

The Keys of the Kingdom
August 27, 2017
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Romans 12:1-8:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

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.

The gospel passage today finds Jesus and his disciples in Caesarea Philippi. I went to Caesarea Philippi in May. It was always pronounced "Ceh-SAIR-ea" at seminary, but our tour guide, Julie, insisted that the Israeli's pronounce it CEE-za-rea, which to me sounds more like a NY pizza parlor, but I now call it by the name taught to me in Israel, Caesarea Philippi.

It is at the foot of Mt. Hermon in the Golan Heights and today what remains is a huge cliff with caves, surrounded by springs from the Hermon River, and buildings dating back to about 2,200 years ago. The Seleucid Greeks of Syria and Ptolemaics of Egypt went to war and the Seleucids brought a secret weapon – elephants. They knew when horses smell elephants they panic, and so the Syrians won the war and attributed it to Pan: god of dark and lonely places, Pan being the root of panic,

pandemonium; and they built a shrine to the Greek god, calling it Paneus. Hundreds of years later, Arabs couldn't produce a "p" sound, and so called it as it is still called today, Banius, the Arabic mutation of Paneus.

In Jesus' time, Herod Philip became the ruler of the Banius region after his father, Herod the Great, died in 4 BCE. Philip sought to endear himself to the Roman Emperor Augustus, who had demoted his father. Philip dispelled his Jewish identity and became a pagan Roman, and built a Gentile city on the Banias River, calling it Caesarea Philippi, honoring Augustus and himself. It was perhaps equivalent to modern-day Las Vegas, but much raunchier. Jews were told by orthodox rabbis at this time to never go there.

Yet it is here that Jesus brings his disciples, and asks them who people say he is, and after they answer with a list of names, Jesus asks, "But who do *you* say that I am?"

Simon Peter answers that he is the Messiah, the Son of the living God. Jesus responds that Simon Peter is blessed to have had this revealed to him by God, and Jesus then says, "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church."

There are theories as to what "on this rock" means. Peter is *Petros*, in Greek and rock is *petra*, and so the words are similar; however: Peter, *petros*, is a masculine noun defined as a detached stone, a stone as one might pick up and throw, a small rock or pebble as found along a pathway. Rock, *petra*, a feminine noun is defined as a large mass of rock, a ledge, cliff or cave. So there is Peter, the blessed pebble, and the rock, the cliff upon which Jesus will build his church.

The passage has been interpreted by some to mean that *Peter* was the rock upon which the church would be built, and that he would be thus the first Pope. Others interpret it to mean that Peter's *proclamation* that Jesus is the Messiah is the rock on which the church will be built. What took my breath away as we stood near this giant boulder at Caesarea Philippi, with caves and the history of it being the gateway to Hades, the desolate place, Pan, Banius, that was the gateway to the underworld for pagans, is yet another interpretation: that Jesus said, "You are Peter," and then pointed to the pagan shrine rock/cliff, and said, "and on *this* rock I will build my church."

On this rock, the center of pagan worship; on this rock, the district of the Gentiles; on this rock, the place so vile and repugnant that they are taught not to go there. On this rock, where the living God of "love for all" is not yet known. I want you to go to places like this to build a loving community, perhaps Jesus meant. The place where it seems the most unlikely and least appealing.

Jill Duffield, editor of the Presbyterian Outlook, shared more this week about her experience on Saturday morning 2 weeks ago at the Charlottesville prayer gathering. She and an African American Episcopal minister stood together in a church parking lot and talked above chants coming from the park where the Unite

the Right rally was to be held at noon. The chants grew louder and angrier, audible even above the sounds of the helicopters hovering overhead.

The chants were filled with malicious obscenities and curses, along with the repeated phrase, "The Jews will not replace us." The Episcopal minister shook her head and looked down. Then she looked up and said something quite unexpected: "There are a lot of hurting people over there. There is no joy over in that park. They are hurting. We need to be the church for them, too. If we forget that, we've lost everything that really matters."

Jill says in that moment she felt all her faith fit into a thimble while her counterpart's faith overflowed into the menacing streets outside the protected parking lot. The Episcopal minister was rock solid in who Jesus is and who the church is called to be, and no earthly power was going to cause her to forget it. The gates of Hades will not prevail against it. Blessed are you the rock solid, who has the ability to show care and compassion in the least likely places.

Jesus tells Peter, who has just proclaimed him as the Messiah, Son of the Living God, that he will give him the keys of the kingdom that will bind and loose. Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, Jesus says, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Traditionally, this verse has been interpreted to mean that Peter, the first Pope, has the authority to absolve sin, to both forgive and not forgive, to liberate and to condemn, to pardon and to excommunicate others. And after Peter, the Popes and clergy after him.

In essence, Peter is to be the judge. What I find unsettling about this interpretation is that it clearly contradicts the many Bible verses that remind us that God is to be the judge, not us.

Maybe Jesus is not giving Peter the authority to judge *others'* salvation, but the accountability to consider his own choices, what to bind and what to loose according to God's will. The Greek word for bind means to tie or fasten; to imprison or put in chains. If we think of earth as the physical world and heaven as the spiritual realm, not just the afterlife but the world here and now today without end, what is bound in one's earthly life will affect one's spiritual life.

Thus what is bound, what is controlled and feared and judged will imprison and confine and constrict, too, in the spiritual realm. In contrast, whatever is loosed on earth will be loosed in heaven. Letting go, trusting God, here and now creates freedom of the soul. We loosen our control over people and events and outcomes and choose to love and trust, and our spirits are set free.

Jesus says that Peter's proclamation of recognizing him as the Messiah is a gift from God, and he now has the keys of the kingdom. He is both a recipient of God's salvation, and an agent of it. With Peter's privilege of God's blessing comes the responsibility to be the keeper of the keys.

We, too, are both recipients of God's salvation and agents of it. With privilege comes responsibility. We are brought into relationship with God through Christ, in order to offer ourselves to serve in the Church and world according to our gifts, as the Roman passage declares. We receive God's grace and protection, and we serve God by bringing grace and protection to others, most especially the weak, the vulnerable, the marginalized, the threatened and neglected, so that salvation is truly for all.

As Rabbi Susan Lieder reminded us at the prayer gathering at Kol Shofar on Friday night, "An injustice to one is an injustice to all." We are not saved from violence by declaring war, we are not saved from poverty by hoarding for ourselves, we are not saved from harm by ignoring those who are hurting or being harmed. We find salvation and protection as we help all to have these Godly gifts, and as we trust that evil in whatever form cannot overcome God's grace.

Paul appeals to us in Romans: By the mercies of God, present your bodies as a living sacrifice; holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect. Perhaps conforming to the world is what Jesus meant by binding, and being transformed by the renewing of our minds is what he meant by loosening.

Paul continues: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought. This call to humility will help us to loosen our grip and control over others and ourselves. It causes us to consider that one is not above the other; we are all people with different gifts to contribute. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us. Let us call to mind the Godly gifts we have been given, and live these out.

We are not meant to go it alone, to face the world by ourselves and our limitations, but to give of ourselves, embodying our God-given gifts and sharing with one another so that all may live life to the fullest. This is how we are bailed out of our own imprisonment, by helping others. This is how we live heaven on earth. We loosen and liberate the locked cells of others and we, too, are then set free.

You will find paper in front of you in the pews. I ask that you write on the slip of paper a gift that God has created in you, something, a quality or trait that you know is God given, something for which you are grateful, something that makes you uniquely you. Write this down on one side of the paper.

Next to the gift, write down one way you will give that gift back to God during the coming week. Please put this paper into the offering plate as they are passed later in the service. We will give a special blessing over these gifts.

Theologian David Lose composed a prayer this week based on the Prayer of St. Francis' Peace Prayer, and I offer it here:

Lord God, we pray that you would arm us with courage and compassion sufficient to the challenges of these days and make us heralds of your grace and instruments of your peace.

Where is hatred, let us sow love;
where there is harm, let us bring healing;
where there is prejudice and intolerance, let us offer understanding;
where there is hostility, let us be agents of reconciliation;
where there is despair, let us speak hope;
where there is doubt, let us spark faith;
where there is fear, let us kindle courage;
and wherever there is darkness, let us offer the light of your mercy that enlightens the whole world.

Meet us in our fear, Lord God, and embolden us to side always with the defenseless. Protect all who put themselves in harm's way to keep others safe. Thwart the plans of those who harbor hatred and plot violence. Grant our elected leaders the wisdom to know what it is right and the courage to do it. And bless this nation and people that we might be a blessing to the world you love so much.

This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.