

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time – 2023 A

When Jesus speaks of the keys of the Kingdom, maybe you'll remember one of my favorite stories of my parents on vacation many years ago. They were driving through Illinois and stopped for gas. My mom got out the passenger side to use the restroom, my dad to fill the gas tank. The '75 Dodge Monaco did not have power locks. Out of habit, my dad pushed down the lock knob on the door and ... of course ... just as the door latched, he saw the keys still in the ignition and my mom's purse with the spare key on the seat. So he went inside to borrow a coat hanger. He was fishing unsuccessfully through the weatherstrip to try to catch the knob when my mom came out, opened her door which was NOT locked, and asked: "Al, what are you doing?"

There's no particularly profound lesson there, just a story worth a chuckle. Today, Jesus might promise Peter the password to the website of heaven. But whether it's keys, or a combination, or a password, *the right numbers or code or key grants access and lets us in*. Unlike the keys to our private belongings, Jesus makes clear that the keys to the Kingdom are entrusted to Peter, not for his own benefit, but as a responsibility of service, *rooted precisely in Peter's understanding of Who Jesus is*. Christ states repeatedly: He is the One Who has come not to be served, but to serve; the Messiah sent not to condemn the world, but so that the world might be saved through Him; the Friend Who will lay down His life in sacrificial love; the One is with us until the end of the age to restore, to heal, to shepherd, to teach, to forgive. *Peter is given the keys, not so he can enter, but so that he has the ability to admit others to the presence of God*. The Scriptures are clear that when Peter and Paul relied on themselves and their own judgment, they failed. But though they were very different people and did not always see eye to eye, what Peter the Denier and Paul the Persecutor had in common was the experience of the unexpected and undeserved mercy of Jesus. Their human imperfection allowed God's healing grace to be revealed; and that continues to be the mission of the Church down the ages.

“Who do you say that I am?” This is not an abstract theological quiz. It is about who I allow Jesus to be in my life. The answer we give does not define HIS identity; it defines OURS. No one else can answer that question for us; He asks each of us, in every age of the Church: “Who do YOU say that I am?”

Jesus is Teacher, unveiling that depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God, and showing us how to live in relationships of service, respect, and integrity. He is Healer, to whom we can bring our sins and our sorrows without fear, believing that He will always forgive, and give us strength to endure our sufferings in hope. He is Friend Who invites us know Him better in time spent together in prayer. He is the Way to our place in God’s Kingdom, no matter our age, status, capabilities, limitations. Jesus shuts out our fears, our regrets, our anxieties, our indifference, and no one can open them; He opens the way to forgiveness, to faith, to perseverance, to a new life, and no one can close them.

In the Church, the keys of the Kingdom are not a privilege but a responsibility, a task, a mission. We learn from Jesus what to open and what to close, what gives life and what brings regret. This week, as you use your keys or combinations or passwords to open things in the routines of life, ask the Lord in prayer:

What can I do today to make it at least a bit easier for someone I meet to get closer to the Kingdom of heaven and know Who Jesus is: the Way, the Truth, and the Life?