**MATTHEW 16:13–20.** (EHV)

When Jesus came into the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" They said, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But you, who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not stand up against it. 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." Then he commanded the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ.

Time for a Catechism quiz. Can you name the six chief parts of the Catechism?

I hope you are able at least to name three: 1) the Ten Commandments, 2) the Creed, and 3) the Lord's Prayer. Martin Luther considered those to be the absolute essentials of Christian doctrine. If someone wasn't willing to learn them, Luther said that person wasn't a Christian. The Ten Commandments teach us God's law. The Creed teaches us the gospel of Jesus. The Lord's Prayer teaches us how to pray.

The subjects of the next two chief parts should also be familiar to us and beloved by us: 4) baptism and 5) the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion.

Actually, Luther's original Small Catechism of 1529 only contained those five chief parts. But in his 1531 edition, he inserted one more between baptism and the Lord's Supper: "How the Simple Should be Taught to Confess." After some tweaking and editing by Luther's friends, this has come down to us as "The Use of the Keys and Confession."

"The Use of the Keys"—what is that? I think this chief part tends to get short shrift. If time is short for catechism instruction, it probably gets left out. But it is still important. Here in Matthew 16, we hear about Christ giving the keys of the kingdom of heaven. We see what a miracle the gift of the keys is, and we see what a privilege it is to use them.

**1. What a miracle!**

Last week we heard about Jesus taking his disciples outside of Galilee to the region of Tyre and Sidon. Now we hear about Jesus taking his disciples outside of Galilee again, this time north and a little east of the Sea of Galilee, almost to Mount Hermon, not far from a city called Caesarea Philippi, named after Caesar Augustus and Herod Philipp. It wasn't far from the ancient site of the city of Dan, which was often used to designate the northernmost point of the land of Israel.

Whenever Jesus takes his disciples outside of their usual stomping grounds, it usually turns into an opportunity for continuing education for them. And this occasion is no different. Jesus appears to be engaging in simple conversation when he asks them, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" At first glance, it might appear like Jesus is essentially Googling himself. "What are people saying about me?" But he frames the question very carefully and deliberately: "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" He refers to himself in the third person, using the name he usually used to refer to himself—the Son of Man. In fact, every time that label "Son of Man" is

used in the Gospel of Matthew, it's used by Jesus to refer to himself. As we're going to see, calling himself that name is actually a sort of test in this question: "Who do people say the Son of Man is?"

The disciples take up the conversation easily enough. One of them answers, "I've heard some people say you're John the Baptist." Perhaps they were thinking primarily of Herod Antipas, who after having John the Baptist beheaded, heard reports about Jesus and his miracles and told his attendants that John the Baptist must have risen from the dead.

Another disciple answered, "Some people say you're Elijah." The prophet Malachi had prophesied that the prophet Elijah would come back before the great and dreadful day of the Lord. He was actually talking about John the Baptist, but many people thought Jesus might be the prophet Elijah come back in the flesh. Remember, Elijah had not actually died, but had been taken straight to heaven. So perhaps, some people thought, he had come back down from heaven now.

Another disciple piped up, "I've heard some people insist you must be Jeremiah or one of the other prophets." As famous as Elijah was in Israel's history, we don't have a whole ton of his prophecies. But Jesus was known for his elaborate teaching, so for some, he was more likely to be a reincarnation of Jeremiah or Isaiah or Ezekiel than he was Elijah.

Notice how, even if any of these false identifications were correct, they would justify listening closely to Jesus. If Jesus really were John the Baptist raised from the dead—my goodness, then listen to him! If Jesus really were the prophet Elijah come back down from heaven, or the prophet Jeremiah or Isaiah reincarnated—my goodness, listen to him! If any of these false identifications were correct, they would justify listening closely to Jesus, and if they had listened closely and carefully to Jesus, they wouldn't have made false identifications about him.

Notice also how naturally easy it is to make claims about Jesus that make him out to be anything but what he actually is. These people cited here were ready to say that Jesus was a resurrected, restored, or reincarnated prophet before they would say what he actually was. The truth about Jesus does not come naturally to people.

Jesus now gets to the point of the conversation. He had been in the public ministry for about two years, and that means his disciples had been with him for nearly as long. Did they know who he was? Had they been listening to him? Or had he just been spitting into the wind? "But you, who do you say that I am?"

And here Simon Peter immediately spoke up for all of them, and he did well: "You are the Christ," or the promised Messiah, "the Son of the living God."

What had Jesus asked again? "Who do people say *the Son of Man* is?" Answer? "You are the Christ, *the Son of the living God*."

What a miracle! Peter had met Jesus's mother at the wedding at Cana, and probably on other occasions. He may have even been distantly related to her and Jesus, since all three of them had been invited to that wedding before Jesus had officially chosen his twelve apostles. He had seen Jesus eat, because he was hungry. He had seen Jesus sleep, because he was tired. He had seen Jesus want to go from point A to point B, and to have to walk or sail in a boat to do it. Yes, he had also seen Jesus perform some tremendous miracles, but so had many others, and not

everyone had come to the same conclusion. So what was different here? Why did Peter and the other disciples here know better?

"Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but my Father who is in heaven." If you turn to John 1, you might think, "Really?" After all, there we read that John and Peter's brother Andrew spent the day with Jesus, and after they spent the day with Jesus, the first thing Andrew did was to go and find his brother Peter and tell him, "We have found the Messiah," that is, the Christ. His brother Andrew was flesh and blood, and Andrew was the one who told him.

But Jesus says, "Flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but my Father in heaven." Now don't get Jesus wrong. He wasn't saying that what Andrew did was pointless and played no role in Peter's conviction. In fact, Jesus is about to tell Peter that he's going to give him the keys of the kingdom of heaven on the basis of his confession, so that Peter can in turn also tell others about who Jesus is, so that they too can believe it. But Jesus is saying what Paul says in 1 Corinthians, "I planted the seed, and Apollos watered it, but it is God who made it grow." And elsewhere Paul says, "No one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit." And Jesus himself already said after the feeding of the five thousand, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him."

By nature, we can say that "Jesus is just alright with me," like the Doobie Brothers did. We can even go so far as to claim that he is a resurrected, restored, or reincarnated prophet. That's basically what a Muslim author did in 2014 when he published a bestselling book on Jesus, in which he actually acknowledged that Jesus was a real miracle worker, but he denied that he was the actual Son of God and Savior of the world. If the confession of our mouth and heart is that Jesus Christ, the Son of Man, is at the same time the Son of the living God, and so we, like Peter, have been given the keys to the kingdom of heaven, don't go patting yourself on the back or looking down on others as if you're a believer because you're so much more intelligent than they are. If you believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, that is nothing less than a miracle. Only God the Father and his Holy Spirit can reveal that to our hearts and give us the conviction to speak it.

**2. What a privilege!**

Jesus continues: "And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not stand up against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven." Here we have one of the most misunderstood and misused passages in Scripture. This is the passage used to defend why the bishop of Rome has to be the head of the whole Christian church, because Rome is where Peter ended up by the end of his ministry and where he was martyred, being crucified like Christ was.

It is obviously true that Jesus makes a connection between Peter and the building of his church. But even before we look more closely at what he says here, which is perhaps confusing to us, we can look at what he says elsewhere in crystal clear terms—especially these two things. First, he says here that he is giving the keys of the kingdom of heaven to Peter, but just two chapters later, and again on Easter Sunday, he says the exact same thing to all of his disciples. So if we interpret this passage in a way that leaves only Peter with the keys, we are interpreting it incorrectly.

Second, we have several passages elsewhere, including in 1 Peter, where Christ's apostles make it clear that Christ's church is only built or founded on ultimately one thing, and that is Christ himself. Paul says in 1 Corinthians, "No one can lay any foundation other than that which has already been laid, which is Jesus Christ." In Ephesians he writes that the church is built on the foundation of the apostles (plural!) and prophets, "with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone." And in 1 Peter 2, Peter himself calls Jesus "the living Stone" and the "chosen and precious cornerstone" of the Church. So if we interpret this passage in a way that makes Peter the foundation and cornerstone of the Church rather than Jesus, we are interpreting it incorrectly.

What Jesus says is, "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church," not, "You are Peter, and upon you I will build my church." He is making a play on words. Peter's name is *Petros* in Greek, which means "rock" as in a rock or stone that you might pick up off the ground. But Jesus says he is going to build his Church upon "this *petra*," which is "rock" as in a towering cliff or bedrock that you sink the foundation of a house or castle into.

In the immediate context, the only bedrock that Jesus could be referring to is not Peter, but Peter's confession of Jesus as the Son of the living God. The good news that Jesus is the God-man come to earth to be our substitute and Savior is the bedrock of the Church.

And this confession prompts Jesus to hand over the keys, as it were. "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." And if Jesus is prompted to hand over the keys to Peter because of Peter's Spirit-inspired confession, that means that all of us who share in his confession, all of us who confess, "We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father," also have possession of those same keys.

In other words, when people stubbornly and persistently continue in their sin and unbelief without repentance, and we tell them, as we ought, "Then you do not have God's forgiveness and can only expect an eternity in hell," Jesus himself turns the key in heaven, and shuts the person out. I think of the pastor who went to visit the parishioner who hadn't been to church in years and who was now approaching death in the hospital. He told the pastor, "I didn't invite you here." And the pastor responded, without any personal anger, exactly how he should have: "Greet the devil for me when you see him."

But when your daughter breaks down in tears and says, "I'm sorry, Daddy," when the friend shows up on the doorstep to apologize, when the parishioner is sitting in the pastor's office confessing wartime atrocities that went beyond the call of duty or the events of one haunting night he wishes he could take back, when the neighbor says, "So there are no hoops to jump through? It's all been done for me by Jesus?" and we tell them, as we ought, "In the name of Jesus, who could and did pay for all your sins on the cross, because he was the Son of Man and the Son of the living God, I forgive you," Jesus himself turns the key the other way in heaven, and opens heaven up for that person. I think of that same parishioner I just mentioned, from whom that pastor received a phone call when he got back home. The thought of greeting the devil didn't sit well with him, and he wanted to talk now, and that pastor returned to the hospital ready and eager to use a very different key that was jingling in his pocket, so to speak.

What a privilege, brothers and sisters! That Jesus should entrust us with the keys to his house! Make no mistake, if you misuse those keys, if you pronounce forgiveness and mercy to

someone who is not repentant, who is continuing in their sin unapologetically, if you pronounce damnation and hell on someone who is repentant, Jesus will not be held responsible for your actions. But if you act in accordance with your miraculous confession—that Jesus and only Jesus is not only the Son of Man, but also the Son of the living God—he himself will act and speak right along with you as you act and speak to others. There is no greater privilege.

The keys of the kingdom of heaven are given to all those who share Peter's confession. What a miracle that Peter or any of us have that confession to begin with! What a privilege to exercise the keys of the kingdom of heaven on behalf of the One who has won heaven for us by his blood! So let's dust off this sixth chief part of our faith. Let's revel in it, and let's use it. Amen.