

## SERMON FOR SUN. AUGUST 23 AND WED. AUGUST 26, 2020

Pent 12A Matthew 16:13-20 “The Creed, the Church, and the Keys”

Dear fellow redeemed of the Lord Jesus Christ, having just celebrated a birthday, I remember that on my 28<sup>th</sup> birthday, Elvis Presly the so called “King of Rock and Roll” died.

His death caused a mass outpouring of grief as hundreds of thousands of people mourned outside his home, Graceland. To this day, many people still place flowers outside the gates of his mansion, which has become a museum.

You may not remember but at first, many didn’t believe that Elvis had really died. Reports of “Elvis sightings” made the rounds year after year. That seems to have mostly died down now, except in supermarket tabloids.

Yet his hardcore fans will tell you why they *confessed* their belief in why they thought he was “the King!” Not one among many, but the one and only. There was no one like him before or since, or so they’d say. We just shake our heads and think, why?

To unbelievers, what Christians do each Sunday is not much different than what pilgrims to Graceland do. Every week we gather to remember the death of our King, for as St. Paul wrote, **“as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes.”**

And we too issue reports that our King isn’t dead, but proclaim, He is Risen! And so today, unbelievers will ask us the same question we’d ask Elvis fans: Why are you here?

What makes **your** King, Jesus, so great? What separates Him from the rest? Those are important questions, ones that St. Peter says we need to be prepared to answer. **PAUSE**

In today’s Gospel lesson Jesus asked His disciples, **“Who do people say the Son of Man is?”** The disciples tell him that some people think that He is John the Baptist come back to life, others that He is Elijah, or Jeremiah. In other words, the people consider Him a holy man, like all the great holy men of old.

Today, many people think the same thing about Jesus. They’ll say he is a holy man, a prophet, a great teacher, a healer – and they are right! Or at least, they are on the right track. For indeed, Jesus is all of those things.

The problem is that their answer is incomplete. Jesus is **not only that**, He is much more. Those answers, say nothing that distinguishes Jesus from any other religious figure.

Similar things are said of Buddha, Confucius, Mohammed, and other holy men honored in our world today.

So, if Jesus is just one among many; the question remains:

Why are we here? What makes *our* King, Jesus, so great?

What *separates* Him from the rest? These are important questions, that sadly, many Christians, even many Lutherans cannot answer. **PAUSE**

In our Gospel lesson, when Jesus says, **“but who do you say I am? Peter** responds for the group saying, **“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”** And with that, Peter has confessed what can be said of **no one else**.

No one else is Jesus **the Christ**, the One appointed by God to be His intermediary, and reconcile God and man, to bring God and His fallen humanity back together again in peace;

AND that Jesus is **the Son of God**, not **A SON**, the one and only being uniquely qualified to reconcile God and man, for He is the only one who is both God and man – the Son of God from eternity, and the Son of Man, born of the Virgin Mary.

Jesus is both **Christ and Son of God!** And this is what separates Him from the rest of the people honored by society.

Jesus has left us no wiggle room. He either is who He said or He is, as C.S. Lewis said, a raving lunatic or a liar.

Jesus ***is the one and only, or He is nothing.***

Other holy men can allegedly teach us how to have inner peace, or be ethical guides, showing us how to make peace with each other, but only Jesus can give us peace with God.

Only Jesus can bring us to the Father. Only Jesus holds the Key to the Kingdom of Heaven.

And it is a key that cannot be duplicated – although many have tried. They all fail though, because they either **overestimate** human capabilities, or they **underestimate** God and His holiness, or both.

Even within the church, legalistic teachers claim that *we can* somehow achieve what God demands, that if only we try hard enough and get the right coaching, we can be self-righteous.

There are others who underestimate God and His holiness, thinking that God would not ask of us more than we can do; that all that He demands is that we do our best and that as long as we're not as bad as the next guy– we'll be okay.

Thus, all man-made religions are built upon the belief that the key to our salvation is in our hands. And that's what makes them so popular! Because if that's the case, we are the ones in control! Just tell me what God requires, and I'll do it.

No faith is involved, just a checklist. And so along with everything else that we want in this life, eternal salvation is just another item on our bucket list: Get a good job, buy a nice house and a fancy car, go on a golf vacation, go to heaven, etc.

Yet what makes this view so popular is also what makes it so deadly. For it assumes that we're not so bad. That our sin is only a repairable defect, because, after all, we're all basically *good* inside. That's what our Old Adam thinks.

But the truth is far different. The truth is that we're dead – as dead as . . . well, Elvis Presley!

We may think we're the kings of our own little kingdoms, but the holiness hurdle is too high when it comes to our salvation.

Because, truth be told, we're dead in our trespasses and "dead men can't jump!" The gulf between God and us isn't a matter of space, or morals, or effort – it is the gulf between life and death.

He is the author of life, and we are living in "**the valley of the shadow of death.**" Due to the effects of sin we are dying, little by little, every day we're one step closer to the grave.

And so, our salvation ***isn't*** a matter of us doing a little bit better, or of us being better than the next guy – it's a matter of ***God raising us from the dead!***

And there's only One who can do that! The One who Himself died and rose to life again. The One who owns the keys to the grave and to Heaven. The One who gave us our life in conception, and the One who gives us new life in Holy Baptism.

And His name is Jesus the Christ, the Son of God. Only He is uniquely qualified to do this work, and who in fact has done it!

He is the only one who hung on a cross with your sins and rose from the dead to save you from eternal death. All the other religious leaders can **try** to tell you **how**, but only One has done it!

And so, the answer to Jesus' question is critically important!

For with the answer **“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God”** Peter and the Twelve and you and me and all who confess this are admitting **that we cannot do it. We can't achieve the holiness that God demands.**

We're admitting that there is only One, and apart from Him, we have nothing, we can do nothing, we are nothing.

It is upon this confession that the Church is built. The Church, which is not a museum dedicated to a dead king, like Elvis' Graceland.

Rather the church is the throne room of our living King, where He reigns by forgiving those who are dead in their trespasses and sin.

And please note, it is He who is building His Church, not us. Why, we cannot even save ourselves! Rather Jesus said, **“On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”**

That's crucial for us to remember. Only Christ can build His Church. His Spirit works where and when He wills, not where and when we will.

And the church is only established our confession of faith, that Jesus is **“the Christ, the Son of the living God.”** The church is built upon His work, His death and resurrection, His Word, on His Sacraments, and on His gifts.

**“The gates of hell shall not prevail against such a church”** because He's already descended into hell, as both God and man, and kicked down those gates!

**“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”** That is why we are here. That is what makes our King so great. That is what separates Him from the rest. He is not one among many, but the one and only, for He owns the Keys to the Kingdom of Heaven and only He can grant eternal life.

But as we heard in the Gospel, Jesus didn't keep the keys to Himself. No! He lends the keys to His Church that confesses He is **“the Christ, the Son of the living God,”** to use even now!

For where this confession of Christ is, there is He;

and where Christ is, there is His Church;

and where the Church is, there are the keys.

As Jesus said in our text, **“I will give you the keys to 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 this is not mere talk!

When I give my car keys to someone, I am giving them permission to drive my car. When I give someone the keys to my house, I am giving them permission to enter it.

I do not relinquish ownership of my car or house when I give the keys, but I permit someone else to use them.

That's what we see Jesus doing in our text. He lends His keys to His Bride, the Church. And He expects her to use them.

And so, while Christ is the One building His Kingdom, He is not doing it in some mysterious and mystical way.

He builds His Church, by allowing the Keys to the Kingdom of heaven to be used by the visible Church.

Forgiveness of sins is what our Divine Service is all about. That is what our liturgy and preaching are all about. The confession of Christ, and the use of the keys to forgive or retain sins. Creed and gifts. Word and Sacrament.

Here in the church we are not only talking about Christ, we **meet Him and commune with Him**. Here we not only **talk about** forgiveness, we receive it. Here we not only **look forward to** the Kingdom of Heaven but *are in it already*.

And so for those who are locked up in their sin and fear, locked up in terror of God's judgment, for those who long to be free, there is a key, the proclamation of good news, the absolving Word which declares to the brokenhearted and the sorrowful:

Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God, died for you. You are forgiven. You are free. And not just someday in the future – but even now!

The forgiveness we declare in our services each week is real, for in the words of the Small Catechism:

this forgiveness is **just as valid and certain, even in heaven, as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us Himself.**

But for those who stubbornly spurn God's gracious offer, who do not desire forgiveness, there is also a key – a key that must also be proclaimed, the binding Word of the Law, forgiveness cannot be given.

It is with both keys that Christ is building His Church, His Kingdom. The sin in us cannot be ignored or excused or explained away but must be harshly condemned.

But also, there is the offer of forgiveness by grace through faith in Christ, and this must be proclaimed in the sweetest way.

You see, God wants no one to be locked out of His Kingdom, but desires all to come to know Him, who He is, and what He has done for all men.

He wants all people to know that He is not just one among many. Rather, He is the only One who can, who is able, and who did reconcile God and man!

**And that is why** we make our weekly pilgrimage here. That is what makes our King so great. That is what's different about Him. That's what separates Him from the rest.

Earthly kings come and go. Holy men are here today and gone tomorrow. But there is only One with the Key.

There is only One who lived and died and lives again.

There is only One who says to you, **you cannot do it**, but blessed are you because I did it for you, in your place.

That is why we are here; to gather in His Name and in His presence, to receive His gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation.

We come here week after week because there is no one else who has those gifts, and no one else who can give them.

**“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”** That is the confession that we make to the world, and it makes all the difference in the world. **AMEN**