

Time: The Third Wednesday of Lent, March 7th, 2012
Theme: Confession and Holy Absolution: The Keys in Action
Title: The Keys of the Church: Binding and Loosing
Text: Matthew 16:13-20 (with reference to Matthew 18)

Matthew 16:13-20: *¹³Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' ¹⁴And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' ¹⁵He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' ¹⁶Simon Peter replied, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.' ¹⁷And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. ¹⁸And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. ¹⁹I 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.' ²⁰Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ."*

Matthew 18:18: *"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."*

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen. Dear people of God, we have come to a time in our culture and world when it is a popular assumption that if you are "going to church," then you have in fact not been enlightened to realize that most "spiritual" people in America no longer need church. We simply realized the result of the Protestant trend which more and more eliminated any liturgy, office or creed standing between you and God, to the next logical step of American Pop-Christianity which highlights "personal faith" more than any other value in American Christianity. Needless to say New Age Religion is the next logical step beyond that which happens to be huge in America. Following Hindu teaching, perhaps we should just save time and consider ourselves to be God as we return to Satan's original temptation recorded in Genesis 3: "you will be like God (v 4)." Once we get there, then you can be your own church. Indeed, the more independent we are, the less we need each other, and the less we need God.

In fact, the Christian Church in America has emphasized the "personal" so much that the church has been reduced to what might be characterized as a public conference or workshop for spiritual positive-thinking, but you don't really *need* that. Just as you can work-out at home without going to a gym, you can be self-taught when it comes to developing a correct mental framework for spiritual growth. But if you in fact treat church as something that is necessary,

then don't be surprised if someone looks down on you as having fallen into the unfortunate and very old problem of institutionalism.

This kind of thinking dear Christians, which is sinful and dismissive of God's Holy Word, ignores the fact that the Church is not the invention of men, but the creation of God. Jesus said clearly in Matthew 16: ***"I will build my church (verse 18)."*** God is bold to teach us that we are not islands unto ourselves, we were designed to be a body (consider the teaching from 1st Corinthians 12 on the body of Christ; the body of Christ is in fact a synonym for the word "church"). When Jesus taught His disciples to pray in Matthew 6 and Luke 11, He did not teach them to pray, "My father who art in Heaven," but ***"Our*** Father who art in Heaven."

The Christian faith is a corporate faith, it is an organic faith, it is a catholic faith in the sense of a universal confession of many; it is the faith that anticipates the countless myriad of believers in heaven depicted in the book of Revelation. For myself, I am by nature an introvert. I really do not like crowds, but when I'm in church all of that changes. This is one crowd that I love, because it means that I am at home with brothers and sisters in Christ. So Church is the place where I seem to easily overcome my phobias. We were all designed to be in fellowship and to practice the most important sign of the true faith which is love, which by definition requires our extending ourselves to others, to bear one another's burdens, to serve each other as Christ served us...in all of these hallmarks of the faith we see that we are meant to be a Church...more than one. That is why to reduce love to the love of self is no longer love at all, but sin; self-love is Satanic and turns life inwards so that we put ourselves before others, perhaps excluding and forgetting them altogether. That is not the way of Christ.

Why take the time to discuss this relationship-orientation of the Church? Because it reminds us that Church requires contact in order to be blessed. Most importantly we remain in contact with Jesus Christ Himself. Thus, when Christ taught that He would build His Church He revealed the blueprints at the same time. He actually let the cat out of the bag as to how He was going to do it. From heaven, God the Father would give to the followers of His Son the confession (the one voice, the common language, the same speaking) that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God (verses 16-17). But the only way this relationship with Christ can occur is if you have direct contact with Jesus Christ.

People have invested so much time, so much energy, so many pilgrimages, so much yearning, and experienced so much disappointment over the centuries on the issue of where do I find God? We know that if we could really have communion with the Living God then all of our needs would be met, we would be safe, we would set free from the bondage of sin and death; we would have the answers to our fears, our doubts, our shame, and our guilt. If we could find

God then we would be liberated. We would have life and life that never ends. We would find paradise on earth and nothing, but nothing could ever cause us to let it go. If we could actually be touched by God, then we would be full of joy and joy that would last!

Our instincts are given to us for a reason. They usually point to that which is real, and what I'm speaking of is very much real. Christ builds His Church and He tells us that it will come to be and actually be built through confession: Our common speaking of Christ as the Son of the Living God, but we must understand that Jesus does not simply come in a general way to all people. No, rather He has told us that He does not really come to those who do not need Him. Consider Matthew 9:12-13: ***"Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick...For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."***

So dear Christians the first part of confession which experiences the Living Jesus Christ in His Church is the confession that we need Him, it is the confession that we are sinners. Thus 1st John 1:8-9: ***"If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹If we confess our sin, he is faithful and just to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."***

But consider this dear Christian, this confession does not take place in a vacuum. It takes place in the Church that Christ builds. By definition, confession takes place in the context of more than one. When you confess your sins, you confess them to God. There are at least two parties always involved in this. You do not confess in isolation, all alone. But to confess in Church is to confess in the presence of Jesus Christ. It is to know that God has revealed to you not only the place in which you will find Him, but also in the manner in which He will come in that place. You find Him in His Church that He is always building, and He comes when you confess your sin. Some people confess sin, but try to do so apart from the Church. That doesn't work. Others come to Church but do not really confess their sin. That doesn't work. We need both: we need to be in Christ's Church and we need to be there with the right disposition: as a confessing sinner. Now we're talking; now we are in His presence where He promises to be and now we receive Him when He gladly comes to minister to you, the confessing sinner. You have paradise on earth.

Still, something seems to be missing. How do I know for sure? Are we returning to positive thinking and personal faith again? How do I actually and truly and empirically know that Jesus comes to me in His Church while I am confessing...how do I really know that He takes away my sin through His blood that was spilled for me on the cross of Calvary and the victory won through the empty tomb? Where does He touch me? Where does it happen? How do I know that this paradise is actually mine?

Like I said, Jesus gave up the blueprints too in speaking to those who would serve in His office of the ministry: From Matthew 16:19: ***“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.”*** And from Matthew 18:18: ***“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.”***

Dear Christians, “heaven on earth” is not a fantasy. There is one place where it occurs: in Christ’s Church! It happens when the Holy Spirit descends upon the child being baptized; it happens when the curtain of heaven is lifted and you receive at this altar the true body and blood of Jesus Christ in the Holy Sacrament, and it happens...it happens...you are in the presence of Jesus when He comes to you through His office, His ministry, His voice, His word, His keys, His authority that is expressed through His servant called “pastor.” Thus Jesus said to those who would give His forgiveness in Luke 10:16a: ***“The one who hears you hears me, and the one who rejects you rejects me.”***

There is a time and a place in confession to which Jesus says, “This is the way you will know that I have heard your confession of sin, and where you will hear me as speaking from heaven, but here on earth at the same time, that your sins are forgiven.” The pastor reinforces this understanding in individual confession and absolution. He will sit with one ear facing you as representing that ear that connects you to the ear of God; and he will sit with one ear facing the altar as receiving God’s absolution to pass on to you: ***“In the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.”*** God speaks these words to you through your pastor. He will dress with that alb or cassock and surplice so as to remind the entire church – himself included – that he does not serve in his name, but in the Name of Jesus; that the ministry he serves in is not his, but the ministry and office of Christ; that he does not serve with any imagined human “power,” which is no power at all, but by the power of God. He will serve you with words that are not his own, but Christ’s words. ***“I forgive you all your sins.”*** And you will know as you feel the hand of your pastor on your forehead etching the cross on your forehead that this Word and Truth is from Jesus and no one else. And you will know with great assurance that the ordination vow that your pastor made means that your confession dies in the tomb of his ear and is covered through the Gospel of Christ’s blood that travels through that same chamber of your pastor to impute upon you the forgiveness of sins.

This is where it happens. This is how you know. Not in isolation with your “personal faith,” but in Christ’s Church, knowing He comes as you confess your sin, and then knowing finally the power of the keys that loose your sins, unlock your stocks and chains, that free you,

liberating you from the bondage of sin. ***“I forgive you all your sins.”*** These words mean that you have found paradise, you have struck gold; you have life that never ends. The pastor who hears confession should also be a sinner who confesses to his pastor as well. I have had two confessors, two pastors who have served me in the capacity of individual confession and absolution. They are faithful pastors that I trust implicitly and every time I’ve gone, they have demonstrated a proper understanding of this ministry: Christ comes to His people, not to condemn, not to judge, but to unbind from sin with His keys, to say from heaven ***“I forgive you all your sins.”*** And when this happens, the greatest joy is given, you walk away knowing that you are right with God, and the terrible burden has been relieved, you are given new life by the power of God, by the Word of Jesus Christ.

He is here in His Church, He comes to those who confess their sins, and He gives a real ministry: tangible, empirical, touchable, hearable, observable, experienced...these are the keys in action, this is Christ in action, this is where God is found and this is where He has found you. He hears you as you confess your sin. Now hear Him as He speaks to you: ***“I forgive you all your sins.”***