

## Who Are You and What Have You Done with My Keys?

Matthew 16.13-20

August 23, 2020

Rev. Dr. Tim Phillips



Here I am, Lord ... I will hold your people – not just in my head; unfortunately, not in my hands; but in my heart. And break my heart if need be. Where it is closed, unlock it - so that it is open to love alone.

I want to start with a general question this morning. Who do you trust with your keys? What are the qualities of someone you would trust with the keys to your car or the keys to your home or your PIN number or, in a spiritual sense, the keys to your heart?

There are people in my life who I love dearly. But I am sometimes reluctant to trust them with my keys. I love them. But I know too much about their driving record to easily hand over my car keys. I love them. But house keys provide access to our lives in a very personal way. I love them. But I'm not passing on my PIN. I love them – and *because* I love them – having the keys to my heart makes me feel very vulnerable.

Who, or what kind of person, do you trust with your keys?

The lesson for this morning as we continue this journey with Jesus in Matthew, is about identity and keys. This is 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 [or the Human One] is?” <sup>14</sup>And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”

[An aside here: It would be curious to learn what their assumptions are about re-incarnation. It sounds like they believe the Human One is somehow a *re*-incarnation of one of the great prophets. That's interesting. But probably a conversation for another time.]

<sup>15</sup>Jesus said to them, “But who do *you* say that I am?”

<sup>16</sup>Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

<sup>17</sup>And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Abba in heaven. <sup>18</sup>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. <sup>19</sup>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.” <sup>20</sup>Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

So the question for the day: Who are you and what have you done with my keys?

The story begins with Jesus wondering what people think about the identity of the Human One - or who they think Jesus is. I think there could be some debate how Jesus relates to this title “Son of Man or Human One.” But clearly, he is asking his disciples to talk about who people think Jesus is.

Now I find this surprising. Why would Jesus care what other people think about him?

Didn't this all get settled at the end of Matthew 3 when a voice from heaven said: "You are my Son, my beloved one?" And immediately he finds himself in a wilderness where the Tempter says: "Ok, so *if* you are this beloved one, turn stones into bread; jump off the highest tower of the Temple; take a short cut to ruling the world by just bending a knee to me." Jesus sends the Tempter away because he knows who he is. That's settled.

And when he starts teaching, he winds up those famous beatitudes with: "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and say all kinds of evil things against you falsely ... Rejoice and be glad!"

So it seems odd that Jesus would care about what people are saying about him.

But I wonder.

Whether we accomplish it or not, we are taught that health people do not care what other people think of them. And it's true. If the *only* thing that matters is what other people think or say about us, that's a problem. But it can be important for us to hear anyway.

A couple weeks ago I was frustrated and angry about all the drugs being sold and used around our building. I had enough. And I noticed a guy who was hanging around and I fired a number of questions at him that made it clear I was accusing him of being a dealer. He denied it and had some choice words of his own to say about me and the church.

It turns out that he was at that spot regularly to pick up his wife from work at the Polyclinic. When he got home that night, he unloaded on me in a Facebook post and sent a message to me about how un-Christian I had been. Who was I, after all? That's the "G" rated version of what he said.

I was mortified. I apologized. I agreed that I was not acting out of my best self or the vision I have for what people of faith should be. I was wrong to jump to a conclusion and rush to judgment.

I imagined this message going viral – how this self-righteous preacher falsely accused a guy of being a drug dealer who was just there picking up his wife from work.

In following days, we came to an understanding and I hope to see him again to apologize in person.

But it got me thinking about the kinds of things people are thinking and saying about churches these days. I like to think that I am not one of *those* people. But there I was.

Accurate or not, I think we need to know how people are perceiving us – especially in this day when all kinds of religious folks, not just Christians or Baptist Christians, but folks in every religious tradition are falsely accusing others, using their faith as an excuse for violence, and finding as many ways as possible to lock out the rest of the world.

Jesus himself went through this in the text from last week, calling a foreign woman with a sick daughter at "dog" not worthy of his healing power. She was locked out of his worldview and his ministry.

But she persisted - with persistence that Jesus called "faith." And it meant that Jesus discovered something more about his own identity and ministry.

Jesus asks: “Who do people say that the Human One is?” He asks because it matters. If the *only* thing that matters is what other people say about us, that’s a problem. But there is some value in knowing how people perceive us and what that means for who we are and how we are living our life in the world.

And then the question gets more pointed. Jesus says to the disciples: “But who do *you* say that I am?”

And beloved ones, the followers of Jesus have been trying to answer that question for two thousand years. Lest we think it all got settled on that day with Peter’s answer, I have to remind you that in the very next verses, Jesus starts talking about his call to Jerusalem and his suffering and death. And Peter takes Jesus aside and “rebuked” him for saying such things. “This will never happen,” Peter says.

This same one who had just got an “A” on the pop quiz about the identity of Jesus, is told: “Get behind me, Satan!”

There is a reason why Jesus has just told the disciples not to tell anyone that he was “Messiah.”

It’s like offering a part of yourself and then discovering that whatever truth you told ends up being a prison of assumptions about you locked up in someone else’s head.

You know, after all these years, I still struggle telling people I meet that I’m gay. I know. It shouldn’t matter. I am embarrassed to say that in some settings, I still refer to Patrick as my “friend” rather than my partner of 22 years.

Who cares what people think, right?

But I have discovered that what happens when some people hear this truth about me, it doesn’t matter who I really am. I get just get locked up in their assumptions and they throw away the key.

Peter illustrates to me that we have to keep asking the question: “Who is this Jesus to us?” How have we locked up his story in the prisons of our own assumptions? What evil do we serve by those assumptions?

And it’s this Peter – the Rock – the one who got the words right but the message all wrong, this is the guy to whom Jesus entrusts the keys of the kin-dom?

Yes, Jesus, we know you love Peter. You know his enthusiasm and his his imperfections. But really. Are you sure you want to trust him with these keys?

Catholics and Protestants have argued about the meaning of this text for centuries.

But here is my observation: the Church – capital “C” or churches of any persuasion – has been a lot better at locking than *unlocking*.

According to Jesus, the keys are supposed to do *both* things. But it seems like, ever since Peter, the church has been preoccupied with locking things – locking up heretics and reformers, carving in stone its assumptions about truth, making sure to lock some people in and other people out.

I understand this preoccupation. The world is scary. We want that “safe space” that Micky ScottBey Jones says there isn’t. We want to lock up our projections of perfection so that they can be seen and admired but not touched. We want to lock up our hearts so that no one can hurt us.

But we are trying to create “brave space” here. And that means less locking and more *unlocking*:

More unlocking of those stories we have hidden away about our hopes and our failures, our potential and our imperfections.

More unlocking of those stories about who Jesus is for us without worrying if we got it right or if other people say something different.

More unlocking of our hearts so that we can dare loving the world instead of always defending ourselves against it.

What we do with these keys we have inherited has everything to do with who we are.

Are we the kind of people who want to keep locking things up?

Or are we the brave people – the daring people – who spend our lives trying to unlock the truth of our own stories, trying to unlock our faith for this new moment in history, trying to unlock our hearts to love this broken and beautiful world?

I have to believe that one day we will hear a voice that may sound like the voice of another person – maybe an angry person or the sound of the accusations of folks around us. And that voice will say: I love you but I need to know – who are you and what have you done with my keys?

And today, beloved ones, if you hear that voice, do not harden your hearts – for your sake, for the world’s sake, unlock them.