

Matthew 16C

- Last week we ended in the middle of an important moment for the Apostle Peter
 - Peter made his personal, public confession of Christ and as he did, he set the example for all who followed in the Church
 - Moreover, as a result of his boldness in that moment, the Lord confirms Peter as the early leader in the church
 - He grants Peter a unique responsibility, a role that is different than many assert yet still significant
 - We need to return to this moment today, but before we do I thought it was important to address one of Peter's most important roles
 - As we all know, Peter guards the pearly gates of Heaven...or so all the jokes would tell us, right?
 - Like the story of the day (in the future) when Bill Gates dies and meets Peter at the pearly gates

Saint Peter takes Bill to see his new house. It's a small wooden cottage with a black & white tv, two bathrooms, and a straw bed. Right next to him was a huge castle made of silver and gold.

"Hey how come that guy gets a castle and I'm stuck with this cottage?!" Bill Gates asked. Peter replies, "That castle belongs to the builder of the Titanic."

"What? How does the man responsible for the greatest maritime disaster in history get a better house than me?" asked Bill Gates.

"Because the Titanic only crashed once," Peter answered.

- Now that we have that out of our system, let's return to the story that truly matters...

Matt. 16:16 Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

Matt. 16:17 And Jesus said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven.

Matt. 16:18 "I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.

Matt. 16:19 “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven.”

- Peter responded to Jesus' question stating emphatically that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God, and Jesus responds with three important statements
 - First, in v.17 Jesus tells Peter that what he knew about Jesus did not come to Peter by way of human agency
 - Jesus says flesh and blood didn't reveal the truth about Jesus to Peter
 - Jesus says “flesh and blood” not “people” to emphasize that not even Peter's own flesh and blood deserved credit
 - No one taught Peter to know that Jesus was Lord, but neither did Peter's own flesh and blood figure it out
 - Jesus said the Father in Heaven revealed that spiritual truth to him
 - If Peter grasped the truth about Jesus, it would be because the Father gave Peter that understanding
 - And as I said last week, that's the way faith comes to every human being
 - Peter isn't being singled out because he was unique...on the contrary, Jesus calls Peter a model for the rest of us
 - In v.18 Jesus changes Simon's name to Peter and says He will build His church upon “this” rock
 - And the gates of hell will not prevail against it
 - In this moment, Simon became forever known as Peter, because up to this point, his given name had been Simon, son of Jonah
 - His new name, Peter, means rock in Greek, and the term can be used for a rock of any size, from pebble to boulder
- Then Jesus makes a play on the word rock, saying upon “this” rock He will build His church
 - Jesus is making a comparison between His Church and Peter, but the question is what connection was Jesus making?

- The answer you get depends upon whom you ask
- If you ask the Catholic religion, they say Jesus meant Peter personally
- They believe Peter himself was the “rock” upon which the Church was built because Jesus said on this rock He builds the Church
- From this interpretation, Catholics assert that Peter was the first pope
 - But the text itself contradicts that conclusion in two ways
 - First, Jesus said He builds His Church on “this” rock; He didn’t say I build my church upon you, Peter
 - Secondly, the word Matthew uses for Peter’s name is *petros*, which a masculine Greek word meaning stone or rock
 - But the Greek word for the rock that establishes the Church is *petras*, a feminine word meaning a massive stone like a cliff
 - So the Greek grammar doesn’t support the conclusion that the Church rests upon Peter
 - So what is the rock upon which Jesus builds His Church? It must be something connected to Peter and to the events of that moment
 - And it is...Jesus was speaking about the larger process taking place in that moment
 - It was Peter’s confession, yes, but it’s much more
 - Peter’s confession didn’t start the process...the Father started it by revealing truth to Peter
 - Followed by Jesus’ invitation to Peter to speak what he believed
 - And it finally ended with Peter’s public confession
 - Peter’s response was just the last link in that chain
 - And that’s why Jesus used the Greek word *petras*, referring to a cliff or mountain, to describe the foundation of the Church
 - And as Peter confessed he became the first stone (rock) in a massive mountain of people Jesus intended to build

- Jesus would build His church one disciple at time, and each of them would enter in the same way Peter demonstrated
 - This was an important lesson for these early leaders of the Church
 - Because in their minds, there had only ever been one way a person could be part of the family of God: you had to be Jewish
 - And to be part of the Jewish nation, you had to be born physically as a descendant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob
 - While a Gentile could convert to the Jewish religion by pledging a commitment to Yahweh, they were not becoming Jewish
 - They were considered a proselyte, a God-fearing Gentile, not a Jew
 - It's true that the Jewish people occupy a special place in God's plan, but at the same time, being born a Jew has never saved anyone
 - Eternal life only comes by faith in the promises of God, and in the Jewish nation some Jews had saving faith while many did not
 - Nevertheless, Jews in Jesus' day were taught by Pharisees that simply being born Jew was enough to please God
 - And conversely, Pharisees said if someone wasn't born Jewish, God didn't love the person and they didn't matter to God
- That bias wasn't compatible with Jesus' plan for His Church, so Jesus is showing His disciples that physical identity would not matter in the Church
 - The Church would be built upon faith alone, a faith brought by the Father and confessed by those who receive it
 - Which means anyone from any background may become a part of the Church
 - In fact, the Father in Heaven invites people from every tribe and nation and tongue to enter the church just as Scripture foretells
 - That's why Jesus gives the institution a new name, church, which in Greek is *ekklesia*, meaning the invited or called-out ones
 - Jesus was establishing something new, something that had never existed before on earth

- He was establishing an institution of people invited by the Father to enter and be called-out of the world, not just Israel
- The Church would be separate from the world just as Israel was also to be separate from other nations
- We are separated by our confession of Christ, meaning what we believe and speak about Jesus separates us from the world
- And Jesus tells us the gates of Hell will not prevail or hold power over those who share in this confession, over those in the church
 - Some interpret Jesus' statement to mean the Church institution will not be defeated by Satan, and certainly that is true as well
- But Jesus isn't talking about the institution...He's talking about the people in the institution
 - When we say "the Church" in any context, are we talking about an institution or are we talking about people?
 - And Hell will not prevail against the Church, meaning it will have no eternal power over those who confess Jesus as Christ
 - To summarize it simply, Jesus will build a body of people through faith alone in Christ alone, and they will receive eternal life
- That's why Jesus changed Peter's name...because Jesus was emphasizing that by his confession Peter obtained a new identity
 - No longer was Peter's identity before God based on his physical birth into a Jewish family
 - Instead, Peter's identity would be found in a new birth through a confession of Christ
 - No longer was Peter to be known by his Jewish name but by a name given to him by Jesus
 - Of course, Peter was no less Jewish, but Jesus' point is that Jewishness would no longer be a meaningful distinction in this new institution

Gal. 3:26 For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.

Gal. 3:28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

- Peter's new birth brought a new identity and a new eternal future
- His future shifted from Hell to the Kingdom and there's nothing the devil or Hell itself could do about it
- So Peter's example of joining the church through a confession of faith becomes an example or model for how the Church itself would be built
 - But Jesus goes a step further in Peter's case...Jesus assigns Peter the role of leading the transition from Jew to Gentile
 - Jesus assigns Peter the responsibility of moving the Gospel from the Jewish people outwardly to the rest of the world
- In v.19 Jesus makes His third statement to Peter saying Peter will have the "keys to the kingdom"
 - Moreover, Jesus says what Peter binds and looses on earth will be bound and loosed in Heaven
 - These are remarkable words, and Protestant Christians have struggled to make sense of them
 - Some say this is a reference to Peter's confession, but Jesus' mention of binding and loosing go beyond a confession of faith
 - I think our struggle comes from our desire to stand opposed to the Catholic view of Peter as the first pope
 - And while Peter wasn't a pope, nevertheless he was given a very important leadership position as Jesus' words clearly indicate
 - And we can't ignore that truth simply because we don't want to lend support to a wrong interpretation
 - Jesus doesn't explain the meaning of His words here, but we do have other Scripture to give us the answer, specifically in Acts
 - In the book of Acts, the story of Peter centers on how Peter turns these three keys to unlock (or loose) the Gospel
 - On three separate occasions, Peter was personally involved in the outward expansion of the Gospel in its earliest days
 - The first of these moments happened at Pentecost, when 3,000 Jewish men came to faith in the Gospel at the preaching of Peter

- This was the first example of mass evangelism following Jesus' departure and it was connected to Peter's preaching
 - And it was also the first time that the Holy Spirit indwelled believers, which Paul tells us is the definition of the Church itself
 - All those indwelled by the Holy Spirit are part of the Church, and all believers receive the Holy Spirit at the moment of faith
 - But there were are few notable exceptions to this pattern in the early church, where the arrival of the Spirit was delayed
 - And those exceptions were connected to Peter's role and to Jesus' words here in Matthew
- For example, at Pentecost Peter preached, men believed in the name of Jesus, and then the Holy Spirit came
 - From that moment, the Jewish people began to respond to the Gospel in large number
 - Soon the church was growing quickly among the Jews in Jerusalem and beyond
 - What Peter let loose at Pentecost among the Jewish people, Heaven let loose all over Judea
 - It was as if Peter had turned a key by his preaching at Pentecost, unlocking a door to the kingdom among the Jews
- The moment of Pentecost was the first of Peter's three keys to the Kingdom, the moment when the Jewish people began to respond to the Gospel
 - And the Lord used Peter to make that happen *not* because Peter was necessary to God but because the Lord elected to work through Peter
 - Jesus was using Peter to lead the outward movement of the early church
 - And the first key Peter turned was to invite the Jewish people to join the Church at Pentecost
 - The second and third keys worked in similar ways
 - The second key was turned in Acts 8 when Peter traveled into Samaria to confirm the evangelistic work of Philip

- As Peter arrives in Samaria, he finds men and women who had come to faith on the basis of Philip's preaching
 - But these believers had not yet received the Holy Spirit
 - Why not? Because the Lord was waiting for Peter to preside over this next step of the outward movement of the Gospel
 - Until Peter turned that key on earth, the Lord hadn't confirmed their entry into the Church
 - We finally see that moment later in Acts 8

Acts 8:14 Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent them Peter and John,

Acts 8:15 who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit.

Acts 8:16 For He had not yet fallen upon any of them; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

Acts 8:17 Then they began laying their hands on them, and they were receiving the Holy Spirit.

- Samaritans weren't Jews, but neither were they like other Gentiles...in Jewish thinking they existed between Jew and Gentile
- So the Lord made Samaritans the second stop along the Gospel's outward journey to the world
- So, just as for the Jews at Pentecost, Peter's presence was required before the Lord ushered Samaritans into the Church by the Holy Spirit
 - Peter turned a second key, and what Peter loosed through his personal ministry, Heaven loosed everywhere among Samaritans
 - Regardless of how much Jews hated Samaritans, nevertheless the apostles could not deny what was happening
 - The Lord had accepted Samaritans equally as members of the Church
 - Once again, the Lord confirmed that upon this rock, that is upon the example modeled by Peter, His church would be built
- Finally, Peter is called to turn a third key to open the church to Gentiles everywhere – but if you remember the story in Acts, Peter was reluctant at first

- Because of His Jewish upbringing, Peter initially didn't want to reach out to Gentiles with the Gospel
 - In Acts 10 the Lord had to "persuade" Peter to go to the Roman centurion, Cornelius, in a powerful dream
 - But we should ask why was it so important to God that Peter be the one to convert Cornelius? Why not send someone else?
- Because Peter had been given the keys to the Kingdom for all peoples, for Jews, Samaritans *and* Gentiles
 - Heaven would let the Gospel loose when Peter opened the door by His preaching, as God appointed
 - So it fell to Peter to turn that key by preaching to the first Gentile, converting him and his family
 - And as a result they received the Holy Spirit

Acts 10:44 While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message.

Acts 10:45 All the circumcised believers who came with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also.

Acts 10:46 For they were hearing them speaking with tongues and exalting God. Then Peter answered,

Acts 10:47 "Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did, can he?"

- So Peter turned his third key and let the Gospel loose among the Gentiles
 - And Heaven responded by sending the Gospel to all nations, to the ends of the earth
- And after soon after this moment, Peter disappears from the pages of the Acts, because his mission had been completed
 - He turned three keys, and each time he introduced a new group of people to the Kingdom of God
 - And with each turn, Heaven responded by pouring out the Holy Spirit upon a new group of humanity, leading to a flood of new believers

- The delayed arrival of the Spirit was a testimony to the apostles and to all the Church that Jesus was at work building His Church as promised
 - He was building upon the rock of Peter's example, through faith and confession one person at a time
 - And He was doing it among all people, not just the Jewish people
- As I opened our teaching last week, I mentioned that to prepare these men for ministry, Jesus needed to teach them two basic lessons
 - First, they needed to understand that Jesus was God, the Messiah
 - Jesus' identity is central to our salvation and to the message of the Church
 - Don't settle for those who agree Jesus was a good Man or a good Teacher or even a Prophet or anything less than what Jesus claimed to be
 - The only Son of God, God Himself in the form of Man, the only name under heaven by which we may be saved
 - Everything starts there or we have nothing at all
 - But secondly, Jesus needed His disciples to understand that the mission of the church is fundamentally about spreading that confession to others
 - The Church is not a secret society or a special club limited to certain worthy individuals
 - Neither is it an open community anyone may join simply by attending a meeting or associating with a crowd of people
 - It is an institution Jesus Himself builds through the testimony of those in the Church, starting with Peter's work to turn three keys
 - And today the doors Peter opened remain open and we are called to invite people to enter with us by faith in Jesus Christ
 - That's our mission, and nothing is more important and nothing can take the place of that mission
 - We can never allow the enemy to entice us to follow after a different mission or to substitute other worthy goals for Jesus' goal

- Because the enemy will try to convince you that solving earthly needs is the mission of the church, but they are merely the means to an end
 - Feeding hungry people is commendable and it can be very helpful to the mission of the church...if it leads to opportunities to share the Gospel
 - Building houses for the homeless, offering shelter to the battered or abused, taking care of orphans, opposing immoral government policies...all of those things are worthwhile crusades...
 - If they lead to opportunities to save souls
- On the other hand, if those pursuits become our goals...then we have forgotten why Jesus called us
 - Because unsaved people with full bellies end up in the same place as hungry unbelievers
 - Unbelievers living in nice homes end up in the same place as unbelievers living on the streets
 - Unbelievers with foster parents and unbelievers with government aid and unbelievers living morally good lives...still end up in Hell
- The mission of the church is keeping people from the gates of Hell, and only entry into the Church stops the power of Hell
 - And entry into the Church requires a confession of faith like Peter made
 - And we are the Lord's instrument to bring that confession to the world
 - And we do not have authority to change the message or decide for ourselves what the best way is to build the Church
 - Jesus will build His church, He says, and He does it only upon the model that Peter showed us
 - And do you want evidence of how serious Jesus is about maintaining His authority and control over how His church reaches the world?
 - Take a glance at the very next verse in this passage

Matt. 16:20 Then He warned the disciples that they should tell no one that He was the Christ.

- The disciples had just heard Jesus confirm Peter's testimony that He was the Christ
 - If that group was at all in doubt about Jesus' identity before this moment, there were no doubts now
 - And then immediately after saying He would build His church on that confession, Jesus instructs them not to share the news
- We know the reason why Jesus is asking these men to stay silent: because the offer of the Kingdom was no longer available to Israel
 - There was no reason to broadcast the news of Jesus as Messiah, for that nation could no longer receive it in that day
- But now we have a second reason for Jesus' command...because Jesus was waiting for the arrival of the Church at Pentecost
 - Until Peter turned the keys of the Kingdom, Heaven was not going to loose the Gospel
 - And the Lord had established the way that would happen and the timing for that to happen
 - And the disciples were not free to re-imagine or reinvent that plan
 - Now we might assume that any time we share the Gospel and any method we might dream up is equally pleasing to Christ
 - And certainly Paul says elsewhere that any preaching of Christ is good even if our motives for doing it are wrong
 - But Paul's point is that Christ was being preached in both cases
 - So even though the preacher's motives were wrong, at least the Gospel was being preached and that's the mission of the church
 - What we're learning here today is that we must be aware of the opposite problem: having the *right* motives, but the *wrong* methods
 - In Jesus' day, it would have been wrong to share the news of Him to others in the nation because Jesus determined that time was past
 - And today we can find the wrong ways to serve Jesus in the church if we forget the true mission of the church

- As you work in the church or as you live as a witness for Christ, always ask yourself if what you are doing is contributing to the mission?
 - Does it lead people to Christ in the way Jesus asked us to do?
 - Or does it merely bring someone to church? Or serve a physical need? Or make us feel better?
 - Other institutions are working to feed, clothe and care for people, and the church should do that too from time to time
 - But no one else has the power to save people from the gates of Hell, no one else has the Gospel...that's ours to share