



Sermon for the Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, August 23, 2020 Who Gets into the Kingdom?

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http://www.lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/Pentecost/AProp16_RCL.html

Exodus 1:8-2:10, Psalm 124, Romans 12:1-8, Matthew 16:13-20

In the Gospel this morning, Peter makes his great confession to Jesus. Jesus has asked Peter, "Who do YOU say that I am?" Peter responds to Jesus: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

Jesus then tells Peter that he is the rock on which the church will be built. Peter or Petros in Latin means "rock." Peter is also called "rock" in Aramaic. Cephas, another name for Peter, also means "rock." Simon Peter or Simon the Rock or, as some modern folk call him, Rocky, simply could not escape his destiny. Nor would we let him as we easily named him both Petros and Cephas.

As the rock, Peter is given the "keys to the kingdom of heaven" and the power to bind and loose 'whatever' on earth or in heaven and it will be honored both places. Each time I hear the story of Peter's confession, I come away with different questions. What kind of things could Peter bind and loose in heaven? How much freedom has the 'whatever' of the gospel given free rein to popes after Peter?

What is really meant by bind and loose? One could go round and round with such questions. And then there is the bit about the keys to the kingdom. This is where we get all those cartoons and jokes and songs about St. Peter at the pearly gates with an account book as he figures out who to let in and who to keep out. That is the age-old question of inclusion and exclusion.

We can chuckle when folks head for the gates with their new wings and nothing but dogs are in the line waiting and St. Peter up ahead is a cat. No doubt you've seen your own cartoons and such about the pearly gates. I think there are just as many cartoons and jokes about St. Peter and the gates as there are about Noah's ark. Picture the ark floating away in the distance and two dinosaurs are on the land watching it leave. One dinosaur says to the other: "Rats. Was that today?"

Who gets in and who is kept out of the kingdom? How does the rock with the keys know who to allow inside? Who gets to live eternally in the heart of God? Who decides?

In St. Paul's Letter to the Romans, we are pretty sure that when Paul says brothers and sisters, he is talking about brother and sister Christians. And yet, his exhortation in the first paragraph is for those who hear his words to present themselves body and soul to God. Once that is done, they and we are transformed into God's people, gladly doing the will of God.

Paul was the great welcomer. He went about the Mediterranean inviting non-Jews – Gentiles – into the life of God. Because of his formation as a Pharisee, Paul was learned in God's great call throughout the Hebrew scriptures for all "nations" to become one in God. This was so from God's call to Abram when God said in Genesis 12:3, "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed," through the words of the prophets.

Here is a citation in Isaiah 42:6: I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, The deeper we get into some stories, the more exclusive they seem to become. But in the seeds of the stories, God's embrace seems large and open. This wide embrace invites us to ask the question of the meaning of the word "all" when we say or sing words like, "All are welcome in this place."

So, still wondering about who is supposed to be welcome, we come to the story of the Hebrew midwives and of Pharaoh's daughter. As we set the scene, the first 7 verses had spoken of how the Israelites had settled into Egypt and they multiplied greatly. The word for multiply in Hebrew is "sharats" which can also mean swarm, not just multiply. It is the same word that was used in creation in Genesis 1:20-21. There God calls the creatures to swarm or teem, to spread abundantly. Think be fruitful and multiply. The Israelites have indeed swarmed in Egypt, so much so that the new king is now fearful of them.

After the new king has oppressed the Israelites, they continue to be fruitful and multiply. Here the word is different and it foretells the future. The Hebrew here is "yirbeh." The word root is "rabah" and it means to "grow and become much," as we all know they will.

The midwives put their own lives in danger because of their "fear" and awe of God. In this case, the moral right is stronger than the legal right. Once the decree comes to kill all the boy children after they are born, Moses' mother and sister send him down the Nile in the basket and he is found, saved and adopted by Pharaoh's daughter. Moses will, literally, grow and become much, as we know.

We know and assume the kingdom is open to Moses and to the Hebrew midwives for their courage and for their heritage. Still, even today, there are those who would keep the kingdom locked up to the non-Christian. And what about Pharaoh's daughter? Will the keys of the kingdom open the door to her? Who gets in? Who is kept out?

It is a question of the wideness of God's mercy of which we sing. It is a question of how deep, how broad, how high can God's love be? It is a question of what Jesus meant in John 12:32 when he said "And I, when I am lifted up from earth, will draw all people to myself." Does all mean all? Or just some?

In our divisive world, we are called to pray and ponder these things continually. Our God is not a God of division but of union. So I sometimes wonder if St. Peter has perhaps just left those gates wide open. Of course, we surely will not know until the fulfillment of time. Yet I am comforted by a story my liturgical theology professor shared during our study of reconciliation and burials. It goes like this. Imagine it is the Last Day, the End of Time. There is celebration in heaven. All the lights are on and Peter comes outside the gates to Jesus. "Jesus," says Peter, "everyone is waiting for you. The party has started. Come in and celebrate." Jesus says, "I will. Just as soon as I can greet my dear friend, Judas."

AMEN