

Sunday October 17, 2021  
Lesson 7: The Church as a Discerning Body  
Scripture: Matthew 16: 13-19

**Context:**

The 2021 fall series is titled “Belong.” Each unit will focus on a way the people of God are called to seek community and discover how God has connected us to one another. Today we continue to unpack the unit titled “Into the Future,” an exploration of the early church’s foundations and a call to return to our roots for renewal. This lesson “The Church as a Discerning Body” explores how Jesus calls the church to discern how to empower and equip one another in life, discovering how God is at work in the challenges of the kingdom of God.

The lesson comes from the gospel of Matthew and recounts a conversation between Jesus and his disciples. This conversation comes as an important shift in the text as Jesus begins to move from Galilee to Jerusalem. As such, the tone and pronouncements of Jesus change from general ministry to a direct focus on what it means to follow Jesus: the way of discipleship is the way of the cross.<sup>1</sup> Jesus continues to repeat to the disciples how following him will cost them something including their very lives.

The text opens with Peter’s confession, as he responds to the question Jesus asks of what people speak of him, proclaiming Christ as the Son of God. This speaks directly to the other reports people have of Jesus naming him as another John the Baptist, Elijah, or one of the other prophets. Simon Peter is the first one to name correctly who Jesus is and what he has come to do.

As a result of Simon Peter naming the identity of Jesus correctly, he is given a new name. Jesus says he will be *petros*, translating to “You are Stone.”<sup>2</sup> For the gospel writer this is more than a nice nickname as they go forward. Throughout this gospel, Peter appears first and plays a more prominent role in other the gospels as well. This development carries over into the other New Testament writings as Peter appears first in all the lists of the apostles.<sup>3</sup> This confession of Peters sets him up to be someone who plays a prominent role in the movement of the early church as he realizes the identity of Christ.

Peter is given the keys of the kingdom and there is discussion of “binding” and “loosing,” terms understood to be the rulings about what can and what cannot be done by members of the church.<sup>4</sup> For the early church, this would have given Peter and the other apostles some agency in how the gospel would spread. However, Jesus is still the end

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<sup>1</sup> Hare, Douglas. “Matthew,” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2009), 188.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 190.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 192.

authority as the Lord. He has the final say over all things regardless of what the apostles and the church declare.

### **Application**

The “keys of the kingdom” is a popular phrase we use today to discuss the dynamics to come with power. We see it when a new CEO is named, when someone does something heroic and they are presented with a key to the city, and when a pastor is sent to a new appointment and receives a new keychain full of keys. This concept is usually paired with the idea: with great power there comes great responsibility.

We’ve all probably seen how keys though tend to have other people who want them. There’s the employee who wants that position because they want a raise. The town hero was in on the whole thing and was able to get exactly what they wanted in their valiance. The preacher may have the keys and yet there’s probably someone else who does as well and uses those keys including the one to the closet no one knows about.

Power and who gets control of things is one of the oldest struggles ever since Adam and Eve looked upon that tree and there was a devilish curiosity to get ahold over them about knowledge and the ability to be like God. All of us, no matter how weak or insignificant we think we might be, have been given opportunities for how we will use power and what we will do with the keys given to us. We all are given choices about what we will do when it comes to being the body of Christ.

In today’s case, we come to discuss how the church functions when it comes to power and who holds the keys to the kingdom. Regardless of how the Roman Catholic Church and Protestant denominations differently understand this passage about Peter’s role in the early church, we can all agree we know how the themes of authority and power play out in the church today. There is always the question of where the Holy Spirit is at work and what the Holy Spirit is leading the church to do today.

Perhaps while we might pray, reflect on scripture, and go back and forth with each other, we still will find how if we cannot see Christ at the center of it all, we will end up missing the point of the keys of kingdom. The keys are gifts, and they demand for us to think very carefully about how they’re used and how we function with one another as we use them. If we abuse them, we are warned about what will occurs with “binding” and “loosing.” There are always consequences to our action and our inaction.

In one of my leadership classes, we discussed the “keys to the kingdom” and how there are varying ways churches can function and be led. One of the more engaging conversations we had focused on if there is such a thing as a non-hierarchical leadership model. In this model, everyone gets a say until something can be done, and all are seen as completely equal. There were some who believed such a thing was possible, while there were others who did not see this always playing out.

As someone who has grown up and finds themselves as a United Methodist Christian, I can say how there is a beauty in hierarchical leadership structures in my experience. It may not be perfect and there are flaws and things to be reformed and amended of over time. The book of Acts makes it clear how even the early church had trial and error as they figured out their calling and who they would be in the ancient world.

A hierarchical structure as we find with Jesus’ words to Peter gives us a way to hear and understand who can give us direction and guidance. This is not to say others in a

hierarchal structure are lesser; instead, it is to say there are those who have gifts to lead at certain times and certain ways. For all parties, there is the acknowledgment of how when we do not play our roles, or when we break out of line to assume power and control, we over function and forget how Jesus is the one with the ultimate authority.

As the church continues to face unknown times and threats to the body of Christ, I pray we might look at this scripture to see the responsibilities given to all of us. We are indeed given the keys to the kingdom and yet this also means we are called to think very carefully to remember who gets locked in and who gets locked out. Best of all, we might need to remember the true keeper of the keys will have the final say and we think a little harder when it comes to what gets “binded” and “loosed.”

What leadership structure do you see functioning well in your local church? Why do you think Jesus chose Peter to be the keeper of “the keys to the kingdom?” How can you support those who lead you even if you disagree with them? What happens when we use the “keys to the kingdom” to exclude or dismiss people? How can the church honor our Lord in how we make decisions for the body of Christ?

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