

Taking the Keys to the Kingdom

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August 23, 2026

When a nurse arrives for a shift, she or he needs to accept the keys. They know that their work may be very rewarding. They also know they may be greatly challenged. They also might assess what they are getting into before taking the keys. Our faith is like that. We know good things will come, we also know there is no guarantee it will be easy.

Our passage for today's lesson follows the miraculous scenes of Jesus feeding the multitude and Peter walking on the water toward Jesus, then the testing of Jesus by the religious leaders of his time. Immediately following today's passage is Jesus' foretelling of his death and resurrection, quite literally, his advanced directives. Nestled between the questioning by the authorities and the advanced directives, here, Jesus asks his disciples the all-important question, ***"who do you say that I am?"*** Simon Peter replies, "you are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." This is a question we all must answer and that connects each one of us in the church.

Today we have a man among us ready to proclaim his faith in the Christ, Messiah, Son of the living God and join us as Christ's body on earth. I am so blessed to know him and to administer his baptism. He is joining us because of his faith in Christ that we all share.

Jesus responded to Simon Peter with the words, "blessed are you" because it was not humanity that revealed the truth to him, but rather the Heavenly Father revealed to him who Jesus is. Jesus went on to say, "you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church. I will give you the keys of the kingdom. Whatever you bind on Earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." Jesus goes on to sternly warn the disciples not to reveal his identity as the Messiah.

We follow the One who lowered himself from his divine status to be among us as a human. He was obedient in his human state all the way to the cross, not only sharing in human suffering, but taking suffering for us. The keys of the kingdom are the crossroads of humanity and the divine.

When the nurse takes the keys, the following shift might be routine, administering medication and checking vital signs. But there are many unknown variables. The nurse may be called upon to the divine work of saving a life. The nurse might even have to accompany someone at the end and usher them out of life—perhaps a divine act in and of itself as someone transitions into eternity. The nurse might have to respond to an accident complete with bleeding and trauma. Whatever the task, the nurse must be prepared and aware of the surroundings. The nurses' presence makes all the difference. The skills, the bedside manner, the art form if you will, might well impact the quality of life for an individual or group.

It is much the same for us as we take the keys to the kingdom. We are equipped through our faith and the grace of God to take on the role of discipleship. We are called to follow our master wherever he leads us. We have the Word and the Holy Spirit to guide us along the way. We must be aware of ourselves and our surroundings. At any moment, we may have an opportunity to build a new relationship, lend a helping hand, or a listening ear. Our work is a blend of the worlds both human and divine.

When we pray for one another, we are doing a human thing but connecting with the divine. When we celebrate as we are today with someone proclaiming their faith and getting baptized, we know this is the work of God in building the church. But as humans, we get to take part in it.

God did all the work and gets all the credit for the faith of a young man this morning. We did the work of offering a supportive community where this young man can learn, grow, and use his gifts to serve. Adding him to the church is a blessing for the whole body of Christ, the church that transcends time and space. It is also a blessing to us and our local congregation in Hornell.

We continue to pray and journey together on our path in our common identity in Christ. We celebrate one man who joins us by putting all of his identity and allegiance into Christ today. Christ promises to build his church and that the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. We have evidence of that before us.

Jesus did not hand Peter a set of keys so he could lock people out. He handed him keys so he could open doors. These are doors to mercy, forgiveness, and belonging. The doors lead to a kingdom of God's love rather than human fear. These keys are not ornamental, but functional and meant to be used.

And just like the nurse who accepts the keys at the start of a shift, we accept the keys of the kingdom knowing full well that we do not know what the next hour, day, or season will bring. Some days will feel routine—small acts of kindness, quiet prayers, simple faithfulness. Other days will demand courage we didn't know we had. Some days will call us to tend to wounds, to sit with grief, or accompany someone through the valley. Some days will ask us to celebrate wildly, to welcome new life, to rejoice in God's work among us.

But every day, the keys remind us: **Christ trusts us with his mission and equips us with his Spirit. Christ builds his church through ordinary people who say yes.**

Today, one man comes to us because he said yes. He has answered Jesus' question—"Who do you say that I am?"—with his whole life. And in doing so, he reminds all of us of our own answer, our own calling, our own keys.