Reverend Jim's Sermon - August 27, 2023

Anyone ever lose your keys? I got home from Church last Sunday, put my keys down and have never seen them again. They simply disappeared. It was weird, and extremely frustrating. We turned the house upside down, went through the cars, looked all over the ground outside. They had vanished. And I kept looking around, wondering, "Where could they be?" And, more philosophically, "Why has this happened?"

When I read the Gospel a day or so later, I thought oh, perhaps losing my keys was a preparation for writing a sermon for this morning. I certainly experienced a sense of helplessness and frustration at not being able to get into places that I needed to get into, not opening doors that I needed to go through. I gained a renewed appreciation for the importance of keys and what they mean in our lives.

As we just heard, Jesus tells Peter, in the Gospel, that he is giving him the keys to the kingdom of heaven. These of course are metaphorical keys. They are the same keys that appear on the logo of this parish of St. Peter.

So, what are these keys to the kingdom, and what do they represent?

The Roman Catholic interpretation of this story is that it is the establishment of the papacy. That Jesus is making Peter, and his successors, the rock on which the church will be built, and is giving him, Peter, authority to lead the church. In this view Jesus is creating a role. Peter later became the head of the church in Rome, and Rome became the center of church power; and the bishops of Rome, later known as Popes, became the highest authority in the church. There is little agreement on how exactly this developed, or when the Bishop of Rome became the Pope, but for

centuries the Pope has been an important leader of Christianity throughout the world and remains so today.

Many Protestants have interpreted this story to mean that the rock on which Peter and the other disciples are to build the church is their faith in Jesus as the Messiah. When asked who he thinks Jesus is, Peter says: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock (your faith) I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it."

Rathan than get into a discussion about the authority of Peter and the Papacy, I would like to reflect for a moment on how this metaphor of spiritual keys can provide some practical guidance for us on becoming spiritually freer, for unlocking that which binds us. Because although we can't know what was in Jesus' mind when he made this important gesture, we do know that he wants us to free ourselves from anything which might prevent us from following the great commandment, to love God with all our being and to love our neighbours as ourselves.

So, what is that prevents us from always being the loving individuals that we are called to be, that we strive to be. What is the key to unlock the power to love and heal and forgive?

Many years ago, when Deb Rivet was Rector here, she asked me to come and give a one-day retreat for Lent. I still remember it well. I picked forgiveness as my theme. I was standing up here rambling on about how there is nothing we can do that God will not forgive, how boundless God's forgiveness is, how we just have to receive it.

As I was talking, I noticed a hand going up. I stopped and said, "do you have a question?" The person replied, "Well, yes. It's just this: I have no problem with what you are saying. I can easily believe that God will forgive me and that my family and friends will forgive me. This is easy for me. My problem is that I cannot forgive myself."

I didn't know what to say, but that comment had a profound effect on my thinking, and I have since come to believe that at the heart of our ability to love and forgive is our ability to love and forgive ourselves. Self-forgiveness is the key. Or at least one of them.

Stanford University psychologist, Fred Luskin, would have known what to say to that parishioner's question about self-forgiveness. Fred has devoted his life to trying to understand the process of self-forgiveness and has started something called the Stanford University Forgiveness Project. He has been conducting studies on forgiveness for years. He's worked with people who have done all kinds of terrible things. And he has come up with some very solid ideas about things that might help us to forgive ourselves. I believe these keys to self-forgiveness are important not just to our mental health, but to our spiritual health as well.

Professor Luskin says there are 4 offenses that people have a hard time forgiving themselves for:

- You fail at some major life task such as making your relationships work.
- Your actions have hurt someone else.
- You've hurt yourself by the way you've led your life: doing something that's self-destructive.
- You didn't do something you thought you should, such as intervene in a family dispute or study hard to get into university.

According to Luskin, "Categorizing each offense allows you to break down what you did, look at it, get a little distance, and begin healing." And keeping in mind that these kinds of failures are universal, that they are things to which we all fall prey, might help us get a bit of perspective as well.

Next, Luskin says, look at the specific wrong you committed and the harm it caused. Tell a couple of trusted people about what you did to get support, care, and advice. Sharing reminds us that everyone makes mistakes. Confessing what you've done also prevents you from slipping into denial. Guilt isn't always unfounded. Sometimes the niggling feeling of guilt may be our conscience telling us that we need to change something in our lives, so a regular examination of our thoughts and actions can be a good thing. Ignatius of Loyola, who founded the Jesuit order directed his followers to conduct such an examination at the end of every day. And confession can be a powerful way of allowing God to remove the burden of guilt from us.

At the end of last year, I was asked by one of the little grade 8 students at Shawnigan if I would hear his confession. He was a devout Catholic from Latin America.

He was very nervous when he came in, so I tried to put him at ease and asked him to tell me what was burdening him. He began to weep as he relayed a list of very minor, typical 13-year-old "sins." I didn't belittle his guilt but did assure him that the things he confessed were things that everyone does at times. I assured him of God's love and forgiveness and gave him absolution. When he left, he had a smile on his face a mile wide. I could see the burden he came in with had been lifted from him. I had never seen the power of confession and forgiveness manifested in such a powerful and beautiful way.

Another thing about self-forgiveness that Luskin suggests is that replaying what you did over and over again in your head isn't going to help you or the person you hurt. It just makes you feel bad. So every time you catch yourself ruminating on your sins, he says, stop, and refocus your attention on something more positive.

Often guilt hangs around long after we have asked for and received God's forgiveness. And feeling bad about things you've done in the past can create a pretty painful present. So while we are learning how to forgive ourselves and move on, Luskin suggests that we give our mind and body a break from all the shame and guilt we might be feeling by replacing them with gratitude, and focusing on the good things we have done for others. The keys to the kingdom of heaven are not about authority, they are about unleashing the power of joy and healing and peace that God desires for us. The lock, that which prevents us from experiences these gifts fully, is not a lock that God has imposed. There are no locks on the love of God; nothing, as St. Paul says, that stands between us and God's love. Nothing that is, except for the lock that we snap shut in our own minds and heart.

Maybe I lost my keys as a reminder that the key to spiritual freedom is the realization that there are no keys, because there are no locks. Nothing of God is withheld from us. Grace is not a river contained within its banks. It is an ocean that contains everything within it, including we ourselves, our community, and our suffering world.