**The Pastor's Task**

 **John 20:21b‑23**

 {adapted from a sermon by Rev. Robert Schaibley, Shepherd of the Springs LC, Colorado Springs}

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

On that Sunday of His resurrection, Jesus appeared to the disciples in the upper room. He spoke to them, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” When he had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

Our Lord Jesus Christ had you in mind when He spoke these words. His purpose in the remaining 50 days on earth between His resurrection and His ascension was to set in order thee means by which He was going to continue to be present and at work in and through His church.

In that upper room, Christ completes the manner in which He would manifest His presence and bestow the forgiveness of sins which He purchase by His death and sealed with His resurrection upon sinners in this world – through His church.

The preparation for His people to receive His presence and His daily forgiveness in His church began with the calling of the Twelve disciples, those who would become the Twelve Apostles, the first to hold the office of the holy ministry.

Christ institutes this holy ministry, when He says to Peter on the hills outside of Caesarea Philippi, *"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."* (Mt 16:18b‑19)

Shortly thereafter, our Lord indicates the context in which this "office of the keys" will be found. The context will be the church. Not the building that is called "the church," nor the organization that is called "the church," nor the hierarchy or administration that is called "the church." It will be found in the church, the gathering of believers around the Word and Sacraments ‑‑ that will be the context of the office of the keys. That will be “the church” in which His presence and His work will be found.

Jesus indicates this when He repeats what He said to Peter and the other apostles, *“Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”* Then He adds the context for this office when He continues, “*Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by My Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in My name, I am there among them.” [Mt 18.18‑20]* Thus, the office of the ministry is instituted by Christ Himself, to function where believers, even two or three, are gathered in His name, that is, around his Word and his Sacraments.

On this night of His resurrection, Jesus takes the next step. He ordains these 10 disciples into the apostolic office of the holy ministry within His church. There are only 10 here, because Judas is dead and has yet to be replaced, and Thomas is absent.

After 50 days, during which time Jesus will meet again and again with these, His chosen apostles, to strengthen them for their new office, our Lord will ascend bodily into heaven. As they watch His departure in bodily form, they will hear the angel tell them that they are to return to Jerusalem and wait.

They are to await the next time in which Jesus will bestow the Holy Spirit on them. We know this happens on the Festival of Pentecost. On that day, the apostles will be installed into their office and they will begin their Christ‑appointed work, in his stead and by His command.

Thus Christ continues His saving work, gives His saving presence, and bestows His saving forgiveness of sins, in His church. That is His purpose on this Easter night behind locked doors. He does it all for you – and all sinners everywhere.

There are many noble purposes for which our Lord could have established for His holy church and instituted her holy ministry. He could have established His church and instituted her ministry in order to bring righteous behavior and good social relationships upon earth. Indeed, we all would like such things to flourish among us. If such things would flourish, there would be no tragedies, no more violent murders of others because they are different. All terrors would cease if this understanding of church were so. The whole world would be blessed by the increase of righteous behaviors and good social relationships in our communities.

There are some churches which pursue just such an agenda, in fact, social change is all they teach and preach. They publicly endorse political candidates from the pulpit, telling people who they will vote for or they are not Christian. Some attempt to influence legislation. Some set out the proper social behaviors and concerns for their members and all of society to follow. Some churches have people who will tell on members who are not living the righteous life, and they are then kicked out of the church. ***But***, these noble purposes are not found in our text.

Likewise, Christ could have established his church and instituted her ministry in such a way as to commission them to do what it takes to draw big crowds and to excite and please and motivate the people. There are many churches today, including many in our own synod, who do whatever social sciences tell them to do, and what it takes to draw big crowds.

One of our sister congregations in Omaha did just this for Easter. They rented an arena and drew over 6000 people to Easter services there. What was the draw? What was the promise spread abroad in their city by their hefty advertising budget? Was it the forgiveness of sins? Was it the washing of regeneration and new birth in Holy Baptism? Was it the gift of life and salvation in the Lord's Supper? Was it the presence of Christ through the Gospel and the Sacraments? It was none of that. It was the promise of top‑name singers, guest musicians, mass choirs, bells, dancers, dramatic presentations, clapping hands, excited faces and even a laser light‑show with all the effects.

But none of this is found in our text. None of this is found in Christ's institution, ordination, and installation of His holy ministry. There ***IS*** something great in every gathering of Christ's people around His Gospel and His sacraments. It is Christ Himself! He is there. His Holy Spirit is there, at work. His forgiveness of our many awful, offensive, unshakable sins is there. And, ***THAT*** is the ***only*** attraction that Christ places in His church!

The role of the apostolic office, which is the office of the keys, which is the task of the pastor, is to forgive the sins of the repentant sinners and to send sinners off, forgiven and at peace with God. And where unrepentance raises its ugly head, the role of the apostolic office, which is the office of the keys, which is the task of the pastor, is to retain sins, to send the sinner off – without forgiveness, without the absolution of the Supper – that they may see the severity of their sins and come to repentance.

Yes, there are many noble purposes for which our Lord could have established his holy church and instituted her holy ministry. But this is the one and only noble purpose for which our Lord did, in fact, establish His church and institute her Office of the Holy Ministry: To forgive and retain sins!

So, how is it supposed to happen, according to our Lord's noble purpose, that people come to church, that they gather around the Gospel and the Sacraments of our Lord?

Well, consider it in this way. People who are not hungry, drive right past the restaurant, because they do not think they need any food right now. Right? People with a full gas tank, drive right by the gas station, because they do not think they need any fuel right now. Yes? And people who do not require any merchandise drive right by the merchant's store, because they don't think they need any more stuff right now. All these things are true, aren’t they?

People who ***feel*** they are not guilty before God because of their sins drive right past the church. Why? Because they feel no need of forgiveness right now.

Even now, there ARE people driving right by Culvers, Cenex station, a Wal-mart even though they need the things that are provided there, because they have no hope of getting them. Why? Because they have no money. And there are people who drive right by the church even though they know in their consciences that they are guilty before God because of their sins. Why? Because they THINK that they have no hope of getting forgiveness.

Dearly beloved of Christ, not only is real forgiveness for real sinners available here, it is distributed here FOR FREE! It is paid in full by the one who died to purchase that forgiveness, and who rose again from the dead to certify that forgiveness. This same Jesus established, ordained and installed in His church, the manner by which He is present among His people in this place – and by which ***He*** bestows on you, today, His forgiveness – and with it, eternal life and salvation.

According to our Lord's noble purpose, ***THAT*** is how is it supposed to happen. People come to church and gather around the Gospel and the Sacraments of our Lord. It is when they get here, when you get here, when your family, your neighbors, your friends, and your fellow members of this congregation, get here, that Christ is present and His forgiveness is freely given.

It all happens through the office of the keys that He ordained on that Easter night, behind locked doors. Pastors continue to exercise this holy office on Christ's behalf and for your benefit, just as Christ set it in motion two thousand years ago.

Through yet another contact with the presence of Christ and the message of His Gospel, the picture gets a little clearer. God indeed loves ***you***. ***You*** indeed are His child! Christ indeed died for ***you***! The Holy Spirit indeed indwells ***you***! Faith indeed is given to ***you***! Heaven indeed awaits ***you***! And Christ is with you as you face every struggle, every defeat, and every challenge of life.

Today, again, you walk out of this place forgiven and at peace with God. In the name of Jesus. Amen.