

Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle A
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception – August 27, 2017
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Some Memphians talk about the times when no one bothered to lock their doors – but even I am not old enough to remember that. Indeed, one of the rites of passage – one of the indications that a child was maturing – was when he or she got their own set of keys. I suppose I had a key to the house from time to time as I was growing up – but I don't remember carrying my own set of keys until I started driving. I didn't get my own car for my 16th birthday, but I did get a key chain. I got keys to the house and to each of the two family cars. For the next five years, my mom and dad and I managed to share the cars quite easily – and then my brother turned 16. He got his own set of keys – and the schedule got infinitely more complicated. You see, once my brother started driving – he drove everywhere – I mean everywhere – except to a gas station, that is. My mother and father and I quickly learned that if Patrick had the car the night before, well, you had to leave the house early enough to get to the nearest gas station – praying all the way that the fumes would take you there. Even if the tank had been completely full when he set out, my brother – miraculously, it seemed – managed to pull the car into the garage with the needle of the gas gauge unwaveringly on empty. It was truly a gift. Keys, you see, bring privileges – the ability to enter and leave on your own, the ability to drive wherever you'd like. But those same keys bring responsibilities, to the other members of the household, to the drivers with whom you share the road and, especially, to those members of the family with whom you share the car.

In the gospel today, Jesus gives his disciples a quiz – Who do you say that I am? Well, he'd been their leader, their teacher for quite some time – yet each was a little hesitant to speak up. How could they admit that they didn't really know who he was – an interesting carpenter, a self-taught rabbi, a spiritual guide, or the Messiah, the Anointed One. When the silence lingered and became awkward, Simon Peter spoke up – “You are the Christ,” he told Jesus, “the Son of the living God.” With all of the others lingering there silently, Peter stuck his neck out – and Jesus called him “Blessed,” he called him the rock upon which he would build his church. And then Jesus offered Peter a prize, the reward of seniority – his own set of keys. Not the keys to the house, or to the treasury, or to any other man-made lock – no, Jesus promises Peter the most important keys of all – the keys to the kingdom of heaven. For months, maybe even years at this point in the gospel, Jesus has been preaching about the kingdom – comparing it to a mustard seed, yeast, a treasure buried in a field, a pearl of great price – all of those images we reflected upon this summer. If the disciples knew nothing else after listening to the preaching of Jesus, they at least knew that the kingdom of heaven was something good, something of immense value, something they should want. Yes, Jesus was dangling the kingdom before them as a

prize, as something tremendously desirable, and they were waiting eagerly to learn how to get there. Then suddenly, Peter comes forward with this answer – You are the Christ, the Son of the living God – and Jesus promises him the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Wow! Peter had the keys. They could come and go as they wished. Was that all it took? All he had to do was tell Jesus that he was the Messiah? That was so easy, why didn't they think of that? Well, of course, it isn't that easy – but we'll cover that in next week's gospel if you want to read ahead. In the meantime, Peter has the keys – what a blessing, what a privilege, what a responsibility.

We think of keys as freedom, as opportunity, as our ability to do whatever we want. But when we share a house, a car, a church – keys are also a responsibility. That's what Jesus was bestowing upon Peter – upon the church which is Christ's mystical body. By entrusting to Peter – and, ultimately to his successors – the keys of the kingdom, Jesus was giving him the tremendous responsibility of caring for the flock, of opening those doors that will lead us toward Christ and closing those doors that will lead us away from him. That is the role of the Holy Father, the role of the Church – to guide us along our journey of faith. True, at times, we don't want that guidance – we'd rather set out on our own – but, honestly, that never turns out too well. We get distracted by the elaborate boulevards that this world sets before us – wealth, power, pleasure – until we realize too late that those roads inevitably lead us toward selfishness, anger, bitterness; inevitably those roads lead us away from God. The mission of the Church is to remind us of the truth Peter spoke in today's gospel – Jesus alone is the Christ, the Son of the living God. Only by following him will we find true happiness, only by following him will we find salvation.

As Catholics, accepting this role of the Church, of the Holy Father as shepherd and guide can sometimes be difficult. We are naturally rebellious. We want to set our own course, even to make our own mistakes. In this regard, we would do well to listen to many of those former Protestants who have found their way home, their way to the fullness of the faith in the Catholic Church. Far from being a hindrance in their spiritual journey, many of these former Protestants saw in the Holy Father and in the Church's magisterium the spiritual authority that they longed for, the spiritual authority that is absent in “do-it-yourself, make-it-up as-you-go-along” Christianity. Why would Christ leave his Church alone and abandoned, without a leader, with a crew who cannot agree upon which path to take? He wouldn't, of course, and he didn't. He gave the keys to the kingdom, the responsibility of caring for the faithful, to Peter and his successors. He built his Church upon the solid foundation, upon the rock of Peter. Before we start charting our own course, before we start trying out our own set of keys, we should remember the responsibility we have for one another, and be grateful that Jesus has indeed entrusted the keys of the kingdom of heaven to his Church. Guided by the successor of Peter, may we share the responsibility of leading one another to the Christ, the Son of the living God.