

Marks of the Church: the Keys

In the name of him who has given to his Church the Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven, dear friends in Christ: In this Lenten season's evening devotions we are reviewing what Martin Luther identified as the seven marks of the Church. So far we've covered the three most apparent marks: God's Holy Word and the Sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion. We look for these marks because the Church itself, which consists only of faithful believers in Christ, can't be seen with the eye because no one can see another person's faith. But we know that where the Word of God is being taught correctly, where people are being baptized into the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and where they are gathered around the altar to receive Christ's body and blood under bread and wine, there the Church must be because these are the primary means of grace by which God the Holy Spirit makes, keeps, and sanctifies believers in the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

This evening we turn our attention to the fourth mark of the Church, which is known as the Keys. What is it? It's nothing less than the God-given authority to bind and to loose the sins of those who have committed them. We see Jesus exercising this authority in St. Matthew's account of the healing of the paralytic. From the other evangelists, we know that because of the crowd, this is the guy they had to lower through the roof to bring to Jesus. Place yourself at the scene: you're sitting in the house with Jesus, intently listening to him teach. Suddenly there's this commotion overhead as someone is tearing away the roof tiles. Dirt and debris are falling on you. Bright, almost blinding sunlight comes streaming in as they breach a hole and begin to widen it. And then there's this poor, helpless guy lying on a pallet being gently lowered into the room. He's paralyzed from the neck down. His body is shriveled and atrophied from lack of motion.

Having seen Jesus in action many times before, everyone there leans forward to see yet another amazing healing miracle. But Jesus shocks everyone by saying instead, "Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven." They are absolutely flummoxed. He can't say that! Why, to have your sins forgiven you need to take a lamb to the temple. You confess your sins to a priest and he places them on the head of the lamb. And then he kills it. He pours its blood on the blazing altar. And then he proclaims your sins forgiven. That's the way it's done. It's the *only* way it's done. Jesus is speaking blasphemy – or so it seems to those sitting there.

But Jesus knows something they do not. He knows that *he* is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. He knows that he is the reality that all that vast multitude of lambs slain for sin only illustrate. In forgiving this man his sins, Jesus is taking them upon himself. And to prove that he commands that authority, he then raises him to his feet and sends him home both fully healed and forgiven. The witnesses are astonished beyond belief. An immense sense of holy awe falls upon them. And they glorify God who has given such authority to men. And please note: the word *men* there is plural. It isn't only Jesus who has the authority to forgive sins by virtue of his being God. Jesus is also a man. He commands this authority as both God and man. And because the authority is his, he can give the same authority to anyone he pleases.

We hear Jesus promising to give his disciples precisely that a bit later in Matthew's Gospel. After Peter on behalf of all twelve disciples confesses the truth that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, the Lord tells them that he is going to build his Church on the solid

rock of that confession of faith. And then he says to them, "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." He's telling them that in the future he will give them the authority to free people from their sins and also to bind them to their sins. Why doesn't he give it to them right away at that time? It's because he hasn't yet made atonement for the sins of the world. In the grand scheme of God's justice, the authority to forgive sins rests squarely and only upon the death and resurrection of Jesus.

But you'll note that granting this authority to his disciples is among Jesus' first items of business when he appears to them on the evening of the day he rose from the dead. He speaks God's peace to them, he breathes out upon them the Spirit, and he tells them, "As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you ... If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld." And it's important that we recognize that Christ gives this authority to his whole Church and to each of its individual members, not just to the disciples gathered there in the upper room. Just as the Word, Baptism, and the Supper belong to the whole Church, so do the Keys.

And that means we need to exercise their use properly. We don't just go around willy-nilly forgiving everybody's sins in the name of Jesus. "You're forgiven." "Oh, that was naughty of you; but never you mind: You're forgiven." No, God's forgiveness in Christ Jesus is to be proclaimed to those who admit their guilt, who are sorry for their sins, who repent, and who want to do better. To be sure, the Keys work both ways. The same authority that allows us in the Church to free sinners from the guilt and penalty of their sins compels us to bind the sins of those who won't admit their guilt and/or refuse to repent.

Jesus gives us instruction on the proper use of the Keys in the passage we read from Matthew 18. If a professed believer has sinned against you (or if you are aware that a person is involved in a sin – it doesn't have to be against you personally), then you are to go to that person, confront them with their sin, and urge them to repent. If they do repent, you proclaim God's forgiveness and the case is closed. You have won your brother. If, on the other hand, you get a lot of huff and puff, mind your own business, leave me alone, you're no better, you have no right to judge me, blah, blah, blah (I've heard'm all), well then you gather a few others who are respected by the person in sin and who are aware of the problem, and you try what might be thought of as a group intervention – that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. Again, if that works to bring the person to repentance, well and fine. All is forgiven and forgotten. If it doesn't work, you are to take the matter to the whole congregation so that all may express their loving concern for the one who has fallen into sin and urge them to repent – but also so that the whole congregation may be made aware that this sort of sinful behavior (whatever it is) cannot be allowed to continue among us, for we are called to godliness of life, and this is precisely how we deal with one another in love. If the person repents, good; we've won back our brother or sister. If not, then we are to use the Keys to bind that person to their sins. It's called excommunication. It is done to warn the sinner in the strongest possible terms that as long as he or she refuses to repent, they are not in fellowship with Christ or his Church, and they are excluded from the benefits of the Gospel, namely forgiveness, life, and salvation.

And I need to emphasize that the Church *must* do this. If we are to use the Keys to loose from sin – which we are all eager to do, we must also use them to bind when necessary. Both are acts of love; though admittedly, the latter is harder and less pleasant to do. But as difficult as it is, a congregation that fails to use the Keys to bind when it should will not be able to maintain any discipline at all. It further communicates to all of its members that we don't care if

one of us is lost in sin, and we would rather let that person die in sin and be lost forever than to momentarily disturb our false sense of peace and tranquility.

Also regarding the use of the Keys, it should be noted that they have both a public and private use. In our day to day interaction with other believers, we are to use the Keys privately both to confront people with their sins and to forgive them when they repent. Also, if anyone feels particularly burdened by guilt, they can go privately to a pastor to confess and receive absolution. We Lutherans didn't do away with private confession and absolution; what we did was remove the obligation that the Roman Catholic Church imposes on its members. For them it's mandatory. We see it as a gift of the Gospel – one that can and does provide real comfort to troubled souls. I encourage you to make use of it if and when you feel the need. If you do, you can be confident that our pastors are sworn to secrecy. They may not reveal to anyone the sins confessed to them in private, nor can they be compelled to do so by a court of law.

Of course, we also have *public* confession and absolution. That's the first order of business when we celebrate the Divine Service. The congregation together confesses their sins in a general, and the pastor absolves them. We do it also in the Compline Service that we're using this evening; and what's nice about the way it's laid out in this service, is that it highlights the fact that the Keys belong to the whole Church. You used them on me before I used them on you – even as we should, because the Keys, the fourth mark of the Church, is a precious gift and belong to and should be exercised by all who confess the name of Jesus Christ. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!