

Sermon for The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

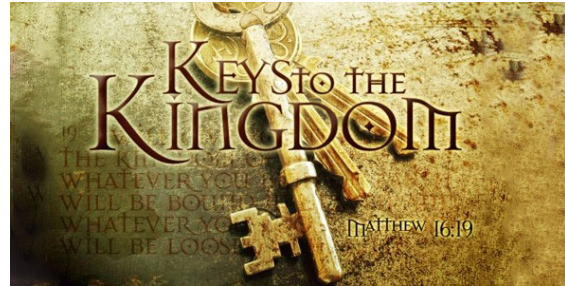
Date: August 19, 2018

Location: St. John's Lutheran Church, Austin, MN

Old Testament: 2 Samuel 12:1-13

Epistle Reading: 1 Peter 2:1-10

Gospel Reading: Matthew 18:15-20



Sermon Title: Good News: Keys That Unlock Heaven's Door

Introit: Psalm 51:2-7; Antiphon: Psalm 51:1

Hymns:

LSB 606 – I Lay My Sins on Jesus

LSB 827 – Hark, the Voice of Jesus Calling

LSB 781 – We Give Thee But Thine Own

LSB 610 – Lord Jesus, Think on Me

Distribution:

LSB 680 – Thine the Amen, Thine the Praise

LSB 629 – What is This Bread

Liturgy:

Divine Service IV, p. 203



Pastor James Groleau
St. John's Lutheran Church
1200 13th Avenue NW
Austin, MN 55912
Office: (507) 433-2642
Shepherd@JamesPlace.net
StJohnsAustinLCMS.org
FaceBook.com/StJohnsAustin
Twitter.com/StJohnsAustinMN
FaceBook.com/Shepherd.James.Groleau



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Grace to you, and peace, in Jesus' name. Amen.

This is the ninth message in a series of ten sermons that we've been going through. This ninth message is called: "Good News: Keys That Unlock Heaven's Door." This message is about who can forgive sins and whose sins are forgiven. We refer to this as the "Office of the Keys" meaning the keys to the gate of Heaven or the ability to lock and unlock access to Heaven.

Jesus said:

Matthew 16:19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you imprison God will imprison. And whatever you set free God will set free."

John 20:21-23 Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you." After he had said this he breathed on the disciples and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. Whenever you forgive sins they are forgiven. Whenever you don't forgive them they are not forgiven."

What are the keys to the kingdom? They are the authority to forgive sins for those who repent and to declare sins unforgiven for those who do not. You have heard me say often there are only two things that can keep you out of Heaven, they are unbelief and unrepentance. Unbelief keeps one out of Heaven because only those who believe in Jesus Christ as their Savior can be saved.¹ Unrepentance keeps one out of Heaven because those who refuse to repent are also refusing obedience to God's command. Spreading the Gospel is part of this Office of the Keys because in telling the Good News we are showing them the only way that their sins can be forgiven.

Who has the authority to forgive sins? Who can declare a person's sins forgiven? Who has the right to judge a person before God as unforgiven and therefore denied access to Heaven? The Bible says:

Matthew 18:18 I can guarantee this truth: Whatever you imprison God will imprison and whatever you set free God will set free.

1 Peter 2:9-10 You are chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, people who belong to God. You were chosen to tell about the excellent qualities of God, who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not God's people but now you are.

The authority to declare sins forgiven, or unforgiven, is given to all Christians. This is true both as individuals, as well as when they are gathered together in congregations. This might seem like a weighty responsibility. To declare a person's sins unforgiven is to, by your words, lock them out of Heaven. It is a heavy burden and one we must take seriously. That leads us to the question: whose sins are to be forgiven and whose sins are not to be forgiven? How do we make that judgment?

The Bible says:

¹ John 14:6

Acts 3:19-20 Change the way you think and act and turn to God to have your sins removed. Then times will come when the Lord will refresh you.

Psalms 51:16-17 You [Lord] are not happy with any sacrifice. Otherwise, I would offer one to you. You are not pleased with burnt offerings. The sacrifice pleasing to God is a broken spirit. O God you do not despise a broken and sorrowful heart.

2 Samuel 12:13 David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the Lord."

Nathan replied, "The Lord has taken away your sin, you will not die."

Mark 16:15-16 Jesus said to them, "So wherever you go in the world tell everyone the Good News. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.

God has set up rules for us to follow when it comes to the Office of the Keys. We are to give the forgiveness of sins, and God's eternal love, to all who believe in Jesus as their Savior, and who apologize for their sins and desire to change their conduct. However people who refuse to repent, those who refuse God's love, are to be told they are not forgiven. We do not then simply give up on them but rather continue to pray for them and make every effort to encourage them to come back to the truths of God.

Can we really make that judgment? Doesn't the Bible say, "Judge not lest you be judged"? That verse, Matthew 7:1, is probably the single most misused verse in the Bible. People will use this verse to claim that no one can judge their actions or conduct. Some will state that we're all sinful so no one has the right to tell another person what is right and what is wrong. Some will state that sin is something only between themselves and God.

The problem is that would make sin whatever you want sin to be. Sin is not what we want it to be. God defines sin and God tells us how to deal with sin. We are in fact commanded to judge. Jesus told us to judge when He said, "Whatever you imprison God will imprison, and whatever you set free God will set free."² However we make those judgments based on what He has taught not on our own ideas. It is God who defines "Absolute Truth" truth that is true even if no one believes it.

So then what does Church discipline look like? How are we supposed to deal with those who defiantly refuse to bring themselves under God's authority? How should we treat those who simply refuse to apologize for their sins? Jesus again gives us the answer.

Matthew 18:15-20 If a believer does something wrong go confront him when the two of you are alone. If he listens to you, you have won back that believer.

But if he does not listen, take one or two others with you so that every accusation may be verified by two or three witnesses.

If he ignores these witnesses tell it to the community of believers. If he also ignores the community deal with him as you would a heathen or a tax collector.

I can guarantee this truth: Whatever you imprison God will imprison, and whatever you set free God will set free.

2 Matthew 18:18

I can guarantee again that if two of you agree on anything here on earth my Father in heaven will accept it. Where two or three have come together in my name I am there among them.

When you discover someone who is sinning the first thing to do is go and talk to them privately. There are all sorts of reasons for why people sin. Not one of us in this room (or on this earth) can live a perfect life. As fellow brothers and sisters in Christ we should support and help each other. So Jesus says the first thing you should do is simply go and talk with that person. It doesn't have to be a formal meeting. It shouldn't be a hammering of the Law. It can be as simple as going out for a burger and having a friendly conversation.

It should start out patiently. Ensure there is no misunderstanding first. We're not supposed to start out hitting them over the head with the Bible clubbing them into submission. Talk to them the same way you would like someone to come to you. Matthew 18 talks about a slow progress of escalation. It should take a while.

Each step should be done in genuine Christian love. The point is always to bring the person back to the family of God. Everything we do, whether as individuals, or as the Church, must be done with the intention of bringing them back, not driving them away. For the very defiant person who has refused any and all calls to come back home to their Church family there is an ultimate punishment. That is formally called Excommunication. How is that tool, which God has given us, to be used?

Excommunication is the very last and final effort to bring a person back to God. Yet even this punishment, which is the most extreme punishment the Church has to use, is still an action taken in Christian love. Excommunication is to cut a person off from the Church. It is an action taken by a congregation and it can include separating a person utterly from all members of the congregation. It means not doing business with them, not talking to them in public. They are not welcome to enter the church building for public worship. Excommunication is to completely sever a person from the Church and all members of the congregation.

When Jesus said, "treat them as you would a heathen or a tax collector"³ you need to understand what that meant to the people to whom He was talking. Heathens are those who mock you for your faith, who ridicule your worship, and even ridicule God Himself. Such people would never be allowed to come into our worship service and disrupt it with their disrespect. Tax collectors in Jesus time weren't like the IRS of our day. Their tax collectors were traitors collecting taxes for a foreign power.

You see Rome had conquered the nation of Israel. They demanded taxes from their conquered people but they discovered that Roman tax collectors would sometimes go out to collect the taxes and never come back, and never be heard from again. So Rome would offer the job of tax collection to Jewish people who would not only collect Roman taxes, but also a little (or a lot) for themselves. They were traitors to their own people as well as liars and thieves. You wouldn't let those people come in to worship here either.

3 Matthew 18:17

Jesus point was to cut them off from everything. This however is still not to be done in anger or hatred but in Christian love. This, the most severe punishment, is reserved for that final last-ditch effort to bring them back when every single other possible option has been exhausted. The point is to bring them back, and when they come back the Bible says:

2 Corinthians 2:6-8 The majority of you have imposed a severe enough punishment on that person. So now forgive and comfort him. Such distress could overwhelm someone like that if he's not forgiven and comforted. That is why I urge you to assure him that you love him.

The Church, in all things must be about the business of bringing people to Christ. That is true in the grace and forgiveness we offer, as well as any punishment we use. However with that said this last-ditch effort is telling them that their sin is not forgiven and that sin will remain on them and bar them from gates of Heaven. Jesus said, "Whatever you imprison God will imprison. And whatever you set free God will set free."⁴

Sin is a serious thing. We live in a culture where sin is often dismissed as unimportant, or even condoned and encouraged, but our culture doesn't define God's priorities. It is always important to remember that we are all sinners so we should, like Jesus said, "do unto others what you would have done unto you."⁵ We always approach these things with patience, understanding and long-suffering the way we would want others to be patient and understanding with us.

The hope, prayer, and desire of the Church, and every member, should be what God desires, that being the salvation of every person.⁶

In Jesus' name. Amen.

4 Matthew 18:18

5 Matthew 7:12

6 1 Timothy 2:4