

Haydenville Congregational Church
The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian
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Matthew 16:13-20

“Both Powerful and Powerless”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

Those of us who are parents of children old enough to drive know well the anxious feelings we experienced when we first gave the car keys to our son or daughter and saw them drive off in a vehicle capable of going 100 miles per hour. As we handed over the keys that very first time we were barely able to contain our fear, and so we blurted out everything we had been saying for months all at once, in one big, undifferentiated gush of emotion...

“Don’t go too fast. Don’t speed. Wear your seatbelt. Don’t pick up hitchhikers. Drive defensively. Don’t talk on your phone. Don’t talk to anyone in the car. Don’t talk at all.”

When that moment arrives and we must give the car keys to a teen-ager, we are tense and worried. We hand over the keys to our sons and daughters and say some heartfelt prayers. As they drive off, usually speeding out of the driveway, we wonder: do they have the maturity to handle this responsibility?

That is the same question we might ask about Jesus giving Peter the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Jesus asks his disciples: who do people say that I am? Then he asks, who do YOU say that I am? Peter answers, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Jesus then blesses Peter and tells him, “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church...I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven...”

But wait! Jesus knows a lot about Peter, and we know a lot about Peter and so we find ourselves wondering: h-m-m-m does Peter have the maturity to handle this responsibility? If we look at Peter’s track record prior to this event, we see a loving disciple who constantly misses the point, and often talks before he thinks. AND just three short verses AFTER Jesus tells Peter he will give him the keys to the kingdom, Jesus calls Peter “Satan.” Do you remember that shocking exchange?

Peter angers Jesus and Jesus responds, “Get behind me Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things” (Matthew 16:23). And we know that Peter, that beloved disciple now with the keys to the kingdom of heaven, is the one who, after Jesus is killed, will deny Jesus three times.

How could Jesus give the keys to the kingdom of heaven and vow to build the church upon someone so unstable? Clearly Peter’s authority and pre-eminence among the disciples is not based on his wisdom or righteousness. So what is it based on? Let’s explore that question...

The passage begins with Jesus asking: who do people say that I am? The disciples’ responses reflect the different factions that the Hebrew people were a part of: some preferred John the Baptist, some Elijah, some Jeremiah or another prophet.

But in the next verse, Jesus gets more pointed and more personal—he asks the disciples directly: “... who do YOU say that I am?” (v. 15). Simon Peter, who often jumps right in, replies first: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (v. 16).

Jesus is pleased and honors Peter for his proclamation.

“Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood have not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are **Peter** (*Petros*) [*note: he renames him*] and on this rock (*petra*) I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven” (vv. 17-19).

Peter’s particular strengths and accomplishments up to this point were not significant and do not warrant Jesus’ exclamation of profound faith and trust in him. But at this moment, Jesus is not evaluating and responding to Peter’s resume. Jesus is responding to Peter’s testimony.

Peter is saying: *I experience you Jesus as the Messiah. I believe you have been sent to us as a gateway into the kingdom of God. You have touched and changed my life.*

That’s the key, and why Peter gets the keys to the kingdom.

Okay, that makes sense. But hold on...today’s scripture reading is really not quite that tidy. This exchange between Jesus and Peter is actually one of the more controversial texts in the Bible.

Since about the 4th century, many church leaders have interpreted this passage as a way to shore up the church's own authority through the doctrine of "apostolic succession."

This famous, controversial and much-debated exchange between Jesus and Peter has been interpreted as appointing Peter to be the first Bishop of the church and, given that stature, empowering Peter to pass on what was like regal authority down through the hierarchy of the church—that's called apostolic succession. Controversy has raged for literally centuries over these questions: what exactly is the foundation of the Church that Jesus is declaring in this exchange with Peter? Is Peter the first Bishop and is it from that authority that the Church is built? OR is it Peter's **faith** in Jesus that is the foundation of the church?

I believe, as do many scholars and theologians who have influenced my thinking, that the church is not founded on or by Peter, just as it is not founded on John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, Luther or Calvin.

The rock is not Peter but Peter's testimony...what Peter says, what he believes, his expression of faith, and how his faith has totally altered his life—those are the foundations of the church.

Although this passage in scripture has often been interpreted as a way to give the church power, authority, strength and permanence, the real underlying message is that the church is built on faith, Peter is expressing his FAITH.

Essentially, the lesson in this exchange is this: in the end the church is as powerful, authoritative, strong and permanent as our own individual faith.

For millennia, the church has existed as an institution that is both powerful and powerless because the church is only as strong as the individual faith and testimony of its members.

The church has no real external power. We cannot claim power from the disciples, power from Peter, power from our confessions, doctrines, or creeds. Ultimately, the only power the church has is our testimony, our faith, our living witness to the influence of Jesus in our lives.

Jesus' question to Peter is the question each one of us must confront. Jesus is asking each one of us: "Who do you say that I am? What is your testimony of me? How do you experience the living God in your own life? How will you build the church because of your faith?"

Jesus lifts up Peter and gives him the metaphorical keys to the kingdom of heaven not because of Peter's great gifts, strengths or talents...

not because Peter will have some great authority over others and will decree how the church should be established and run...

not because Peter is meant to be superior to the other disciples and to the rest of Jesus followers...

Jesus lifts up Peter and gives him the keys to the kingdom of heaven because Peter recognizes who Jesus is and declares it without qualification or hesitation.

And you can build a church on declarations like that.

The church at its best is rooted in the sure knowledge that each one of us has access to the keys to the kingdom of heaven because each one of us is called to declare who God is and what God means in our own lives, in our lived experience...

each one of us is meant to be a rock upon which Jesus can build the church, each one of us is empowered to testify to our love for Jesus maybe through our words, certainly through our actions.

Although some would argue otherwise, I believe the church has very little external authority and power. We have our traditions, our statements of faith, our doctrines, and our dogma. But in the end those are all flimsy compared to our deepest beliefs about God and the ways our faith finds expression in our actions.

The church is as strong or as fragile, as rigid or as resilient as each of us in our own faith. The church can be powerful or powerless—it depends on us.

My friends we do not just testify and declare our love of God and our sense of Jesus moving through our lives, we must live the Gospel, follow Jesus' example, demonstrate our faith through our words and actions in the world.

And we do not just testify and declare our love of God and our sense of Jesus moving through our lives in isolation. Jesus calls us to community, to live and learn, worship and study, struggle and rejoice **together**.

We make the church, we are the church, we build the church...day after day, week after week, year after year, century after century.

The church is as strong or as weak, as effective or as ineffective, as powerful or as powerless as each new generation re-creates it.

If Jesus were here today, he would say:
You are TOBY, on this rock I will build my church...
You are GINA, on this rock I will build my church...
You are DIANE, on this rock I will build my church...
You are MIKE, on this rock I will build my church...
You are RUTH, on this rock I will build my church...
You are WYATT, on this rock I will build my church...
You are NORMA, on this rock I will build my church...

As an institution, we have our history, we have our traditions, and we have our creeds, but as a church we have each other...and our faith, our testimony, our lived experience of God, our witness in the world, our words and our actions.

Year after year we are called to reconstitute the church...
to make it again and anew,
to serve as the rock upon which Jesus can build his community,
to take hands and pray,
to welcome and gather disciples
to search and seek and discern the way forward.

Jesus offers each new generation the keys to the kingdom of heaven...
now those keys are being offered to us...not because our talents are so great or our accomplishments are so impressive. Jesus wants us to know him and to know God through him. Jesus wants us to model our lives after his life. Jesus wants us to do nothing less than re-make the world into a thoroughly love-filled, justice-filled, Spirit-filled, compassion-filled place.
Jesus wants us to grab ahold of those keys and get moving so we can create the kingdom of heaven on earth.

When a parent hands a teen-ager the keys to the car in the driveway, that Mom or Dad may wonder: is my son or daughter ready for this responsibility?

When we recognize that Jesus is handing us the keys to the kingdom to create the peace and joy of heaven on earth, we may wonder: am I ready for this responsibility?

Well, Jesus says we are. And God believes we are.

So let's get rolling.
Amen.