

**Installation Sermon for Rev. Sebastian Meadows-Helmer  
Sept. 12<sup>th</sup>, 2010, by Rev. Linda Douglas  
Matthew 16:18 -19**

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.

Imagine several months have passed since this joyous festival service. Your newly installed Pastor Sebastian has been preaching the Gospel faithfully, and there have been new visitors to the church. One day, two agnostics, non-believers, are walking by the church and one says to the other, "I see you've gone and heard that preacher several times. You don't believe all that stuff, do you?"

And the other replies, "No, but he does."

Could that conversation actually happen? It might. For your pastor who is being installed on this festive day is a person of conviction.

And he will be preaching the Word of God with boldness and power. It is that power which I want to talk about today: the power given to a congregation, and the power that comes from God alone.

This power is symbolized in this morning's gospel as the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Most of you probably have not thought about the Office of the Keys since your Catechism class. Jesus has the keys of the kingdom in his hand. In the book of Revelation he came to John and said, "Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades."

Only God could make a statement like that. Yet the creator of life, the author of the universe, humbled himself. The Almighty God stepped down from his throne on high, assumed human form, took upon himself our sin and guilt, and by his death on the cross made atonement for the sins of the whole human race. Christ died. Christ conquered death. Christ lives and reigns for all eternity. And in his hands, he says, "I have the keys of Death and Hades. I am able to free them from death and hell."

The incredible thing is that these keys which Christ has in his hands, these keys that open and close the gates of hell, that open and shut the portals of heaven, keys that the Lord of lords possesses – these keys have been given to you, Christ the King/Dietrich Bonhoeffer Lutheran Church. Christ said, "All authority ... has been given to me." With this authority Christ has

delegated the power of these keys to you here on earth. He gave this power to Peter – the spokesman for all the disciples; he gave it to the twelve; and he gave it to the little congregation assembled in the upper room on Easter Eve when he appeared to them with the blessing, “Peace be with you.” Three times he spoke the words, and three times he passed on the keys, “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.” Or as another passage puts it, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any; they are retained.”

The Office of the Keys is the power, the authority, to preach the Word and administer the Sacraments, the power to forgive and retain sins. This means that you – the church of God – are to forgive the sins of the penitent and open the doors of heaven to them; and you are to retain the sins of the impenitent and close the door of heaven to them as long as they do not repent. These are the keys in your hands. This is the power which Jesus has given you. It’s really amazing when we think of how weak and frail and unworthy we are! Yet you have the keys of the kingdom, “even though,” as Luther says, “all of you were but stable boys.” Of course, you can’t all crowd into this chancel to speak the comforting, heaven-opening words over the Eucharist; you can’t all squeeze into this pulpit to preach the Gospel; you can’t all dip your hands into the water of the baptismal font and pour its regenerating water on an infant’s brow. Nor have you all been called by this congregation to do so.

But one has been called and trained to do so, one who holds fast the faithful Word as he has been taught, one who is able by sound doctrine to exhort and convince. In his hand you are placing the keys of the kingdom to be used among you. This is what you are doing today, as you, the people of Christ the King/Dietrich Bonhoeffer, confirm the solemn call extended to Sebastian to be your pastor. In your name the pastor will do that which is the right and the responsibility of all the members of this congregation: the opening of the door of heaven with the keys – with the saving Gospel, the cleansing Sacraments, and the comfort-giving forgiveness.

And yet, properly understood, it is not you who have called Pastor Sebastian. It is God, who through you has called him to serve here.

Otherwise, by what right can any pastor stand before others and say, “I forgive you all your sins” and “Repent and believe the Gospel” when he dips a hand in baptismal water or lifts a cup of communion wine to your lips? It is not because Sebastian is

better than any of the members of this congregation. It is because God has called him through you. Through you, God whispered to him and conscripted his service to administer the keys of the kingdom of heaven.

To you, the congregation, Jesus gave two keys, and you are entrusting them to your pastor. One key is to enlarge the church, and the other to keep it pure. On one key is written "Use this to win." On the other is written "Use this to warn." Jesus wants you to use both of them faithfully.

The key to win is the "Opening Key." You – pastor and congregation together – will be using it as long as you keep the preaching of the Gospel as the central focus of this congregation, as long as you develop a greater appreciation of the Sacrament of the Altar, as long as you derive still greater meaning from your Baptism, and use repentance in a meaningful way. You will be using the opening key by your witness and worship in the home, by the Sunday School classes and Bible studies held here, by the work of your church in its Mission for Others, and by your own personal testimony to the Gospel. In these ways "whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

There is also the key to warn – not only to warn unbelievers to repent and prepare for Christ's return but also to lovingly warn one another that we are not just to go through the motions and the routines of our worship while our hearts are somewhere else. The key to warn it also to be used in a congregation, should these words of Scripture apply to it: "This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me."

It is so essential that pastor and people have the right relationship – the right partnership as they work together! Congregations can have a completely wrong attitude towards their pastor. The either expect too much of the pastor or else they expect the wrong thing. For example, one congregation, in calling a new pastor made the following list of qualifications. He should be energetic and enterprising, yet ripe in experience and wisdom. Not under 30 nor over 45. Married, with a wife who is anxious to help, and must be neither too good looking nor too homely, and neither too fat nor too thin. He should not be bound to the forms of either high church or low. He should be a good preacher, able to put across his message eloquently and briefly. Devout, broad-minded. An inspiration to the flock, but just a bit thick-skinned.

In response to this set of qualifications, someone said, "All that congregation wants is an earthly saint!" That's like another congregation that wanted its pastor to be – born in Bethlehem – work for nothing, and – stay forever.

A congregation needs to recognize the limitation of its pastor, who, after all, is a human being. And one of the quickest ways to deny the priesthood of all believers – is to promote the heresy that everything in the life of the church depends on the minister. A congregation needs to recognize that in giving the keys of the kingdom to its pastor, it does not absolve itself of its own responsibility and call to service – what we refer to as “the priesthood of all believers.” The congregation still bears the keys. And the way in which you use these keys in this congregation depends on your attitude towards the office of ministry and towards your pastor. I would like to suggest some guidelines as to how you, the bearers of the keys, are to regard Sebastian, your pastor, whom you are entrusting with the keys. To you, the people of Christ the King/Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the following loving responses to the Gospel will guide you as you begin to work with your new pastor.

1. First of all, trust confidently that your pastor, as a faithful steward, will always try to do everything to the glory of the Saviour for the best interest of this congregation.
2. Remember that the pastor is a special target for the devil’s arrows. His Achilles’ heels are pride and fear. So, with your prayers build a strong wall of defence around the pastor.
3. Ask God for an extra measure of the Holy spirit for your pastor that the pastor might have courage to speak the Law fearlessly and the Gospel winsomely.
4. Do not expect your pastor to rely on visions or dreams to know when your loved ones are sick or in distress. The pastor cannot apply the keys of the kingdom to those whose needs are not known.
5. Your pastor is not perfect or infallible. For the most part, overlook any failings he may have and look into the mirror to see if your weaknesses are not at least sometimes greater in size and number. If some fault appears to be serious, tell him about it in a loving way. You will find him responsive.
6. Do not judge the pastor’s motives or think unkindly about him on the basis of hearsay. Do not expect to hear only good things about the pastor, for even Jesus did not please everybody, especially not those whom he rebuked because of their sins.
7. Don’t tie down your pastor with all kinds of red tape. Take responsibility for some tasks yourselves so that the pastor might be freed for the central task of ministry: the care of souls.
8. Finally, give the pastor and his family the full benefit of your friendship and your love.

And you, pastor elect:

1. “Proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favourable or unfavourable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching.”

There will be those who say to you:

“Preach about the other man, preacher,

The man we all can see —

The man who drinks and beats his wife,

The man who swears and raises strife.

Preach about the other man, preacher,

Don’t preach about me.”

People may say that to you, but it is your responsibility to preach the Law and the Gospel clearly, “rightly dividing the Word of Truth.”

2. Remember, that people do not come to hear you but the Word of God. They sing, “Blessed Jesus at Thy Word, we are gathered all to hear thee.” So make Christ the centre of your preaching, and may it be empowered by love: “We love, because he first loved us;” and “Beloved, since God so loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.”

3. And, through it all, may God the Holy Spirit grant you the grace to live a life of Christ-centred conduct.

And as both congregation and pastor, seek to use these keys of the kingdom in keeping with Jesus’ will, may you remember that in the Office of the Keys you have the very power of heaven itself, the “power of God unto salvation to everyone that believes,” the power of your salvation. May you join the multitudes that see it and marvel and glorify God, who has given such power to human beings. Yes, even to you! Amen!