

“Letting Loose”

Matthew 16:13-20

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi,
he asked his disciples,

“Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”

And they said, “Some say John the Baptist,
but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah
or one of the prophets.”

He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?”

Simon Peter answered,

“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

And Jesus answered him,

“Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah!

For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you,
but my Father in heaven.

And I tell you, you are Peter,

and on this rock I will build my church,
and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.

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.”

Then he sternly ordered the disciples
not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Letting Loose
Matthew 16:13-20
August 23, 2026
Rev. Michael P. Catanzaro

I.

As a way to begin to wrap up our summer worship, today I would like to delve into a bit of heresy. Though a very real threat to the still coalescing 2nd century Christian church, the movement known as Gnosticism actually has roots which stretch back several centuries before Christ. More interesting, though, is that Gnosticism is still very much at work in our modern world, though in ways which are less obvious. Unless, of course, you know where to look.

Named for the Greek word “gnosis, which translates as “knowledge,” Gnosticism is a collection of religious ideas and systems which emphasized *personal* spiritual knowledge and experience above the emerging orthodoxy, traditions, and authority of the early church. Gnostics considered material existence flawed or evil, and believed that the principal means of salvation to be *direct* knowledge of a hidden divinity, which was attained through mystical or esoteric insight. That is to say, secret knowledge.

II.

Gnosticism, in one form or another, has proven itself to be quite popular over the centuries, including our own. Who doesn't love a good mystery and like being in a secret? Moreover, we *all* have had that sense that there is more going in the world than what we can see or are being told, and Gnosticism plays right into that hand. Understanding ourselves to be included among the relatively few who *really* know the score makes us feel powerful and serves to set us apart from and above everyone else. Which is always a nice feeling, just ask any conspiracy theorist.

Religiously, believing there is some kind of shortcut to salvation is more than enough motivation for us to spend our time and energy in search of it. Kind of like the attraction of flicking channels rather than actually watching a show or movie from start to finish. The mere *pursuit* of something makes us feel like we are getting somewhere, regardless of whether or not there is actually anything there to pursue.

III.

Today's sermon text, Matthew 16:13-20, is a fruit of irresistible temptation for the Gnostic. This passage is most often and commonly understood as the moment Christ establishes the earthly church upon the rock that is Peter. For Roman Catholics, this establishes the line of Papal succession which serves to confer both power and authority to the church. Protestants go the other direction, however, understanding this to be the occasion when the very onerous weight and responsibilities of the church *universal* were placed upon the very human shoulders of *all* the faithful. In either interpretation, the rush to understand and connect the dots of our origin serves primarily to overshadow what it is that we, as the church, have been actually created and called to do. Namely, to bind or loose those things on earth which, correspondingly, will also be bound or loosed in heaven; the means of which are the "keys of the Kingdom."

IV.

Unfortunately, the biblical record is woefully unhelpful in ascertaining the specifics of these "keys"; which, in and of itself, is odd. You don't just hand a teenager the car keys and say, "Go ahead, have at it." So, either the keys are used to access, operate and unlock things which are stunningly self-obvious and require no explanation, or somewhere there must exist a detailed user's manual. Or, failing that and at the very least, a Quick-Start FAQ Sheet floating around.

Traditional orthodoxy takes the easy way. These "keys of the kingdom" are simply power and authority, in whatever form or forms. A Gnostic, however, would choose a different path. While I can make no claim that this was actually the case, historically, it is not a stretch to imagine that for the Gnostic such keys serve as a very tempting breadcrumb which leads the way to some deeper, hidden, and secret truth which grants to a mere few a power and authority unknown to most.

V.

I spent a great deal of time this week thinking about these keys. The first thing to notice is that these are keys *of* the kingdom, rather than keys *to* the kingdom. While the former indicates a "belonging to" which conveys an internal, all-accessibility, the latter indicates a simple "admittance" or the

ability to operate from the external. The second thing to notice is that there is more than one key; this could mean as few as two keys or, alternatively, a great many.

While I don't have a definitive answer, my gut tells me that rather than a couple of car keys (one to the ignition, one to the trunk) or house keys (one to the front door, one to the back) a better analogy is probably that big ring of keys which the school janitor always had hanging from their belt giving entry and access to every room, door, cupboard, and closet in the building. If you have ever seen such a ring of keys and wondered about the mysteries it unlocked, then you, *too*, might be a Gnostic.

VI.

Rather than focus on the exact nature of these Keys of the Kingdom, or the specific number, I would like to suggest that we operate under the assumption that we have *all* the keys, to open *any* door, along with the accompanying and requisite power and authority to do *anything*...that we *choose* to do. While an argument may certainly be made that as the church this is our *responsibility*, I would propose, instead, that we might start by seeing these Keys as, both, an opportunity and our great privilege. As followers of Christ, as the church, we have been given *everything* necessary to be *of* the kingdom such that we might shape, alter, bolster, and create the Kingdom of God here on earth; and, in doing so, *literally* change the world.

VII.

As it turns out, though, the Gnostics are 100% correct about a few things. There *is*, in fact, some secret knowledge beyond what we can see or are being told. Moreover it is ingeniously hidden in plain sight right in front of our very noses. Gnostics are also correct that we *can* discover a direct knowledge of the divine which remains hidden to most. We do so through the mystical and esoteric insights derived from getting off our...er...couches, out of our ruts and getting into the game which is our life together. We do so by actually *using* the Keys of the Kingdom which have been given to us, each of us, regardless of all the places we think we need to go, people we feel we must see, or things we insist we have to do. The keys aren't hanging on the wall somewhere, they are housed in our hearts, and our minds and, most importantly, in our imaginations. What do we imagine our church to be? We do we imagine our world to be?

VIII.

This morning, summer's penultimate Sunday, the Canton and Brick Chapel Churches *each* find themselves at a movement of epic imagining about what they will choose to do next with the Keys of the Kingdom which have been, respectively, given to them. While the folks on the Park may not yet have fully caught on to this, the folks at the Chapel are acutely and unavoidably aware.

The town church is in the midst of a changing of the guard. The people are there but the question is who, *specifically*, will fill the roles? Who will assume responsibility and ownership for the Church on the Park during that critical period of time after *this* pastor leaves and until the *next* one arrives? The country church has fewer to whom the keys might be turned over, so the question becomes do we strive to simply preserve the past, or is it possible to move into the future in some new way?

IX.

In the centuries which have elapsed since Jesus first handed over the Keys of the Kingdom to Peter, the church has unfortunately become ever more concerned with orthodoxy, traditions, and authority rather than unraveling the mystery and sharing the secret of all the doors we might unlock and the things we might do by being a little more Gnostic in our approach by emphasizing the importance and role *personal* spiritual knowledge. The kind of spiritual knowledge that comes from frequent prayer, daily devotion, dedicated service, and a life-long hope.

If we want to know what this looks like, I would suggest we speak to those church folk who have been around the longest as they are the keepers of the sacred knowledge. They are the ones who are best able to help us in discovering the secret knowledge that is only ever right here, under our own noses, all the time, hiding in plain sight. Namely, that each of us has the power to bind ourselves to God's grace and let loose the Holy Spirit upon our world. Amen.