

Sermon for Sunday, August 27, 2017
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
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I wonder if you remember
the first time
you were given responsibility for something.

Maybe
it was when your mother
gave you a few cents
and sent you into a shop alone
to buy some milk.

And suddenly
you grew three inches
and your eyes were brighter
and your face more serious
than it had ever been before.

Or a teacher at school
asked you to run an errand for her
to another classroom,
and you remember walking importantly down the halls,
knowing that everyone else was hard at work
while you got to skip class,
then overcome with the enormity of the responsibility
knocking hesitantly on the door,
stuttering out the message,
and running back to the safety of your classroom.

Or the neighbor
who asked you to feed and walk his dog for him
when he was out of town for the weekend,
and each morning you went in afraid
that something had happened to it overnight and you would be blamed,
and every afternoon
you strutted round the neighborhood, dog in hand,
making sure that all your friends saw you.
And on Monday at school
every sentence began,
“when I was taking the dog for his walk...”

There is nothing quite like the importance
of responsibility.

It can bring great joy, it can call forth things from within us
which we never knew we had,
and it can be the makings
of a complete
disaster.

Which is what sometimes makes me wonder
if Jesus knew what he was doing
when he said those famous words to Peter:
“You are Peter,
and on this rock I will build my church,
and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.
I will give you the keys
of the kingdom of heaven,
and whatever you bind on earth
will be bound in heaven,
and whatever you loose on earth
will be loosed in heaven.”

Peter, the same Peter
who just fell in the lake
because he got scared.
Peter, the same Peter
who opened his mouth and blurted out
what perhaps others were thinking
but only he dared to say,
“you are the Christ”.

Peter, impetuous, faithful, enthusiastic, doubting,
a kind of great galumphing golden retriever.
Is he the one
you would trust
with the keys of heaven?

And maybe that’s why he told them to be quiet
Because an announcement like this

would be sure to go to their heads
 and in a burst of enthusiasm
 impetuous Peter and his friends
 would be off
 setting the world ablaze
 binding and loosing,
 forbidding and allowing,
 as fast as their tongues could travel
 all
 in the name
 of a Christ
 who hadn't yet
 done
 what he had come
 to do.

Now you may have heard
 that Peter's name
 means rock.
 The word that Jesus uses is
 πέτρος (petros),
 and it literally means a stone, a pebble, a piece of gravel.

And then, when he talks about the rock,
 he uses the word
 πέτρα (petra),
 and that means a big rock, an outcrop, a boulder.

So what Jesus says actually sounds like
 "Peter, look at me.
 You are just a
 a pebble.
 but it's on you,
 as if on a big outcrop
 that I'm going to build.
 Build
 not a building made of bricks and wood,
 but of people.
 And I'm asking you

and your friends
to take responsibility
for this building.

I want you to be the new interpreters,
the people who think about
what should be forbidden
and what should be allowed,
what should be tied up in knots
and what should be set free.

It's up to you.

Here is the key
to the front door.

Use it well.”

And maybe the reason
he told them to keep quiet
about who he was,
was that he didn't want word to get out.
He didn't want them
getting caught up in discussions
over the best way to start a revolution,
or a the very least
an organization.

He didn't want fights
over who was the Messiah's favorite.
He didn't want them to get distracted
by the prospect of power.

What he did want,
was for them to follow him.
To learn what that building would look like
from the inside,
as they built it together.
To learn that they would be interpreters
not of a law, like the scribes,
but of a life.

It worked for a while.
But it wasn't too long before
the power overtook the responsibility,

before we got more concerned
with guarding the door
than keeping the house in good repair.
So that it began to fall down,
and sometimes
we find ourselves
still locking and unlocking a heavy wooden door
while people wander in and out of the ruins behind us.

Have you ever heard the news stories at Christmas time
where fights break out at the church of the Holy Nativity in Bethlehem
about who is doing the cleaning,
and which group of monks get to worship where and what time?
Or if you've ever visited the Church of the Holy Sepulchre
and seen the ladder
perched up beneath a window
high on the facade,
you may know that it has been there for a couple of hundred years
because to make any change to the building
requires the agreement of all six denominations who share in the building -
and they can't agree.

Those are fairly innocuous examples,
but they point to an uncomfortable reality:

For 2000 years
we in the church
have been fighting over
the keys of Peter,
fighting over
who gets to decide, using the key
to create binding laws
rather than freeing people.

We sometimes act as if
there is a competition between us
about who is
and who isn't

really the church.
We point fingers
at other Christians
and find fault.
With other denominations.
With other congregations within the Episcopal Church.
Even, sometimes, within our own parish.
Because we all
 want to be known
as the true believers,
the true
church.

But that's not really useful is it?
The more we split ourselves apart
the less we are like the church that Jesus imagined
built on Peter.

And that's particularly important at times like this
when there is a great deal of turmoil around.
There is enough division in our society
without Christians
adding to the mix.

That's why
one of the best things we do as a parish
is work with six other church communities
to run the food pantry.
There's no pointing fingers,
or arguing about whose theological position is best,
or who are the best
followers of Jesus.
Just a bunch of followers of Jesus
serving others.

And one of the great things about our connections with other churches
is that we can have our eyes are opened
to a whole different way
of doing faith.
As much as we might prefer our way,

it's not the only way
of following Jesus.

Faith in Jesus Christ
can be expressed in many different ways.
And that's okay.
We all need to work together
to keep that building, the church at large, standing.

Just as our physical building is being renewed at the moment -
if you didn't notice the lovely new roof as you arrived, make sure you check it out as you
leave -
just as our physical building is being renewed,
the spiritual building that Jesus talks about
constantly needs renewing.
By all of us.
Because we are all,
everyone here in this congregation, everyone who follows Jesus
outside of these walls,
all of us
all inheritors
of the keys of Peter.

Together
we continue to build the church,
the people of God.
We need heads and heart, fingers and toes,
biceps and quads,
strong backs and keen eyes.
God needs all of us.

And God trusts all of us
with the church.

Trusts us
to step outside our own preconceived ideas
of how things must be done
to make room for others, who might see things differently.
To make room
for children, skipping with confidence in Jesus who loves them,

and newcomers, just beginning to explore this thing called faith;
for old-timers, rejoicing in the familiar language of the faith
they have known from their childhood,
and teenagers, not sure what, and how, they believe.
For passers-by, who don't yet know the riches of love and forgiveness that God has to
offer them,
and passers-through, who wait on the call of God.

Having the keys of Peter
places a burden on us. It's a burden
which is terrifying
and wonderful.
It can call forth things from within us
which we never knew we had,
and it can be the makings
of a complete
disaster.

And maybe that's why
Jesus tells his followers to be silent.
For in the face of such a responsibility
and such a blessing
who can speak?