

HELPING PEOPLE TO FREEDOM

Our Mission

Matthew 16:13-20; John 8:31-32

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Have you ever had a block in your vision? Has there been a time when something so obvious wasn't obvious to you? I'm holding a computer mouse. It has two buttons and is designed to conform to a person's hand. It is such a convenience to move around the computer screen and click on things. One day a computer support department got a distressed phone call from a lady. She could not get any power into her computer. The technician had her check all the cords, outlets and so on. Finally, he asked her if she had turned the computer on? She said she pressed the pedal but got no power. That is funny to us who are familiar with sewing machines and computers, especially men. Yet we men sometimes have a similar block. How many of you husbands have called to your wives, "Honey, I can't find it anywhere!" and she pulls the object right from the place you are staring at? Who among has that not happened to? Did you know that one definition of a wife is a woman who finds socks in a drawer that aren't there? Sometimes, the obvious just isn't obvious. Sometimes, the truth is elusive - not because of the truth, but because of us.

God has given us in Christ a truth that is so powerful, so practical, so precious, and yet as obvious as it is to some, it is hidden from others. Matthew recounts in his gospel a pivotal moment for all the twelve disciples. Jesus turned to them, and asked them who they believed he was. Peter looked at Jesus and said, "Jesus, you are the Messiah; you are the Son of the living God." Jesus looked at Peter whose birth name was Simon. He said:

Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven (Matt. 16:17-19).

Jesus told Peter that he was blessed. God had blessed Peter. God had opened Peter's eyes so that he understood who Jesus is. How has God blessed you and opened your eyes? That is key to your future. As a result of this revelation, Jesus gave a man called Simon a new identity. Simon became Peter the rock. Simon was a new person. Simon had a new name. When God opened my eyes to the love of God for me in Jesus Christ, He gave me a new identity too. I'm still Wesley, but slowly I realized that it was not just Wesley. It was Saint Wesley. Sinner Wesley had died. Saint Wesley was born. Saint Wesley is Saint Wesley not because he no longer sins. If there is any question about that, ask the family. They're honest (and discreet - most the time!). Saint Wesley is a saint because he is forgiven and also because he is a temple for the Holy Spirit. Thus he is holy. (Do I sound like the former Minnesota Viking, Herschel Walker? He used to speak in third person a lot.) I'm holy because of the blood of Jesus and the residence of the Holy Spirit. Saint means holy one.

When God opened Simon's eyes, Jesus called Simon, Peter. He said, "You are a rock," Jesus named Simon something that is strong and enduring. On this rock, on this Peter, Jesus would build his church. No one knows what all Jesus meant by that. We do not have time to even scan some of its richest meaning. However, Jesus made at least one thing obvious. Jesus would use the strength and endurance of Peter' faith to build a special people. That people would need strength and endurance for they were in a war. Jesus said that the gates of Hades would not prevail against this people.

Jesus presented a picture of gates, and these gates were closed. The gates belonged to a kingdom called Hades. Hades is a Greek term that resulted from combining the Greek word "not" with the Greek word "to see." It means "not to see" or "invisible." It came to mean an invisible world. Jesus gave Peter a picture of an invisible world with imposing gates that were confining people. He said that these gates would not prevail. The gates would not be rammed opened. They would not be scaled nor would they be broken down. Instead, he gave Peter keys that would unlock them. Now understand, Jesus did not give Peter just one key. Peter was *not given the key* of the kingdom. He was given *the keys* of the kingdom. Jesus did not speak of a single gate. He spoke of *gates*. I get the picture of multiple keys and multiple gates. This invisible world may hold some in unbelief, others in bitterness, others in fear, still others in shame. There is a variety of bondages (although that does not appears to be an English word). There is a variety of enslavements. There is also a variety of gates. Sometimes, walking out one gate frees a person from many compulsions and confinements. When some people come to faith in Jesus, their addictions to alcohol, pornography, compulsive spending, or abusive tantrums are broken. They are free. Others, however, must have separate gates unlocked with different keys. The keys belong to Jesus, but they are given to Peter and to us.

Jesus gave Peter more information than a picture of keys. He spoke about the nature of those keys. Now remember we are talking about unlocking the gates of an invisible world that imprisons people with destructive attitudes like rage, bitterness, fear, insatiable lust and despair and with desperate conditions like disease, injury, poverty and war. These keys according to Jesus allowed Peter to bind or restrict things in the invisible world as he did so in the visible world. It empowered him to loose or free things in the invisible

world as he did so in the physical world. In other words, as disciples of Jesus what we say, pray or do on this earth, in this visible world, restricts or unleashes power in the invisible world. Jesus gives us the keys.

Have you ever contemplated the fact that there is probably not a single cure for disease that has come without answering someone's prayers. What's more, many researchers believe as much as 80 percent of illness relates to our inner thoughts and emotions. Tens of thousands of people, all over the world, experience relief and healing when prayer teams, like the ones we have here on Sunday morning and available throughout the week, minister to them. So many people experience a great deal of freedom and often amazing physical healing as a team ministers to them. Why? Because of the keys of the kingdom.

I doubt if there is a single good idea in this entire world that came without answering someone's prayers. The person through which the idea or cure came may have no faith, but the God in the Bible often works his plans through people who are clueless. Unshackling the researcher, the scientist, the physician, the psychologist, the mineralogist, the metallurgist was a believer or believers using the keys of the kingdom. They opened a gate of darkness. They opened a gate of blindness and deception.

Let's get more specific, however. Jesus revealed a world of people affected by invisible powers, people bound in destruction by invisible spirits. Although we are morally responsible for our decisions and actions, we often suffer delusions, deception and disorientation. I think of the man who ordered a pizza one day. The chef asked him if he wanted it cut in six or eight pieces. "You better make it six. I don't think I can eat eight," he replied. That's deception. It may be funny and a little self-destructive, but many deceptions carry greater consequences.

Many believers are locked into worries, fears, and guilt that rob them from experiencing the true love and peace that is theirs as children of God. They are shackled in habits of thought and action that attack their health and destroy their relationships. They need freedom. Many more non-believers have no clue that God really loves them, that there is a plan for their life and healing for them. They are lost and wandering through life. Christ handed Peter and us the keys so that they could be freed along with us. Jesus said:

If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free (John 8:31-32).

We come to know the real truth when we fully embrace Jesus. We come to know God's greatness and goodness, God's love. That truth is the truth, and it sets us free from an invisible world of deception and destruction.

Since the beginning of September, we have been looking at our mission at Bethany. Why did God establish this congregation? What is our business? What call does God place on

our lives. Together at Bethany we are called to: *Go and bring people to faith and freedom in Jesus Christ*. That is our mission. Keys have been handed to us. Keys to a failing marriage. Keys to a haunted heart. Keys to a broken body. Keys to a lonely and wandering life. The gates of Hades are so imposing and they are locked. People feel hopeless. Some drink to cope. Some party and wander from relationship to relationship. Some try to spend their way out. Others try achievement and service. In the end they all feel empty, and the gates are still locked. We've been given the keys to their freedom. Will we use them?

It is critical to not ignore these keys. It is essential that we embrace our mission. If you have tasted the love and freedom of Christ, you have no higher calling than helping others experience that same love and freedom. Indeed, a church that is not fully invested in bringing people to faith and freedom is not a church. It is simply a religious fellowship with a historical tie to Christ. It does not embody Christ today. In the 21st Century Christ goes to the lost and lonely, the alienated and unbelieving, the hurting and suffering. The church he embodies serves there. Every other group is a fellowship of religious consumers.

At Bethany we refuse to be religious consumers. We will live as disciples. Much of our learning and blessing will happen as we reach out to others. We will invest ourselves in those who do not know the love of Christ or the fellowship of his people. We will go to them and we will train and equip our children and youth to go and serve them. One lost sheep is worth ninety-nine in the fold. We hold to that teaching. We are beneficiaries of that teaching. We've all been that one lost sheep. We will know even more the love of God as we go and bring people to faith and freedom in Jesus Christ. We will know even more God's amazing grace as we go and use his keys.