

The Keys to the Kingdom

Bishop Claire S. Burkat – Southeastern PA Synod Assembly 2015

Readings: Acts 10:44-48; Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16:13-19

I recently heard about a conversation that a receptionist at a car dealership had with one of his customers.

Caller: “I need to have my car towed to your dealership. Do you have a service for that, or one that you can recommend?”

Receptionist: “We do, but it’s expensive. Can you tell me more about the problem so we can try and help you before resorting to that?”

Caller: “Oh, sure! Well, I think my key remote is dead, so I can’t unlock my car. Because I can’t unlock it, I can’t get anywhere! This is my only car, and I rely on it. I need to get it unlocked as soon as possible.”

Receptionist: “Ma’am, have you tried putting the key into the keyhole on the door?”

Caller: [long pause] “What? Cars still have that? I don’t think mine does, but I’ll go check.”

(About a minute passes...)

Caller: “Oh, my goodness! You’re my hero! It totally worked! Thank you so much!”

Sometimes the key we are looking for is right in our hands and we don’t even know it.

In my work as bishop I sometimes feel like I have conversations very similar to that of the receptionist.

Church member: Bishop, our church is losing members and money and we need the synod to fix it. Do you have a service for that, or one that you can recommend?

Me: Well, can you tell me more about the problem so we can figure out how to help?

Church member: Sure! The key remote is dead. We can't compete with all the activities on Sundays. People don't want to come to church anymore. Young people aren't interested in church. The good ole days when we could just point our key remote at the door are gone, so we can't unlock our ministry. We can't get anywhere! We need to get it unlocked as soon as possible!

Me: Have you tried putting the key into the keyhole on the door? Have you tried actually unlocking the door yourself and getting out of your church building and into the world? Have you tried taking your ministry out instead of relying on the cultural conventions to get people in?

Church member: What? We can do that? I don't think our church knows how, but I'll check.

Jesus said: "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."

Sisters and Brothers in Christ -if we truly want to unlock the ministries of our congregations and our synod and fling wide the door, we can, and we should and guess what we already do! The stories I hear about what you are able to do when you unlock your doors never cease to astound me.

Take the amazing ministry opportunity that is happening at Resurrection in Yardley. Diane Casey, coordinator of Serving Hearts Ministries at Resurrection says *"God keeps putting opportunities in front of us to serve the hungry and the homeless."*

Over the last decade as the church identified its assets for ministry, from time to time there was discussion about what to do with a plot of land adjacent to the church. The church has long collected food for a local pantry; why not add to that supply with a garden? But the idea remained just an idea.

About four years ago after Pastor Sharon Taylor asked new members to list their gifts, Nicola Fiscarelli said her gift was gardening. Not just any tiny garden or collection of flowerpots, Nicola had owned a nursery, greenhouse and landscaping company for 40 years. The right person at the right time and place was the KEY to unlocking an incredible ministry opportunity. Soon Nicolai was plotting to start a 50-by-50-foot garden with fruit, produce and herbs.

"This year the garden project has exploded," Diane told us. "We have doubled the number of people working, and doubled the amount of food we give away." Last September LCR made three deliveries a week, totaling more than 300 pounds each week. You will see and hear more about this ministry and how it is growing -growing -growing as they align and expand with new partners and networks later this afternoon.

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Jesus has given us the **keys to unlock** our ministry on this earth. They are summed up in our theme for this assembly, for our campaign for the Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod: **FORWARD TOGETHER IN FAITH.** Over these next two days, and throughout the coming year, you are going to be hearing more about these keys: **equipping, innovating, communicating and networking.** You are going to hear stories about the ways in which people like you, through congregations like yours, are using these keys to unlock the kingdom of heaven right in their own communities and across the globe.

Keep in mind – these are not new keys. We've had them all along. But sometimes we don't even recognize the keys already in our hands. We're so used to the remotes we've been using where you just press a button and expect everything to open for you. But those days of easy access are over, my friends. The battery has run out and the chip has gone bad. 20th century strategies no longer work in this 21st century world.

I admit I was one of those evangelism consultants who in the 80s and 90's taught church leaders how to bring people into Church through 10 steps, and invitations and building improvements, and parking lots and new signage and clever marketing.

And I am here to tell you that it was not the wrong thing to do, but the world has changed again and the techniques, while helpful, are not the same keys that will work today.

No, what we're doing is rediscovering the keys that Jesus gave us – the keys that he gave the apostles over 2000 years ago.

The keys that enabled them to unlock the power of the Holy Spirit and unleash their minds for innovating, their tongues for communicating, their feet for networking, and their time for equipping. We never lost those keys. We've had them in our hands all along. We just forgot what they were for and what we can do with them.

Or worse, we've been using them to keep ourselves locked up in insular compartments, trying to keep the world at bay, or trying to preserve a time, a culture and perhaps even a piety that has long passed.

"Whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

This is both awesome and scary.

Sadly, many Christian congregations in this country are using the keys to keep threats, doubts, and certain people out, which in effect keeps the Body of Christ locked in! Some are trying to protect and rescue the faithful in well-appointed buildings meant to shelter people from the storms of life. Certainly, we need times and places to come back to home base and recharge. But the goal of Christianity was never for the faithful to remain inside the buildings.

Doors are ready to be opened. We have the keys – it is time for the Church of Jesus Christ to use the Keys of the Kingdom to once again unlock our doors and loose the Spirit upon the earth.

Because Jesus has told us very plainly – whatever we bind on earth will be bound in heaven. Whatever we keep locked up tight will remain that way until we insert the key and turn. God entrusts us with the cooperative power to be the presence of Christ in the world.

You want to grow your church? Give yourselves away for the sake of the Gospel.

When we do that, we will find that power will be loosed in heaven as well. We will begin to see the blossoming of the Spirit's power in ways we could never have managed on our own.

I have been observing the places in our synod where revitalization and the welcoming of new people is happening. Some of the most fun and relational new initiatives are the many kinds of PUB Theology groups and dinner churches cropping up all over the five county area.

What makes these gatherings so popular? The people meet OUTSIDE the meeting rooms and basements of our churches. The people often come straight from work and have a drink or something to eat or both at a restaurant or Pub in their community, hosted by the local Lutheran church. The format is one that creates community and gets people talking about the issues that affect their relationships to one another and to the world and to God.

You will hear more this afternoon about the ways weeknight Pub gatherings and dinner church are unlocking the traditional invitations to younger generations right there in SEPA Synod.

You don't have to drink beer in order to meet people to discuss faith and life issues, but remember Martin Luther himself started his own Pub theology with his young students at his home. We have evidence of these conversations in a collection called Table Talks compiled in 1566. Ahhh...Everything old becomes new again....

Every time another person begins to see the world differently through the eyes of God, to expand their vocabulary with the words of faith, to open their minds to new ways of thinking theologically, to step into a new culture or social setting proclaiming the risen Christ – every time that happens is a **Day of Pentecost**.

Every time we unshutter the windows to let in the freshness of faith, and then step out the door, the Spirit moves through and makes things happen.

But if the doors are shut and locked tight; if the windows are locked and shaded; if all possibilities of entry are closed for fear of whatever scares us, then the Holy Spirit has no choice but to move on. This is not to say that we should simply dismiss the fears that make us want to lock our doors. Stepping out of your church to do ministry in a new way, without any agenda of trying to get people to join your church, without any thought of getting a return on your investment of faith – this is a risky endeavor.

Where will the money come from? How will we sustain ourselves? What will become of our cherished traditions if we open ourselves in the radical way Jesus taught and the early church behaved?

Jesus said, "*You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church*" This rock has been interpreted throughout Christendom in various ways. Jesus used a play on words...Peters name means rock - Petras (little rock) but the confession of Peter - "*You are the Christ the son of the living God*" - is clearly the HUGE ROCK of our faith upon which the church is built - and not the other way around! Christ and only Christ is the chief cornerstone. But for some reason, he gave the keys to the Kingdom to His CHURCH... The apostles, the disciples, the believers who passed them from generation to generation to we who are the baptized today. It is an awesome Privilege.

Think about it...

Jesus said: "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."

Nobody was more surprised than Peter to discover that the Holy Spirit's power extended beyond the bounds of his own clan, his own clique of disciples and believers. *"Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?"* he asked when he saw that even the Gentiles – the unholy riff raff beyond his cultural and religious boundaries – were graced with the Holy Spirit. Those Gentiles began speaking in tongues *just as he and his friends had done on the Day of Pentecost*. So, you see, the Day of Pentecost was not one event. And it was not an insider event. It was a sort of flash mob OUTSIDE the synagogue. And it was not the be-all and end-all of Christ's community. It was just the kick-off. The unlocking and releasing of the Holy Spirit.

I know these are uncertain times and we 21st century Christians have been thrown into unfamiliar territory.

Some days I am truly discouraged, and sometimes even scared to be a leader in this new world.

But honestly, my perspective on fear changed after having traveled to Turkey on an ecumenical journey led by former Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson several years ago. Our small group of 12 could not even wear a cross or a collar in public in Istanbul. On Sunday morning we snuck out of our hotel rooms at 6 a.m. tiptoed through the darkened hallways and gather secretly in an upper Mezzanine room that we had unlocked the night before in order to worship on our Sabbath. The Bread, Wine, and Bible were actually contraband of sorts.

That was an experience I will never forget. We could have been arrested or deported just for worshipping in public.

When I think of all the places where Christians really are threatened, countries where being baptized means facing death, where the notion of "taking up one's cross" could, in fact, lead to execution – I have to say that we as Christians in North America would do well to keep our own fears in perspective. Even if you take the risk of trying something new and it turns out that your church has to close anyway – you still have your life intact.

No one is holding your faith hostage as often happens in places like Kenya, Syria, Somalia, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, Palestine, Nigeria, and Libya. The only

ones who are holding faith hostage in this country are our own people. Us – you and me.

We hold the keys only because Christ has given them to us. So are we going to keep ourselves locked in? Or will we open up, think outside the church-box, and re-envision what it means to be the Church in the world today?

What we are initiating here in the Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod is a truly new and lock-busting way of doing ministry. And as much as I feel those butterflies in my stomach when I think of embarking on this new journey, my anxious mind is steadied when I think of the talents and skills we have in this synod to unleash in our communities and in our synod, the whole ELCA and the world. Paul recognized the same thing in his community:

For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another

You see, the Church of Jesus Christ, is the one against which even the gates of Hell will not prevail because it is not tied to buildings or any geographical place. It is not a *location*, but an *action*. It is *not a noun*; it is a verb. Being church is about equipping and sending ambassadors for Christ, including lay leaders and clergy; youth and adults, all generations, all parts of the social strata, all genders, all sexual orientations, all skin tones, all cultures into a complex world that is wide open for the Spirit of the Living God to blow through cobwebs, clutter and locked doors. And like the apostles of the early church, we will step into an interfaith world – in fact, even a no-faith world – with the confidence that our help comes from the Holy Spirit.

As you come forward to receive communion this morning, there will be a basket as you return to your seats with small keys like this one (Hold up key) I invite you to take one. Let your imaginations be fed by the vision of what the key could open in your life, in your congregation, and in our synod. And may God bless you with excitement and joy as you take these keys and unbind the power of Christ, letting loose God's power in this world

Amen