

Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.” And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld.”

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

Throughout my high-school and early university years, I worked for a variety store chain. I had a key to the store, and a key to the burglar alarm. I would often work the late shift, and lock up the store at night. I was responsible for making sure that the alarm was set, that the door was secure, that everything was done to protect the store from burglars. On weekends, I would go in and unlock the doors, opening the store to the customers. Having that key was a position of responsibility and trust.

Most of us have a whole host of keys. There are the keys to our car—or cars; there are keys for the various doors in our homes. We may have keys to the office or shop; keys for the church, a key for a lock-box, where we have access to more keys that open even more doors. Today’s keys may not always have the traditional form—sometimes keys are simply passwords, as they are on the computer. They may be more sophisticated, and actually use biometrics, scanning a person’s fingerprints or doing a retinal scan before a computer or a door can be unlocked. But having the key, the password, or the digital code says that you have been entrusted with a position of authority and responsibility.

Shortly before His crucifixion, Jesus told Peter and the disciples: *I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.*” (Matthew 16:19 - ESV) And again, after His resurrection, the Lord comes to the disciples and says: *As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.*” And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, *“Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld.”* These words describe that power and authority that Christ has given to His church. We call it the Office of the Keys, and express it this way in the Catechism: *The Office of the Keys is that special authority which Christ has given to His church on earth to forgive the sins of repentant sinners, but to withhold forgiveness from the unrepentant as long as they do not repent.* (SC, The Office of the Keys)

In giving His church the keys of the Kingdom, Jesus bestows upon His church the authority, the responsibility and the direction that defines the only work that the Church has to do in the world. In his Large Catechism, Luther said: *“Everything, therefore, in the Christian Church is ordered toward this goal: we shall daily receive in the Church nothing but the forgiveness of sin through the Word and signs, to comfort and encourage our consciences as long as we live here”* (LC II 55). While there are many things that we can do individually because of God’s love and grace for us in Jesus Christ, the Church is given the keys of the kingdom so that we will go out into the world, preaching the Gospel of forgiveness. In our text, Jesus tells us: *As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.* Jesus came to bring us forgiveness and life and sends His Church to proclaim that forgiveness and life. Luke tells us of Jesus at His ascension teaching the disciples: *Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.*” (Luke 24:45-47 - ESV)

What a blessed task the Lord has given to His church, that we are able to go forth in His name to proclaim forgiveness to the lost and dying people of this world! God calls us out of the world so that He may feed us, strengthen us and bless us through His Word and through His promise of forgiveness. Yes, He equips us to live as fruitful people in the world. He calls us to love Him with all our being, but also to love our neighbour as ourselves. But the authority and responsibility of His Church, which knows by faith the power of Christ’s forgiveness, is to share with others the blessing of forgiveness we ourselves have received. We are not called to be a political force. We are not called to be internet influencers. The church is not in the business of judging people or forcing our belief upon them. That doesn’t mean that we ignore sin. We do proclaim God’s law. We have the responsibility, when necessary, to retain sins, or to discipline sinners. But the church’s chief work is to proclaim forgiveness. We have the power to work through the preaching of the gospel, the administering of the sacraments, and the Absolution’s declaration of forgiveness.

Of course, the church itself has no power to forgive sins. God alone has the power to forgive sins. When Jesus said to a

paralytic, ***“Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven.”*** (Matthew 9:2 - ESV), the Pharisees accused Him of blasphemy, because only God could declare sins forgiven. Jesus could forgive sins, because He is God. But what about the forgiveness that the church proclaims? Every week, after the Confession of Sins, I say to you in some way, shape or form: *“Upon this, your confession, I by virtue of my office as a called and ordained servant of the Word announce the grace of God unto you, and in the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”* How can I, a mere man, forgive you your sins? The power of forgiveness is in the atoning work of Jesus Christ. He alone unlocks the chains of sin that bind us. He does that through His death which paid the price for all sin and through His resurrection that declares His victory. It is because Jesus died for us that God says: ***For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.*** (Jeremiah 31:34 - ESV).

Now the living Lord Jesus Christ gives that authority to His church. If I have sinned in some way against my sister, I can't go to my brother and ask him to forgive me for what I've done to her. It doesn't do any good, because he doesn't have any authority to forgive me for what I have done. But if my sister says to him, “If David comes and tells you he's sorry for what he did to me, then tell him that I forgive him”, then my brother can forgive me in her name and in her stead. That is exactly what the church does. Christ commands us to go and forgive in His name. The forgiveness is earned by Christ. We take that forgiveness at His command and assure troubled hearts of the grace and mercy of God. That is why the Catechism, in commenting on the words of our text, asks: *What do you believe according to these words? I believe that when the called ministers of Christ deal with us by His divine command, in particular when they exclude openly unrepentant sinners from the Christian congregation and absolve those who repent of their sins and want to do better, this is just as valid and certain, even in heaven, as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us Himself.* (SC, Office of the Keys)

Christ has given the Office of the Keys to the Church—not to pastors or bishops or popes, but to the church, that group of saints who believe in Him and worship Him together. But for the sake of order in the church, God has also ordained the office of pastor for the sake of His Church. Pastors are called by the church to serve in the name of the church. Every member of the church cannot stand at the Baptismal font and perform the sacrament of Baptism. If everyone were trying to serve as the celebrant at Holy Communion it would create mass confusion (pun intended). And we might have a fight to see who would be in the pulpit on Sunday morning. For the sake of order and peace in His church, God gives a gift to the ambassadors of Christ: He gives them pastors who are called by the congregation to preach, to administer the sacraments, and to forgive and retain sins. We will talk more about the pastor and his office next week, but God has given His church pastors who are called by the congregation to administer the office of the keys for them and among them. As Jesus declares to His disciples, so He says to you; that when the pastor says your sins are forgiven, they are, indeed, forgiven. He's not speaking his word at that point, but God's word according to God's command so that you can be absolutely sure that your sin is forgiven and that you have peace with God.

We often lose sight of the Office of the Keys as the basis of our ministry to the world. The Keys are our marching orders. We go forth in the name of Jesus to call people to repentance and to the forgiveness and life that Christ brings to us through His death and resurrection. Our ministry focuses on the cross of Jesus Christ. We point people to the cross. But that cross brings two very different lessons. On the one hand, the cross is a message of the law. It reminds us of the terrible reality of sin—and, yes, that means our sin, too. One hymn that always comes to my mind says: *Ye who think of sin but lightly nor suppose the evil great; here may view its nature rightly; here its guilt may estimate.* (LSB 451, st. 3) Sadly, there are those who will not heed the message of the cross. They see nothing wrong with their sinful deeds and words. They don't see themselves needing a Saviour. This is when we cannot absolve or forgive. Where there is no repentance, there can be no forgiveness. We must retain sins. But the cross also proclaims the Gospel of a Saviour who loved us and gave Himself for us. When we proclaim the law, and hearts are pierced with guilt and shame, then we need to come with that blessed Gospel message, assuring them of the promise in our Epistle lesson: ***“Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.”*** (Hebrews 2:14–15, ESV)

The church can abuse the power that is the Office of the Keys. For Luther, this was much of the issue that led him to nail his 95 Theses to the door of the castle church in Wittenberg. He saw the abuses, as the church used the granting of forgiveness as a fund raising tool; or as a means of controlling the hearts and lives of people for its own ends. The church used the promise of forgiveness to influence politics and business. Instead of assuring burdened hearts of the grace of God; setting them free through the declaration of forgiveness, new burdens of penance were added to those troubled. And if you didn't cooperate, well, the church used its authority against you.

Again, that is not why God has entrusted to us the Office of the Keys. We can only lock and unlock the door of heaven as Christ

has commanded. If we should forgive someone that should not be forgiven, then that forgiveness is meaningless. Or if we should refuse to forgive a repentant sinner, He is still forgiven by God who sees into the heart and knows the thoughts hidden there. We are ambassadors, working in the name of God, but God Himself will see that everything is done properly in His divine kingdom. The God of mercy and love, who gave His Son to die for us wants us to go and bring the Gospel to the very ends of the earth. He wants people to know His forgiveness, His love, His peace. That is why He has given us the keys—so that we may go in His names to set the captives free through the Gospel. Amen.