

Pentecost 12A. August 27, 2017. Dungeness Valley Lutheran Church, Sequim, WA. Isaiah 51:1-6, Romans 12:1-8, Matthew 16:13-20  
Matthew 16:13-20

13 Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" 14 And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." 15 He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" 16 Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." 17 And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. 18 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. 19 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." 20 Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Romans 12:1-8

1 I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. 2 Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. 3 For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. 4 For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, 5 so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. 6 We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; 7 ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; 8 the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

Dear church – church in Greek is ekklesia, meaning “those called”! Dear Church, Blessed are you for your faith in Christ Jesus, as Peter declared, “the Son of the living God.”

Or I could say, Blessed are you for the love you showed to the community last weekend and throughout the year. You washed windows, gathered

school supplies, brought in produce and crafted items to share, gave offerings for the good of this place and our outreach to others, and, as Paul wrote in our second lesson, leaders were diligent; the compassionate were cheerful!

Or I could say, Blessed are you for your caring for the folks who can't make it to worship, for your visits, for your sharing of meals with one another.

Or I could say, Blessed are you for the small-group transition meetings you are leading and attending. Many expressions of faithfulness have arisen from these. One body, many members.

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Our Gospel writer recalls Jesus saying to Peter, Blessed are you for your witness. You and this witness are a rock and upon this rock I will build my church. And all the blessings you and the church bring to the world will overcome the powers of evil – called Hades here – because those powers cannot withstand the power of love and grace and cheerfulness in the face of suffering.

The keys I give you are to forgive sins, to comfort souls, to unlock confused minds. I've been showing you how all this time.

This is how I understand today's Gospel.

Others have said Jesus' words made Peter the first Pope and the guardian of heaven. These verses are the reason there are so many jokes about going to heaven and meeting St. Peter.

For example, the one about the pastor and the NYC taxi driver who went to heaven about the same time. The pastor was given a modest cottage in which to spend eternity; the taxi driver was given a palace. After a few days the pastor got up the courage to ask St. Peter why the accommodations were so different; after all, he had served the church for 40 years. "Ah, yes," replied St. Pete, "Well, while you preached, people slept. But when he drove, people prayed." ☺

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Matthew says Jesus gave Peter the keys to the kingdom. What then are such keys? Our Lutheran catechism states, the Office of the Keys is the "special authority which Christ has given to his church on earth to forgive the sins of repentant sinners."

So, let me go back to the beginning, dear Church.  
It might help to remember the old Vacation Bible School song:  
I am the church! You are the church!  
We are the church together!  
All who follow Jesus,  
all around the world!  
Yes, we're the church together!

1. The church is not a building;  
the church is not a steeple;  
the church is not a resting place;  
the church is a people.

2. We're many kinds of people,  
with many kinds of faces,  
all colors and all ages, too  
from all times and places.

3. Sometimes the church is marching;  
sometimes it's bravely burning,  
sometimes it's riding, sometimes hiding;  
always it's learning.

4. And when the people gather,  
there's singing and there's praying;  
there's laughing and there's crying sometimes,  
all of it saying:

I am the church! You are the church!  
We are the church together!  
All who follow Jesus,  
all around the world!  
Yes, we're the church together!

And, I dare say, the church is even larger than that! Godliness has no boundaries. We cannot put God into a box. We cannot, I dare say, even begin to comprehend the awesomeness, the brightness, the goodness. As Micah reminded the faithful thousands of years ago, "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8) One invisible body, many members.

So, dear Church, dear people of God, YOU are the church. You started in the synagogue. You have been forgiven and are now given the awesome power to forgive, to say, “let’s wipe the slate clean and start over.”

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We just had our beloved granddaughter here for almost 2 weeks. A fifteen-year old in a well-set-in-their-ways household of reasonably tidy seniors! Was it a tranquil 2 weeks? Nope! Did she make her presence known throughout the building when I brought her to work one day? Yep!

Did we all take turns apologizing? Yes. “Let’s wipe the slate clean,” echoed a few times within our walls. To our relief and delight once those words were spoken.

Using the keys of the kingdom to forgive, to unlock the minds that harbor hostility, anger, fear, rebellion, laziness, micromanagement one of another – unlock them to allow in the light of love, the light of God, the light of what Jesus called the Kingdom: the life-giving place that overcomes the evil of the world which cannot stand up to it.

There are moments when, like Peter, you confess your faith in Christ, when you do something just right, when you grasp more of God’s purpose than you did yesterday, when things come together if only briefly, and when you sense God’s spirit at work in you and among us. At these moments, which I have sensed often in the last few weeks here, it makes sense to pause and give thanks. Thank you, Lord. Thank you, dear Church.

Jesus asked Peter and asks us, “Who do you say that I am?” How we answer that will help our town be able to answer, “Who do you say that DVLC is?” One of those places of grace, I trust!

Here’s a poem recently written by a retired pastor from Port Townsend, the Right Reverend Bill Maxwell. It’s entitled, “A PARISH CHURCH.”

Our parish church doesn't have many standards  
that I'm aware of. Straight, gay, the fairly well-to-do,  
those living from hand to mouth, some with doctor's  
degrees, the functionally illiterate, military heroes,  
ardent pacifists, deeply religious, doubters,  
very likely an adulterer or two or a greedy subject

of an IRS audit, --- all these folks occupy this space on a typical Sunday morning. All of us are here, together, no questions asked.

We choose to act as though God is doing what God has always done: loving every one of this strange crowd, never abandoning even those who have abandoned Him, always feeding those who present themselves with outstretched hands, enfolding with forgiving love those who fumble around and those who have standards more rigid than His own.

We are all fair game for our Risen Lord. He continues to associate with the likes of us, always dishing out grace in a thousand different modes, always loving with a splendid lack of discrimination. Here we are, together, where, hopefully, Gospel pushes through, and we head out the doors to be the heart and hands of Christ in this precious, peculiar world in which we have been plunked down.

God bless you, dear Church, as you go about your work, your play, your worship, your struggles, your fun this week. God bless the young who go to school, those who clothe, feed, teach and read to them. God bless each of you – for God does exactly that: each and every day. Amen.