

Proper 16 Year A

Now that our daughter and 10 month old granddaughter live in Mobile, I have had to become reacquainted with things “baby.” It is altogether different, more complicated than it was when Katharine and I were young parents... especially when it comes to all the requisite equipment... There’s the exersaucer... a contraption that looks like it was drawn by Dr. Seuss, or NASA, or both... a walker/jumper with all kinds of bells and whistles.... The sippy cup, which back in the day was just a cup and a spout... but now it has all these parts... you have to have a way above average IQ to put it together... a higher IQ than I have, at least... and then there are all the toys... plastic dogs and cats and giraffes and blocks... and this strange creature that lives inside the pack-n-play (that’s a bed/ play pen that folds up to the size of a small suitcase... another thing I can’t do)... this strange creature that looks as frightening as it does friendly, like it’s one of those possessed dolls out of a horror movie; but maybe that’s about me.... And then the strollers and car seats... and none of this stuff is cheap... according to the internet, the “baby stuff” industry now exceeds 23 billion dollars a year putting it in the top twenty five consumer industries in the country... But of all the toys and stuff you can give your baby... there is one thing you can give her that will enliven her imagination... rock her world... and that is your set of keys.

I mean... give a baby a set of keys and watch them gasp in delightful ecstasy... a set of keys will occupy their time long after the plastic stuff from Baby’s Are-Us have lost their allure... take the keys away and then... well... you know. Now Emery’s just 10 months old but she knows that my keys are something special.... And they are aren’t they?... They start our cars.. They are the way in to our homes, the way in to our workplaces... they represent security... all of us are stewards of keys... some of us however more neurotic than others... I keep mine with me always, and on the very rare chance that I misplace them I basically freak out... Katharine usually has to hunt for hers most days... my mother has a separate set of keys for her house, her car, her truck, her beach place, the church... and at this moment, I’m sure she doesn’t know where any of them are... but that’s another story.

Keys are archetypes in the human psyche... humankind’s gift from the Bronze Age... artful; mysterious... I still covet the arcane knowledge of locksmiths... Keys appear in art and literature... in mythology... and the reason they capture our collective imagination, I believe, is because they represent something very dear to us... They represent power... the power of means...of agency... the power to loose... the power to bind... as Matthew puts it... the very power of transformation.... Power... that’s what our gospel reading for today is about.

Matthew is very intentional about the context of his Gospel. The narrative begins with the birth of Jesus... and that birth Matthew has situated in the political milieu of the times... Unlike Luke and Mark, Matthew tells us that the birth of Jesus took place in the time of the reign of Caesar Augustus in the region of Judea overseen by Herod... These are historical times and places... Augustus and Herod represent the Roman Empire, the occupying power of Matthew’s day... Throughout Matthew’s narrative he insists on the contrast between the power of empire, and the power of God... The empire would have us believe that they are one and the same... but Matthew begs to differ. He is offering an

alternative world... a countercultural world up and against power as the world has grown to know it.

In our brief passage today this theme is evident. Peter exclaims that Jesus is the “son of the living God.” In the first century that is the honorific for an emperor... Caesar Augustus was called the son of the living God... that allusion alone lets us in on the subversive nature of Matthew’s gospel....Jesus with the honorific of the emperor. And Matthew takes it further... he refers to the community of faith as the “church” a word not used in any of the other gospels... the word for church is *ecclesia* in Greek, which means: gathered assembly, and in Matthew’s world it is a community gathering of the polis, the town or city state, in which matters political, economic and social are debated and decided... Paul will later use the same term... but the point is that we recognize here that the gospel of Matthew is decidedly political, social, and economic... that the premise of the gospel has everything... everything to do with how we live together.

For some insidious, malignant reason there are still some that believe that the church should keep to itself; out of sight, out of mind, better seen than heard... that it should not concern itself with the matters of the world, matters of economic and social and political justice....But that was never the intent of the gospel writers... nor should it be the *modus operandi* of the church today... We are to be a force for good, the way Jesus and his followers were a force for good... healing, feeding, welcoming, sharing.... standing with enlightened singularity in contradiction against the powers and principalities that would engender indignity and injustice.

This passage, like the rest of this gospel is also one about identity...Jesus asks... “Who is it that people say I am?” And Peter famously proclaims him, the son of the living God... Most ink from preachers has been spilled defining what that means... I’ve already talked about the political connotations of that moniker... but Matthew has Jesus turn the question around and proceed to tell Peter who he (Peter) is, and therefore who this church, this *ecclesia* is, Peter, the everyman of the church for Matthew.... He says that he will give to Peter, and therefore the church, the keys of the kingdom.... Now linguistics are important here... there is only one letter different in the words for *to* and *of*... Jesus doesn’t say I will give you the keys *to* the kingdom... instead he says he will give him the keys *of* the kingdom... That is quite a difference... the keys to the kingdom imply an esoteric privilege into an exclusive world... If one has the keys to the kingdom, then they have the power to enter into an exclusive world... But to have the keys of the kingdom means that one has the means of the kingdom... that the kingdom is about the implementation of keys... agency... binding and loosing... To be the bearers of the keys of the kingdom, one is put into a vocation of opening doors... binding up evil and setting loose the good... To be the bearers of the keys is to be entrusted with the highest authority on earth to open the doors to God’s kingdom for those outside in our own day and age.... And those outside mean the ones locked out of the privilege of well being and dignity... Keys are about transformation.... Keys are powerful... Power gone “right.”

Some in the church say that the issues of our own day are too complicated, to nuanced to speak out about with any authority... especially too complicated for us church people... But there is nothing complicated or nuanced about compassion, nothing complicated about kindness, nothing complicated about justice... Those are the keys of the kingdom... the keys, brothers and sisters that we bear, entrusted to us... Powerful... more powerful than the evil that finds its way into our political, social and economic

structures of our world... The keys that we bear will rock our world with Love. To follow Christ is to pick up the keys, and set about unlocking the paralysis of injustice in our world... and set loose the life abundant imprisoned in the dungeon of corrupt power and greed... else the church fails to be the church.

To be truly human is to be entrusted with the keys of life... life abundant for our world... for our neighbor, our brother, our sister, our flesh and blood.... to be the baptized is to live in a community that rallies to such a call... the call to unlock the doors of love... Go and unlock, set free, transform... unlock, and throw away the keys.