LD 31 (QA 84); Matthew 16:18-19; Rom. 10:14-17; The Key of Preaching I. Understanding this Key II. Responding to this Key

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, keys have a rather ordinary purpose in our lives. We use keys to open doors and lock doors. It is rather simple to understand- keys grant access and they keep out. If you have the right key, the way is open. If you do not have the proper key, the way remains closed. But when we are discussing the keys of the kingdom, we are talking about the keys that are used within the church. The keys we are discussing today are not the physical keys that open the physical doors on the building- but rather we are considering the spiritual keys that Jesus has given to the church. When we discuss the church, we have already confessed that Jesus Christ is building His church- He is gathering, protecting and preserves for himself a community chosen for eternal life. That is what we confessed in LD 21. But how does Jesus gather, protect and preserve this sacred assembly within the context of the assembly itself? How is the purity of the church preserved while still on earth? What means or tools does he use to open the way for some but close the way for others? So today we are considering the Keys of the Kingdom which are keys that Christ gives to the stewards of His local church. The keys which we read of in Matthew 16 were given to Peter and the apostles for the use of opening and closing- or binding and loosing. Keys hold the power of access. There are two keys that are defined in our Catechism- the preaching of the holy gospel and Christian discipline towards repentance. This week we will focus only on the key of preaching and next time we will look at Christian discipline. So today we consider this theme: Jesus Christ uses the key of preaching to welcome His people into His church and to warn those who are outside.

**I. Understanding this Key**

In our first point, we need to understand what this key is specifically. We can imagine picking up a key and holding it in our hands- we can admire the different patterns and key rings attached to it- but if we don’t know whose key it is and where it goes- this key will not do us any good. So then, whose key is the key of preaching? Well, preaching is the key that Jesus Christ gives to the church. Specifically, this key opens the way not only into the church- but it opens the way into the kingdom of heaven! Now this is an especially important key- to think that Jesus has given this key to men- that preachers would be called to use the very key that opens the way to the kingdom of heaven. So what then, is preaching? Well, the definition of preaching that I learned at seminary is this- preaching is the official, covenantal administration of the living Word of God to the gathered people. So preaching is not just a lecture about the Bible, it is the clear and authoritative application of the Word of God. The content of preaching is simply this- the Word of God. Preach the Word in season and out of season as Paul would say in II Tim. 4. So the content of the preaching is to be Word or the Bible. Pastors are not free to make up their content- they are not to be introducing their own ideas or favorite books as the basis for preaching. Every sermon is to be draw from and linked to the Word of God. But we can be even more precise- we are to preach Jesus Christ and Him crucified as I Cor. 2:2 puts it. The central teaching of the scriptures- the golden thread that hold it all together is this- Jesus Christ died to save sinners. Salvation is found in no one else- and everyone who believes in Jesus will be saved! Preaching is a powerful tool. The power in preaching is not found in man’s eloquence- not in winsome words or flowery prose. No, preaching is power of God unto salvation. Listen to Rom. 1:16- I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes. Preaching is a powerful tool because it is the very means by which the Holy Spirit performs His work. Preaching has the power to break hearts of stone- giving the blind eyes to see and the deaf ears to hear. Preaching is like a knife that cuts to the heart and exposes the thoughts and desires of the mind. This is only because preaching is the God-ordained instrument by which the Holy Spirit produces faith in the hearts of God’s people. So preaching is a powerful and effective tool- it is the means of regeneration and conversion. Let’s look again at our reading from Rom. 10. The development Rom. 10:14-17 brings the importance and use of preaching to the front and center of the Christian life. Note the development- preachers are sent so that people can hear the preaching of God’s word. In hearing, they might believe. And believing they might call on the name of Jesus Christ. And all who call on the name of Jesus will be saved. So God uses preaching to save- and He uses preachers to proclaim the message of salvation. To be clear, the good news proclaimed is not just the content but the means by which people are saved! Preaching the good news is the means of regeneration and conversion. People come to know and believe in Jesus when they hear His voice in the preaching! Preaching is the way in which people come to know and believe in Jesus! In these verses we find that the authority of preachers is found in the authority of the one who sends them. Preachers are heralds- they are sent from God with a message. They are ambassadors of Christ- the message they proclaim is His. They speak on behalf of the King! However, this fact in no way undermines the human factor in preaching. The feet that bring this good news are definitely human feet! God, in His wisdom, is pleased to use human vessels- someone who is called to preached. As an aside- we should pray to the Lord of the harvest that He would continue to raise up men to be preachers! Even here- within this very church- men who have the desire and ability met with a calling to preach the word! So Paul calls these preachers clay pots or earthen vessels in II Cor. 4- they are jars of clay that hold the treasure and carry these riches from God to men. So the preachers themselves remain fallen, frail and finite! Men who are called preachers are not perfect- but the Word of God is perfect- it is this Word that revives the soul as Psalm 19 puts it. It is also for this reason that elders have oversight of the preaching- to ensure the purity of the Word that is being proclaimed. So preachers who preach the good news are the God given means by which sinners hear gospel. Being sent from God, the authority of the Word proclaimed is not found in the man but in the One who sent Him! That is why the feet of the messenger are called beautiful- because the message comes from a gracious God! In the OT, the prophets would often begin their message by saying- Thus saith the LORD! So it stands, that the authority of preaching is found in the one who sends the preacher. I Thes. 2:13- we thank God that when you received the word that you heard from us, you received it not as the word of men, but as it really is the Word of God. So it is on the authority of God Himself that I can proclaim to you- if you accept the gospel promise in faith, because of Christ merit, God truly forgives all your sins!

**II. Responding to this Key**

Now that we understand the purpose, authority and agent of preaching, in our second point we consider the proper response to this preaching. How should we hear so that this Word of God proclaimed benefits us? The first response is this- we should embrace it and rejoice over it. Negatively, Paul said that he was not ashamed of the gospel. Positively, let him who boasts, boast in the Lord! If preaching is the power of God unto salvation- if preaching is the voice of Jesus- if the content of preaching is good news- then we should humbly accept and rejoice in this great gift. As QA 84 put is, we are to accept the gospel preaching in true faith. Blessed are your ears when you hear- blessed are your eyes when you see! So God’s people are to humble accept and believe this message- receiving it as it is- the very word of God. In other words, we should not be embarrassed by the preaching of the Word. Yes, we believe that the Word of God is to be central here- but sometimes we might find ourselves arguing with this very Word. I know what God says- but I really don’t like it and I don’t want to obey it. Or we might grow tired of the old, old story of Jesus and His love. I have heard this message a thousand times before. We lose a sense of the majesty and mystery of God’s Word- the fact that God would speak to us face to face in His Word should always move us to awe and wonder! We have a familiarity that might breed contempt. Let me speak to our young people for a moment- do you know how wonderful it is that you belong to a church that has the pure preaching of the word? Not that your paster is all that wonderful- but that here you can find the good news! We are so blessed- that God has stooped down and spoken to us! So do not forget- that it is God who speaks to us in and through His Word. Now we do practice the dialogical aspect of worship- where God speaks and we answer- but we must remember that preaching is not a dialog. Preaching is decidedly a one-way event- God speaks and we listen! He gives, we receive. God says it- and we believe it. We are not free to pick and choose what we like- we are to receive God’s word as it really is- the voice of our Jesus! So thus far, we have seen the opening or loosing function of the key which is preaching. But the fact is, preaching is not only good news! The key that opens and looses- the key that unlock is also the key that locks! There is a binding and a shutting aspect that must also be acknowledged in preaching. There is a warning that is heard- and be clear! Repent- flee from the coming wrath. To unbelievers and hypocrites- as QA 84 says- it must be told that if you do not repent, God’s wrath and condemnation remains upon you. Preaching is not some therapeutic feel-good session. The truth needs to be told and sometimes the truth hurts! It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of our holy God without Jesus blood covering you! Jesus is not only the one who said “come to me all who are weary and heavy laden”; he also repeated condemned the Pharisees and pronounced woe upon them. God not only tells his children that they are welcome into the bliss prepared for them- he also says go away from me you wicked workers of iniquity! So as it is with a key, so it is with preaching. There is a two-fold purpose. A positive and a negative aspect! Yes, preaching is to encourage, strength, heal and grant life! This is the opening or comforting work of preaching. Thomas Murphy put it like this- when we use the Scriptures for the purpose God has ordained, we may look confidently for that blessing! But preaching also warns, exposes, strikes, beats down and demolishes. This is the closing or rebuking work of preaching. You see, the full or whole council of God must be proclaimed as Acts 20 states. Not just the good news- but the bad news as well. The Word cuts both ways! The word of God is powerful and active- a double-edged sword. It never fails to accomplish the goal, end and design that God has ordained. You see, everyone who sits under the pure preaching will be affected by it- but that effect will not be the same. Some will have their hearts softened, others will be hardened in their sin. You never go home the same way that you came. The same heat that melts wax also hardens clay. So every heart that hears the good news is either growing in grace or fossilizing in sin! Not everyone believes- and not everyone benefits from the public means of grace- so the key used to close the door to the kingdom of God is a warning as well.

To conclude, the 2-fold use of a key is a promise of blessing as well as a warning of woe. Receive the Word of God with humility- repent and believe- and you will be saved! Reject the Word of God in pride- refuse to trust in the LORD- and you remain in your sins! Jesus Christ uses the key of preaching to welcome His people into His church and to warn those who remain outside! So when we hear the Word- let us receive it as it is- the very word of God!