special". That is, on earth it is only the Church that possesses this power to forgive sins. Now, some might wonder how that can be. First of all, how can the Church forgive sins; and second, why *only* the Church?

Let's start with the first question: how can the Church forgive sins? Like the Pharisees of old, many people think to themselves that only God can forgive sins, and that it is arrogant and presumptuous – if not downright blasphemous – for mere men to forgive sins. And yet recall the words of our text today, where the risen Jesus breathes on the disciples and says: "*Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.*"

So, how can mere human beings forgive sins? Well, the simple answer is because Jesus gave them the authority to do so. I think all of us here would agree that Jesus has that authority Himself: He is God, and so is Lord of all, including the Law. But even more than that, Jesus has the authority to forgive sins because He has paid the debt for those sins. Every last sin of mankind was piled onto His back at Calvary, every last bit of the curse for those sins was carried by Him that day, as He endured hell for us there. Yes, the Law (and God) demands payment for sin. But Jesus has already made that payment for us. All of it. As He Himself said from the cross, "It is finished". Done. Completed.

And as the One who made that payment for all sin, Jesus obviously has the right to forgive that debt. So, then, how can we say that the Church has that right? Well, remember that the Church is the Bride of Christ. What is His belongs also to her, just like in our civil law. So,

when I married Lisa, her debts became mine (and mine became hers). When she signs something, I am responsible (just as is she for me). Legally we are one, just as God says: “*the two shall be one flesh*” – that’s one of the rare instances where the influence of God’s Word is still felt in our society. And so it is with Christ and the Church – what is hers (sin) becomes His, and what is His (perfect righteousness) becomes hers. But in addition, Christ gives her the right to act in His name, forgiving the sins of those who repent.

And so, as Jesus said to the disciples in that locked Jerusalem room that very first Easter evening, the Church has that authority, that right, that responsibility. She is to forgive the sins of those who repent, but to retain the sins of those who refuse to repent. We call that authority the Office of the Keys because it is only by that forgiveness of sins that heaven is unlocked to sinners. If a person’s sin is forgiven – and that only through faith in Christ and His work of salvation – then heaven stands wide open. But if that sin is retained – that is, if the sinner rejects Christ, or refuses to repent of his sin – then heaven stays forever closed to him. What an awesome right and responsibility is this exercising of the Office of the Keys. Heaven or hell literally are in the hands (and mouths) of Christ’s people! (pause)

But does that mean that the Church is to administer the Office of the Keys in a capricious or arbitrary manner? Is the Church free to set her own rules for whose sins are forgiven and whose are not? Of course not. We do not exercise this Office of the Keys on our own whims and power, but only on the received and delegated authority of Jesus. And so we must look to His command, His direction, as to whose sins are forgiven and whose are retained.

And here is what Jesus says: forgive the sins of the penitent, but retain the sins of the impenitent. That is, those who recognize their sin and their inability to save themselves but who

then throw themselves entirely on the mercy of Christ for them – *their* sin is to be forgiven. There are to be no conditions imposed, no lists of prerequisites to be checked, no inquiries as to the sincerity of the penitent, no qualifiers in the absolution. Jesus simply says that the sins of the penitent are to be forgiven, period, end of story. So when such a person comes seeking forgiveness, the Church MUST absolve – it must forgive – just as Jesus said.

However (and this is very important), those who reject Jesus – or who refuse to repent but instead choose to cling to their sin – *they* are to hear that their sin (along its guilt and punishment) still remain upon them. It is simple enough: forgiveness only comes through Christ Jesus, and if one rejects Him then one rejects forgiveness. Likewise, if a person chooses to remain in his sin then he rejects and loses what Jesus won for him, offers to him, and wants him to have. He has chosen his sin instead of forgiveness. As they say, you can lead a horse to water but you cannot make him drink.

Now, I also just answered our second question about the Office of the Keys: why can only the Church forgive sins? The answer is that because it is only through Jesus that sin has been paid for, and so the right to forgive sins belongs to Him – and to His Bride, the Church, to whom He entrusts that authority. Other religions then, which deny Jesus as Savior, cannot forgive sins. Non-Christians cannot forgive sins (in the sense of removing the eternal consequence of sin). No, only the Christian Church can forgive sins because only the Christian Church is the Bride of Christ. (pause)

So, how does the Church exercise this Office of the Keys? That is, how does the Church forgive sins (or retain them)? Simply put, by preaching and teaching the Word of God, and by administering the Sacraments. The Church is called by God to proclaim His Word to the world,

that people might hear both the Law (which shows and convicts us of our sins) and the Gospel (which tells us how God has saved us by taking the punishment for our sin onto Himself). In the Sacraments, that very Gospel is applied to the person and gives him the forgiveness of his sins.

In Word and Sacrament the Church forgives sins, but in the same things it also ***binds*** sins. So, for example, if someone rejects what the Word says – either about sin or about the only Savior from that sin – then the Church must tell that person that his guilt remains upon him: that he is without hope until he repents of his sin and unbelief. Or if someone denies that baptism gives the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit and faith, then the Church must not baptize that person. Or if someone rejects Jesus’ words that in the Lord’s Supper Christ gives His very Body and Blood, for the forgiveness of sins, then the Church must tell that person he may not receive the Supper. (pause)

In these Means of Grace (whether they are given or withheld) the Church fulfills her call from Christ to exercise the Office of the Keys: to forgive the sins of the penitent, or to retain the sins of the impenitent. But how does the Church do all this? That is why God has called certain men to serve the Church as pastors. As the public representative of the Church in that place, the pastor is given to administer the Office of the Keys publicly on behalf of the congregation. And so it is that I preach and teach, I baptize and commune others, here. Not because I am better or smarter or more gifted, but simply because God has called me here (through the voters assembly) to serve you. Pastors hold their office — they administer the Office of the Keys — on behalf of the congregation, the Church in that place. The pastor is a servant, then, of both Christ AND the Church.

Now, that is how the Office of the Keys is used *publicly*. But there is also a *private* use of that Office. And there each Christian is entitled – even expected – to utilize it. So it is that parents teach and instruct their children in the faith. Christians admonish and teach their friends. Individual Christians forgive each other when they sin, speaking the words of grace in Christ's stead to one another. In emergencies, any Christian can baptize. We all exercise the Office of the Keys in private settings, because we are all part of the Church, that Bride of Christ He has entrusted with that office. (pause).

How wonderful it is to be forgiven! How wonderful that Christ came down from heaven to win that forgiveness for us! How wonderful that Christ entrusts the responsibility, the authority, the privilege of administering that forgiveness to us, His Bride. Every week, through the mouths of pastors and other Christians, we hear those greatest of all words: you are forgiven, go in peace. And those are not just *words* — not just well-wishes — but an actual conferring and giving of that peace, that forgiveness. Thus your sins truly **are** forgiven, for Jesus Himself has said so, using the mouth of this poor sinner. How marvelous is that! Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.

Wed – Hymn
OS – Offertory/Offering
FE – Nicene Creed