

## Children

Now what do keys do? That's right, they let people get into locked doors. In our Scripture lesson today Jesus gives to Simon Peter the keys of the Kingdom. Jesus was starting the Christian church and he was starting with Simon Peter. Jesus was giving Peter and his whole church the keys to the Kingdom of God.

Now there are several ways of looking at this. We might imagine the Kingdom of God as Heaven that beautiful place where people go when they die. You may have seen pictures in cartoons of St. Peter standing there with his keys letting people into heaven. That's one way of looking at it.

But there are others. I believe that the church of Jesus Christ has the key to being happy right here in this world. I believe the church has the key to understanding what life is about. I believe we have the key to what God is like. These are keys (hold up the keys), that only the church of Jesus Christ has. People come here to learn about God. They come here to meet people who know how to truly love them. They come here to put their lives back together again. We have the keys. The church has the keys. In fact, we believe that Jesus Christ is the key to life and love and truth in this world and in heaven.

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I

Names define us. Our entire identity is caught up in the names we bear. Think about it. If a child is raised being called sweet, good, beautiful, and kind, that child will think of him or herself as sweet, good, beautiful, and kind. If a child is raised being called worthless, stupid, ugly, or bad, that child will begin to think of him or herself as worthless, stupid, ugly, or bad.

The human capacity for language association allows us to perceive ourselves conceptually and emotionally according to the names we place upon our person. We all know therefore that if we want to lift someone up, we tell them, they are durable, strong, and resilient. Bullies on the other hand have the ability to wreak havoc on the human spirit simply by employing words, such as baby, idiot, coward, retard, or whore. In fact, we shudder when we hear some of those words slung at others, even if we weren't bullied ourselves. The words themselves carry difficult associations for us, and they create in us a "cringe" effect.

We not only identify with the names placed upon us, but we live out of those names. If we feel badly about ourselves, we begin to doubt ourselves. If we feel empowered, we can accomplish far more than we ever thought we could.

The scriptures are filled with names that bear special Hebrew meanings. And in several cases, God bestows a special name on someone who will take on a very special role in the faith. One of those is Abraham. Abram's name is expanded to add the Hebrew "hamon" meaning many or a multitude. Abram will be the Father of a Multitude. God gives him a name to which he can attach his identity and therefore his mission. Abraham lives out of that name.

Jacob's transformation to covenant bearer after his struggle with his conscience over what he did to his brother Esau is marked by his new name: Israel, one who struggled and prevailed.

In our gospel for today, Jesus is bestowing a new name upon his disciple Simon son of Jonah. He names him Peter (meaning stone). The phrase Jesus uses to describe Peter's mission is a brilliant wordplay in fact: You are Kephass (Petros), and on this Kephass (Petra) I will build my ecclesia. The Aramaic, Kephass means rock. In Greek, these translate to petros (masculine) and petra (feminine). Jesus is calling Peter a "rock," referring to his faith, his character, and his rock-solid loyalty to Jesus, as he just demonstrated by calling him the Son of the Living God. Upon this "foundation stone" or "rock" the movement would be built, an "ecclesia" or gathering of the faithful, the "living stones" built upon the cornerstone, Jesus Himself.

In giving Peter this name, Jesus is not merely “rewarding” him for giving the right answer, however. But Jesus is giving Peter a new identity as the disciple equipped to carry on the faith of the Way.

Peter or Simon Peter as we call him was one of the most impetuous disciples. Quick to anger, impulsive at times, fearful and doubting at others, obstinate and outspoken, this fisherman was also extremely loyal to Jesus, even to a fault. He had many flaws, as we saw in his denying of Jesus during his trials. And yet, Jesus needed him to be able to carry on the mission and build believers after his impending death. He needed to empower Peter.

Calling Simon a rock, a bedrock, or foundation rock, was like instilling in him the courage, the strength, and the optimism that he had the character to handle the job of early church founder and leader. I imagine that when Jesus bestowed this name upon him, Peter must have been feeling that Jesus believed in him, even though he himself felt that he had failed many, many times. Peter is a confidence building name for a man, who would need to have a lot of endurance, confidence, stability, obstinance, and permanence. In his naming, Peter step up and be transformed from mere disciple to valued stalwart of the faith.

Think of the names that you bear upon your heart and soul. I’m not just talking about your first name or your last name. But what are the names you’ve been called by parents, siblings, friends, neighbors, colleagues, others in your life? What names have clung to you and become part of who you are, part of your core identity? What names do you brand upon your own person?

Name those names that cling to you like barnacles now in your mind.

If you have had many loving names placed upon you, no doubt, you are feeling good right now. But many of us unknowingly carry with us many false names, names that have been foisted upon us by others, or names we have placed upon ourselves, critiques, judgments, labels, names that have injured our souls.

I want you to take a moment and think of those names. If you would like, you can write them on a piece of paper, or you can say them out loud. Or you can simply bring them to the surface in your mind. How do they make you feel?

Now I want you to hear Jesus’ words for you, as told to us by Peter himself (1 Peter 2:5):

“As you come to Him, the living stone, rejected by men but chosen and precious in God’s sight, [you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ](#). For it stands in Scripture: ‘See, I lay in Zion a stone, a chosen and precious cornerstone; and the one who believes in Him will never be put to shame.’”

Or Paul’s words to the Galatian church:

“[You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus](#). For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ...” (Galatians 3:26)

God has called all of you “living stones” and “sons and daughters.” You are part of a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, and you are literally clothed in Christ.

Now, watch all of those former labels, judgments, and names fall away from you, as you take on God’s mantle of blessing.

[Pastors have the option of handing out stones to all congregants]:

I want you now to hold the stone I’ve given you in your hand. Put it tightly into your fist. This stone represents your new name. You are a stone in the foundation of Christ’s holy church. Every stone is precious. Every stone is important. Every stone fits with the ones around it and works with those around it to form the foundation of the faith.

Every stone is unique. No shape is exactly the same. And yet every stone is beautiful.

You are beautiful. Because you are a son or a daughter of God.

Now may the peace that passes all understanding be with you, now and always.

Like other great newspapers the Washington Post has a room filled with file folders. These folders contain information on famous people who are no longer alive. Each of these famous people is identified with a single vocational notation ("home run king," "motion picture star," etc.). One of these is marked "Jesus Christ." The notation is simply "martyr."

Coming to grips with who Jesus is and what He means to us is the most important task we have. It has often been noted that Jesus' favorite teaching method was the asking of questions. There are over 100 questions asked in the four Gospels. **Of his parents Jesus asked, "Didn't you know that I would be in my Father's house?" Of the paralyzed man he asked, "Do you want to get well?" Of people who listened to Him teach but failed to act, "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?"**

No question is more important, however, than the question He posed to His disciples at Caesarea Philippi: "Who do you say that I am?" It is a fair question for us to ask today. "Who do you say that Christ is?" The answer to that question will have an effect on our ethical standards, our feelings about our responsibilities to God and to one another, and our feelings about our own purpose and destiny. Dr. E. Stanley Jones once said that the early Christians "out-loved, out-laughed, and out-died the people around them." Why? They knew who Jesus was and it affected everything about them. So, who do you say that He is? Who is He? Is He simply a good teacher an excellent moral example a spiritual guru in the same class with Mohammed and Buddha? Or is there something more to this Galilean? I hope by the way I ask the question you have guessed that I believe there is something more.

JESUS, FIRST OF ALL, IS THE REVELATION OF THE NATURE OF GOD. As John Killinger put it so cogently, "Jesus is God's way of getting rid of a bad reputation." Man had many ideas and intuitions about the nature of God prior to the coming of Jesus. But even the most brilliant theologian was a blind man trying to describe an elephant. How could any mortal capture the essence of the divine Other? It was beyond man's capacity. Even more critically, bad descriptions of God caused persons to perform outrageous rituals such as infant sacrifice, temple prostitution and the slaughter of unbelievers (a practice that is still carried on in parts of the world today).

Bad ideas of God always produce corresponding behavior. If someone says to you, "Oh, it doesn't matter what you believe, just so you are sincere," ask them to consider the modern state of ISIS sending children out to be slaughtered so that they can go to heaven. It does matter what we believe about God.

Because we could not climb up to God, however, God reached down to us in Jesus of Nazareth. He is the revelation of what God is really like. Back in the winter of 1981, the Mayor of Chicago, Jane Byrne, made a much publicized tour through a public housing project in Chicago, named Cabrini Green. Cabrini Green has been described as a taste of hell on earth. Two youth gangs literally controlled the lives of the 14,000 residents of that project raping, extorting, and murdering those who got in their way. On her tour of Cabrini Green Mayor Byrne made a promise to the residents, "You are going to live in security and safety." Sounds like a typical political promise, does it not? But Jane Byrne did one thing more. The following week she announced her plans to actually vacate her luxury apartment and temporarily move to Cabrini Green to see first-hand the problems of that crime ridden neighborhood. We are impressed by Jane Byrne's courage. Shall we not also be moved then by the compassion of God who saw our plight and became incarnate, walked in our shoes, (SONG WHAT IF GOD WAS ONE OF US) that He might know our need and we might know His love. One of my favorite stories about Helen Keller concerns her introduction to the Christian message. When Helen learned to communicate, Anne Sullivan decided it was time for her to hear about Jesus Christ. Being a Bostonian, she summoned the most renowned clergyman of his day, Phillips Brooks. Brooks came, and with Sullivan interpreting, he talked to Helen Keller about Christ. Soon a smile lighted Helen's face and she beckoned for a chance to respond. Through her teacher she said, "Mr. Brooks, I have always known about God, but until now I didn't know His name." Helen Keller was more fortunate than most people in her spiritual sensitivity. She knew God's nature but not His name. Most people without Christ know His name but not His nature. Jesus is the revelation of the nature of God.

HE IS NOT ONLY REVELATION, HOWEVER, HE IS ALSO REDEEMER. Elizabeth Achtemeier and her husband were given fellowships to study at Basel University, Switzerland, under the tutelage of the renowned

theologian Karl Barth. She relates that Barth visited this country and spoke at Union Seminary in New York City. A seminary professor was shocked when in conversation with Barth, someone had asked what he would say if he met Adolph Hitler and Barth's reply was simply, "Jesus Christ died for your sins." Comments Achtemeier: "How irrelevant, how simplistic, how utterly absurd seemed that reply to American pragmatic ears! And yet I suspect that Barth's answer...(was)...that finally the church has only one message Jesus Christ and Him crucified." Jesus Christ died for our sins. That is the central message of our faith. We preach Christ and Him crucified!

One of the "in" things today is to ask people, "What is your sign?" That, of course, is a reference to astrological signs. One man got tired of answering that overused question and started replying simply, "the cross." What is your sign? The cross. The cross is our sign that we have been set free from the dominion of sin. We can walk in dignity as children of the Father not because of anything that we have done but because of what Christ has done in our behalf. In John Bunyan's classic work, *Pilgrim's Progress*, Christian has been making his way to the Celestial City with a huge load strapped to his back. The load is exhausting, crushing, almost devastating. It is the weight of his own sins. He carries that weight until he comes to the foot of the cross of Jesus, then immediately, as Bunyan put it, "His burden tossed from off his shoulders, and fell off his back, and began to tumble and so continued to do so until it came to the mouth of the sepulchre, where it fell in, and was seen no more." That is a beautiful, poetic way to describe the indescribable. Something happened on the cross of Calvary that bridged the gap between God and man. Jesus Christ is our Revelation and our Redeemer. One thing more.

**HE IS ALSO OUR RISEN LORD.** Two famous Broadway producers were pallbearers at the funeral of the great escape artist, Harry Houdini. As they lifted the beautiful and heavy casket to their shoulders, one of them turned and whispered to the other, "Suppose he isn't in there!" He was, of course. Only one man in human history has conquered the grave and it is He whom we call, Lord. "Christ has been raised from the dead," writes St. Paul, "The first fruits of those who have fallen asleep." (1 Corinthians 15: 20)

What deliriously good news that is. No wonder our church is full on Easter Sunday. That is news that turns the world upside down. Jesus Christ is risen! In an Easter, 1984 article for the *Boston Sunday Globe*, theologian Harvey Cox noted that "In His Divine Comedy, Dante reports that after he had made the torturous ascent from hell to purgatory and then drawn close to the celestial sphere, he suddenly heard a sound he had never heard before." Stopping and listening, Dante wrote that "It sounded like the laughter of the universe." The Easter story, says Cox, "gives us a clue to this baffling riddle" as to why God laughs. "God laughs, it seems, because God knows how it turns out in the end..." Somehow it seems to me that if we know Christ to be the risen Lord there ought to be more laughter in our hearts. There ought to be laughter in the halls of this church. There ought to be laughter as we gather around the table for Sunday dinner. We do not have to fear anything in this world. He has overcome the world.

A frontiersman came to a lake that was frozen over. He was fearful to cross to the other side. How solidly frozen was the ice really? In his fear he knelt down and began to creep most timidly on his hands and knees. Suddenly he heard a happy sound. It was a team of horses pulling a wagon. It was in the middle of the lake and it was moving rapidly. The frontiersman knew that if the ice could support a horsedrawn wagon, it surely could support him. He stood confidently to his feet and continued his journey with a feeling of great exhilaration. That is the good news of the Gospel. One has gone before us. He has shown us, as it were, that the ice will hold.

Someone sent a clipping from their church bulletin to *Catholic Digest* sometime back. The typist had misplaced a notice about a bus tour in preparing the bulletin. Thus it read like this: "Today's liturgy portrays Christ as the Good Shepherd. He will lead all who seek Him to eternal life. The bus will depart from the Holy Family parking lot at 10 A.M. and will return at 5 P.M." I'm ready for the trip. Are you? He is the Revelation of the nature of God. He is our Redeemer from the power of sin and death. He is our Risen Lord who reigns victorious and is present with us in the power of the Holy Spirit. That is what the New Testament says about Christ. He is all this and more. He is the Savior of the world. But he cannot be your Savior until you settle this crucial issue in your own mind. Who is He to you?



### III

*Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!  
How inscrutable are his judgments and how unsearchable his ways!  
For from him, through him, and for him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.*

This is from today's second reading, Romans 11. God knows what he is doing, even if his reasoning is beyond our understanding. Today's Gospel reading gives us a clear example of the inscrutable judgement of God. In today's Gospel, Jesus gives the keys of the Kingdom to Peter.

As you know, the name Peter comes from the Greek word, *Petra*, meaning rock. Jesus named Simon, "Peter", the rock upon which the Church would be built. Authority in the Church was entrusted to Peter, "*whatever you declare bound on earth would be bound in heaven, whatever you declare loosed on earth would be loose in heaven.*"

The Lord could have found many different ways of establishing His church. He could have entrusted it to the angels. He could have worked out a Church of some sort of direct inspiration where every move on earth was exactly dictated from heaven. Instead, the Lord put the Church in the hands of people of faith. Good people, like Peter, but still people with all the limitations of being human. As all human beings, sometimes the humanity of individuals got in the way of their divine charge. Peter tried to keep Christ from going to Jerusalem and was called "Satan" for he was doing the work of the devil. After boasting that he would never deny the Lord, he did in fact deny him three times. Peter was a good man, a man of faith, but sometimes his vision became clouded. He was a man who could walk on water to the Lord, but then started thinking about what he was doing and started to drown. That was very much the story of his failings. He often started out well, but then let his humanity effect his actions. For example, after Pentecost when the Church was in its first days, Peter realized that Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians were equal. Yet, at Antioch, he ignored the Gentiles in favor of the Jews, for which he was berated by Paul. Peter was a holy man, but still, a man, and as a man he made human mistakes.

On the positive side, Peter was a man who grew in his faith. He was a determined fisher of men. He accepted the obligations and responsibilities of leadership over the other apostles, many of whom were far better educated than he was. Think about Paul who was educated at the feet of the great teacher Gamaliel. Yet Paul laid his teaching out before Peter to be sure he was proclaiming Christ properly. Peter's authority was given to Him by the Lord and confirmed in the action of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and through the remainder of Peter's life. Peter may have denied Jesus before Pentecost, but after Pentecost, he embraced suffering if that was what the Gospel entails. Peter, this man of Galilee, whose longest trip had been to Jerusalem, traveled all the way to Rome. This man who fled the crucifixion of Jesus, accepted his own crucifixion asking to be crucified head down because he didn't deserve to die as the Lord died.

When we consider the human failings of all the Popes who followed Peter, including those who would be canonized saints, we have to recognize the hand of the Holy Spirit in the very life of the Church. Christ gave His authority to the rock, even though some of those who exercised this authority let their humanity get in the way of their responsibility. Still, because we do have a concrete authority, rock-solid, we know who we are when we say we are Catholic. We know the fundamental beliefs of our faith and the basic dictates of our morals. We are so firm in our faith, that even if those in authority should give us a poor example of living the faith as some of the popes of the distant past did, we still maintain our Christianity. The Church still flourishes. Why? Because the Church is far more than individuals. It is the Body of Christ guided by the Holy Spirit.

Human frailty is not more powerful than Divine Grace. When I think of some of the ways in which I, as an ordained leader have let my humanity get in the way of my responsibility, and yet still witness the wonderful ways the Lord uses me for others, I realize that God's power is far greater than my own limitations. After forty-three years as a priest, I am still shocked at the way the Lord uses me despite my continual human failings.

I am sure that there are situations in your own lives that you feel the same way. I am sure that you recognize the Lord's presence in your decisions despite your own human failings. Many parents fear that they are acting like hypocrites when they do everything they can to prevent their children from engaging in actions that those parents themselves had done. But really, they are not hypocrites. They are concerned parents who want to protect their children from repeating their mistakes.

We, the confirmed, are entrusted with the responsibility of leading others to the Lord. We recognize that we do not do this alone. We realize that we must allow the hand of the Lord to work his wonders through us.

Today's gospel reading, "You are Peter and upon this rock I will build my Church" leads us to make an act of faith in the Lord who uses human beings, you and me, to proclaim his wonders.