

September 6, 2020  
Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
Ezekiel 33:7-9, Romans 13:1-10, Matthew 18:1-20

**"Care enough to confront"**

There he was, lying along the road, bleeding and badly beaten. Robbers had jumped him and left him for dead. A Samaritan man rides by on his donkey, stops and has pity on the man even though he was a Jew, his enemy. He took oil and wine and bandaged his wounds. He put him on his donkey and paid an innkeeper to take care of him.

You know the story. We not only have compassion for animals that are suffering, because some of us have rescue dogs and cats, but we also have compassion and love for people who are suffering. We may even take some of our precious money and use it to help other people who are going through hard times.

In the words we just read, our Lord Jesus directs our attention to helping people who are caught in sin.

There will be times in our lives when we see people beaten up, and bruised and bleeding because they have opened their lives up to sin and many times it is so much easier to pretend not to see them, to turn the other way, and just keep on traveling down the road of life.

But we can almost always be counted on to help someone whose car won't start, or who is hungry and needs a meal, or just needs a few words of encouragement, or even our daily prayers,

When it comes to confronting people caught in sin: that is the hard work of being a Christian especially in a culture where it is totally not cool to pass judgment on what another person is doing or believing.

Do you care about people? What kind of question is that? Sure you care about people. Do you care enough to confront them when they are caught in a sin that could ultimately destroy their faith and condemn them to eternal death and punishment?

Personally, I struggle with this. It does not come easy for me. This is not something fun to do. But Jesus calls us to carry out this ministry. Our thought today: Care Enough To Confront! I bet every adult here carries around a handful of keys.

Which of those many keys is the most important to you? Which key would you hate most to lose? The key to your garden shed? The key to suitcase? The key to a bicycle lock?

No, I don't think you would count any of those keys as the most important. Instead I think you would hate most to lose your car key or house key. That's because without your car key you can't get anywhere. And without your house key you have nowhere to end up at.

Of course it's annoying to misplace any kind of key and so if you're like me, you're in the habit of patting every pocket before you go anywhere to make sure you have your keys.

As Christians we also possess another set of keys that, while we can't actually hold them in our hands, these keys are more important than any other key we have.

These are the Keys of the Kingdom given to us by Jesus himself and so we will want to treasure them. We do that when we understand what these keys are and when we use them faithfully.

We learn about the Keys in Matthew 16 where Jesus said to the Apostle Peter: "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" (Matthew 16:19).

The first part of that verse is simple enough. Jesus is giving Peter, as the spokesman of the apostles, keys to the kingdom of heaven. But what does it mean that these keys can bind and loosen things on earth and in heaven?

The sixteenth century reformer, Martin Luther, explains when he wrote in his catechism: “The use of the keys is that special power and right which Christ gave to his church on earth, to forgive the sins of the penitent sinners, but to refuse forgiveness to the impenitent as long as they do not repent.”

Luther’s explanation is confirmed when you consider our sermon text from Matthew 18. There Jesus told all of his disciples, and not just Peter, what they were to do if a fellow Christian was caught in a sin.

They were to first and go and speak to that individual privately about his sin and call him to repentance. To repent of sin means to be sorry for the sin, to stop committing that sin, and to trust that Jesus has forgiven the sin.

If the individual refuses to repent, then the disciples were to “bind” the sin to the individual. That’s kind of what a police officer does when he pulls over a speeder and gives him a ticket.

That ticket binds the infraction to the driver so that he has to answer for it in court or by paying a fine. He can’t just drive away and act as if nothing has happened.

In the same way when we say to an impenitent that his sin is still bound to him, we’re announcing that he’ll have to answer for his sin on Judgment Day as long as he remains impenitent.

On the other hand, if the sinner repents and says he’s sorry and expresses his trust in Jesus’ forgiveness, then we are to “loose” the sin like untying a boat on a river so that it floats downstream and out of sight. Loosing sin is just another way to say that the transgression has been forgiven and has floated out of God’s sight.

What if the brother or sister refuses to listen to you? My sinful heart would say, “Well I have done my job. He won’t listen. There is nothing more I can do.” Listen to what Jesus says about the next step. “But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.”

When a brother or sister won't listen to you about the danger of sin, you can take others with you to help the person see the errors of their ways and take it to heart.

It always, always, always has the best interest of the other person at heart, the salvation of their eternal soul. You want them to be in heaven with you, and not spend an eternity separated from God.

What is the next step, if they still refuse to heed your warning? Jesus says, "If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church." The church needs to get involved to help them open their eyes and see how bad the situation truly is.

Instead of two or three people, the congregation of believers gathers around and points out the sin to lead the person to repentance. And what if they will not listen to their whole Christian family as it points out the sin? Jesus says, "And if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or tax collector."

This is commonly referred to in the church as excommunication.

Excommunication is not meant to kick a bad apple out of the church family. It is meant to show the person the seriousness of sin, so that they repent and are won back to Christ's family.

It is to be done in a spirit of love and compassion. It is meant to warn the Christian that their soul is in serious danger of being lost. This whole concept is almost completely foreign to what people think of when it comes to "church" today.

The modern Church, the big church with all the programs, upbeat music and inspiring life lessons according to most people these days, is kind of like an individual membership at a health club. You go there to get fit, you may have your own personal trainer, or you may just exercise on your own.

You may have a few friends there, maybe not. Nonetheless, you don't feel the need to really be that connected with anyone else who goes there. Most would just as soon put on headphones and mind their own business. That's how many view "church" as today - a bunch of individuals who come to individually be fed and then leave.

No more, no less. It's a part of society's rugged individualism that likes to rely on no one - hates telemarketers, door to door salesmen, and anyone else that invades their personal privacy.

Don't judge me. Don't worry about me. Don't think about me. Just leave me alone, and I'll leave you alone. This is NOT God's concept of a church. At our little church here, God wants us to be brothers and sisters in Christ.

We have a fellowship here that is supposed to be a stronger bond than any type of super glue. It is supposed to mean that we can talk "Jesus" together. It is supposed to mean that we look out after one another. It is also supposed to mean that we can be lovingly honest with one another without parting company. We try to watch out for one another's back.

So Jesus gives us the power to forgive or not to forgive sins. That's what the Keys of the Kingdom are? And he's given this privilege to all believers and not just to Peter and to the Twelve Disciples, or just to pastors?

That's right. When Jesus said, "If your brother sins..." he wasn't just thinking about the Apostle Matthew sinning against the Apostle Peter. Or the Apostle John sinning against the Apostle James. He was speaking about anyone who calls himself a believer.

If such a person sins, then other believers who witness that sin should call the individual to repentance. But let's not forget about the other Key of the Kingdom – the loosing key. With this key we announce forgiveness to those who are sorry for their sins.

We want them to know that because of what Jesus has done, their sin is no longer tied to them like a big rock that would drag them down to the bottom of the ocean if they tried to swim with it.

Your Christian friend confesses to you that they had an abortion a number of years ago. They are sorry for what was done. You assure them, "The blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin. You are forgiven. God still loves you in Christ.

Someone you know says, “ I made a wrong decision in my parent’s health care. I believe if I had done differently, they would have been alive today”. You assure them. The blood of Jesus has cleansed you from all sin. You are forgiven.

Remember, God determines when our last day will be. Someone says, “I made a comment in anger to my spouse that was hurtful and wrong. It continues to bother me.” You tell them, “The blood of Jesus cleanses you from all sin. You are forgiven.

Or someone was abused as a child, and then abused their own children years ago. It still bothers them. They are genuinely repentant. You say to them. You are forgiven. Jesus paid the price for you.

When you offer this support you are wielding the loosing key, the key of forgiveness. The next time you hold a set of keys in your hand, think about the Keys of the Kingdom that have been entrusted to you – to offer forgiveness, or to withhold forgiveness.

Then pray that the Lord will keep you faithful in using those keys because when you treasure the Keys of the Kingdom you not only cherish God’s Word, you treasure the people around you. You show that you love them enough to care about where they will spend eternity.

Think about that when someone uses the Keys of the Kingdom on you and calls you to repent of some sin. Don’t get angry. Don’t make excuses for your sin. Confess the sin and repent.

For you will then hear that, for Jesus’ sake, your sin is forgiven and the kingdom of heaven is open to you. The Keys of the Kingdom really are better than keys to any sports car or keys to any mansion here on earth.

May the Lord keep each one of us faithful in the use of those keys and may he also give us an attitude that welcomes their use! Amen