**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church**

**Watertown, WI**

**“Keys that Bind and Loose”**

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“*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”* (Mt. 16:19).

Most of us use some kind of key every day. You used car keys to get here. The elders used a key to open the building. Children may use keys to secure their bikes. We usually don’t think of keys . . . until we’ve lost them, or locked them inside the office, or for some reason, they no longer work.

This key hung around my neck on a recent cruise in Greece. It got me on board the ship. They shot it with a little scanning gun, and said, “Welcome aboard, Mr. Groth.” This key gave me entrance to the ship, to my room, to the ship’s buffet, and various excursions. When I held it up at dinner, it almost magically refilled my drink. I loved this key. But if I were to show up willy-nilly next week wherever that ship is at port, if I were to try to enter, holding up my little friend here like I owned the place, do you think it would work? Would they let me in? Would they know my name? Would they at least refill my glass? Not a chance. Some keys work well, others not so much; because the trip expired, the car got junked, the padlock is lost, or the deadbolt was rekeyed.

In our text, Jesus talks about the most important keys of all. He says, “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (v. 19).

Those are remarkable words and speak of an extraordinary burden of responsibility Jesus has placed on His church. Realize, this statement is not just an anomaly, a strange and mysterious thing He mentioned only once. No, He said it multiple times in multiple ways. When Jesus rose from the dead and appeared before His disciples in the upper room, He said to them, “As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.” Then he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld” (Jn. 20:21ff). Jesus is speaking here to Christian congregations in every place and at every time. Jesus is promising when the called ministers of Christ absolve those who repent of their sins, this is just as valid and certain, even in heaven, as if Christ our Lord dealt with us Himself. Real forgiveness. Full and genuine forgiveness.

Later, in Matthew 18, Jesus tells His disciples how Christians should handle grievances. If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. . . If he does not listen, take along one or two witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and tax collector. That is, regard him as outside the Christian fellowship. Then he says, “Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Mt. 18:15ff).

Amazing as it may seem, Jesus has entrusted the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven to His Church. He has given His church authority to withhold forgiveness from those living in unrepentant sin, but also to give the gift of divine pardon to all repentant sinners.

Jesus speaks of two keys. The first is used for the “binding” or “locking” of doors. Scripture gives us a striking example of this use of the first key. In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul says he received a report about a member of the congregation in Corinth who was having an incestuous relationship with his father’s wife. (It doesn’t say with his mother, so it probably means with his step-mother.) Paul tells them this sort of immorality isn’t even tolerated among the pagans. By no means should it be tolerated among those who claim to be Christian. And this fellow, having already been warned, was apparently flaunting his shameful behavior!

You can imagine the damage this was doing to the unity of the church, the reputation of the church, the reputation of Christ Himself. They were people of the Way, after all, people who were supposed to be followers of Jesus. They are called Christians. His name is on them. But this isn’t how Jesus lived, and it cannot be how His disciples live either. Paul tells the church, “Don’t you know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough?” (v. 6). Don’t you know that if you do not address it, others may think it’s ok, and that anything goes in God’s church? “Let him who has done this be removed from you” (1 Cor. 5:2). That is, excommunicate him. Deny him the sacrament. Tell him the forgiveness of Jesus is not for him. So long as he is living in unrepentant sin, he is not welcome at the Lord’s table.

The Book of Concord says, “Truly Christian excommunication is this: Open and hard-hearted sinners are not admitted to the Sacrament until they amend their lives and avoid sin” (SA III IX). Only God can condemn the sinner eternally, but this is a practical decision to preserve the church from division, confusion, hypocrisy, and other corrosive influences, but hopefully also compel the unrepentant sinner to repent. Paul tells the church in Corinth, “Purge the evil person from among you” (5:13). The work of the binding key is to show people who refuse to repent the seriousness of their sin, and its goal is to rescue them from eternal condemnation and win them back to Christ.

Now, remember, Jesus makes it clear we have enough “logs” in our own eyes. We don’t need to go looking for “specks” in the eyes of fellow believers (Mt. 7:4). Nevertheless, some sins compel us to confront the sinner. If you are at the supermarket and someone falls unconscious before you, compassion compels you to do what you can to help that person. Similarly, believers must have compassion on those in their church who live in sin and seem oblivious to its consequences. The most unloving thing to do would be to turn a blind eye, because the only sin that damns us is the sin that we hold on to, the sin that we do not repent of. Forgiveness is for repentant sinners; it’s not for those who don’t want it or feel they don’t need it.

Someone may object and say that only God can look into someone’s heart to judge whether there’s repentance and faith. That’s true. The church deals only with what people do or say. We cannot read the hearts. We can only look at the actions of men and women, what they confess with their words but also with they do or don’t do. We deal with the works alone, not with the heart. Nevertheless, Jesus has directed and commanded us to deal with the facts as we know them. We have no choice but to obey Jesus.

This binding key, it’s not a happy key to use, and often, because of hardness of heart, it does not work. But sometimes it does. Sometimes it brings erring brothers or sisters back to Christ in repentance and faith. This, in turn, brings joy to the church on earth, and even in heaven! Jesus said, “There is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance” (Lk. 15:7).

Jesus speaks of two keys. The second is the key that loosens. “Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” It’s kind of odd language. “*Luw*” is the Greek verb for loose. Writing this sermon it shows up with a little squiggly line underneath it, meaning, “Are you sure you want to use this word?” Yep, I’m sure. It’s what the Bible says here. In the Bible, “*luw” is* used for being “released from prison”, or for “the putting off of fetters or shackles.” It means to “unbind” or “to loose.” Whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

Sin imprisons us. It entangles us. It puts us in shackles. Jesus said, “Everyone who sins is a slave to sin” (Jn. 8:34). Forgiveness, however, releases us from prison. It throws off the fetters and the shackles. It even releases us from the grip of death.

In front of the tomb of Lazarus, Jesus cried out, “Lazarus come out.” Immediately the dead man came out. He was all wrapped up tight with burial clothes, sort of like mummy. “Unbind him,” Jesus said. It’s the same verb from “*luw.”* “Loosen him.” Take all those things off him, “and let him go.” That’s what forgiveness does for us. It frees us and rescues us from sin, death and the devil, from guilt and shame, and gives us eternal life in Christ.

It’s a key that works only for repentant sinners. It says, “Christ’s forgiveness is for you. “As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed your transgressions from you” (Ps. 103:12).

It's a key that invites. “Bring your family and friends. This key can open the gates of heaven for them too.” And these gates can open for all people, not just the wealthy elite. And it’s free for all. It cost Jesus everything. It costs you nothing.

Have you ever thought how much it costs us to use keys? How much money does it cost you for the privilege of using the key fob to chirp open your car and go? Or how about the key to your house? How much does it cost you? This key was also expensive, but expired as soon as I stepped off the ship on the last day of vacation. It’s useless to me now, except as an object lesson. But the key that opens to you the gates of heaven? It still works, and is still free. Jesus paid all the costs for you on the cross. You pay none. And it is forever. It never expires.

“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.” That first key is a heavy responsibility, and an unhappy business God has given His church. We are tempted to set it aside and not make use of it. But we cannot ignore the Lord’s commands and expectations.

The other key – what a delight! What a delight to proclaim forgiveness and the Lord’s favor and grace. What a delight to hear He will remember our sins no more (Heb. 8:12). The words of absolution alone should be enough to entice us to worship!

Sooner or later, every key on earth will expire and be rendered useless. But the key that loosens and unbinds . . . that key opens the Door. It unlocks the gates where we find room and welcome for us in the eternal Kingdom of Heaven. Thanks be to God. Amen.