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Pentecost 14

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Alexandria, VA

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“The Creed, the Church, and the Keys”

Text: Matthew 16:13-20

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Approximately ten days ago, some 100,000 people made a pilgrimage to commemorate the death of “the King.” You probably saw something about this reported on the news. People traveled from far and wide to a place called Graceland, to remember that 25 years ago, the “King of Rock and Roll,” Elvis Presley, died. But you may remember that 25 years ago, at first, many didn’t believe that he had really died. Reports of “Elvis sightings” made the rounds year after year, adding to his legend. That seems to have mostly died down now, and as the years go by, the crowds that gather to commemorate his death will as well. But ten days ago, if you had asked some of those 100,000 pilgrims why they were there, what made Elvis so great, what was different about him, what separated him from the rest, they would have eagerly told you. They would have *confessed* their belief in his greatness. He is “the King!” Not one among many, but the one and only. There was no one like him before, and there will be no one like him again . . . they would say.

Well today, we as Christians are being asked the same question. To those outside the Church, what we do is no different than what those pilgrims to Graceland did. A curiosity of dedication and fanaticism. Because for some 2,000 years now, every year we gather to commemorate the death of our King on Good Friday. Indeed, every week we gather to commemorate His death as we partake of Holy Communion, for as St. Paul wrote, ***“as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes.”*** And we too issue reports that our King isn’t dead, but is alive. . . . And so today, those on the outside looking in are asking us the same questions: Why are you here? What makes *your* King, Jesus, so great? What is different about Him, what separates Him from the rest? Important questions.

And that is the question Jesus asked His disciples in the Holy Gospel that we heard today. ***“Who do people say the Son of Man is?”*** Or, what are the people on the outside looking in saying? And, ***“Who do you say I am?”*** Or, what answer will you then give them? Important questions. The disciples respond that the people think that He is John the Baptist come back to life, or that He is Elijah, or Jeremiah, or one of the other great Old Testament prophets. The people consider Him a true holy man, in the line of all the great holy men. And many people today think that same thing about Jesus. That He is a holy man, a

prophet, a great preacher and teacher, a healer, a rabbi – and they are right! Or at least, on the right track. For all of those things are true! Jesus is all of those things. The problem is that that answer is not complete. He is not only that, He is more. For with those answers, so far nothing has been said that distinguishes and separates Jesus from any other religious figure. The same things are said of Buddha, Confucius, Mohammed, Gandhi, and a myriad of other holy men honored in our world today – that they were holy men, great teachers, and the rest. So far Jesus is just one among many; one in the line of all the great holy men. . . . And so the question remains: Why are you here? What makes *your* King, Jesus, so great? What is *different* about Him, what *separates* Him from the rest? Important questions, that sadly, many Christians, even many Lutherans cannot answer.

And Peter responds, “***You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.***” And with that, Peter has confessed what can be said of no one else. That Jesus is **the Christ**, the One appointed by God to be His intermediary, and bring God and man back together again in peace; and that Jesus is **the Son of God**, the one and only being uniquely qualified to do this work, to bring God and man back together again in peace, because He is the only one who is both God and man – the Son of God from eternity, and the Son of Man, born of the Virgin Mary. . . . **Christ and Son of God** – if it is not true, it is a dangerous claim to make! Jesus has left no wiggle room. And this is truly what separates Him from the rest. He either is who He said He is, or He is raving lunatic and a liar. He is the one and only, or He is nothing. Other holy men can teach us how to make peace with ourselves, or make peace with each other, or strive to be the best that we can be, but only Jesus can give us peace with God. Only Jesus can bring us to the Father. Only Jesus has the Key to the Kingdom of Heaven.

And it is a key that cannot be duplicated – although many have tried. There have been many so-called “saviors” of mankind, or of society. But all fail. And they fail because they either overestimate us and our abilities, or they underestimate God and His holiness, or both. And so there are those who think that we can somehow achieve what God demands, that it is within our grasp, if only we try hard enough and get the right coaching. After all, we’ve put a man on the moon, we can communicate instantaneously with people all across the globe, we’ve figured out the human genetic code – we can do whatever we set our mind to! . . . And then there are those who underestimate God and His holiness, thinking that God would not ask of us more than we can do; that therefore all that He demands is that we do our best and that as long as we’re not as bad as the next guy – as long as there are people we can point to that are worse than us – we’ll be okay. . . . And so all man-made religions are built upon that fact that we can achieve what is necessary. That our salvation is in our hands. And that’s what makes them so popular! Because we are the ones in control! Just tell me what is necessary, what is required, and I’ll do it. And no faith is involved, just a checklist. And so along with everything else that we want in this life, salvation is just another item in a long list: good job, nice house, fancy car, go on a golf vacation, go to heaven, etc., etc.

But what makes that view so popular also makes it so deadly. For it assumes that we're not so bad. That our sin is only a defect, or a weakening. That it's something that we can overcome because, after all, we're all basically *good* inside. . . . But the truth is far different than that. The truth is that we're dead – as dead as . . . well, Elvis! We may think we're the kings of our own little kingdoms, but when it comes to our salvation, the hurdle is too high. Because “dead men can't jump!” Because the gulf between us and God isn't a matter of space, or morals, or effort – it is the gulf between life and death. He is life and we are living in ***“the valley of the shadow of death.”*** And we are dying, little by little, every day one step closer to the grave. And so our salvation isn't a matter of making us better, or of self-improvement, or of being better than the next guy – it is a matter of raising us from the dead! And there's only One who can do that! The One who Himself died and rose to life again. The One who has the key to the grave and to Heaven. The One who gave us our life in conception, and the One who gives us new life in Holy Baptism. And that is the One who is the Christ, the Son of God. The one and only being uniquely qualified to do this work, and who has done it! The only one who hung on a cross with your sins, and rose from the dead to save you from eternal death. All the others can try to tell you *how*, but only One has done it!

And so the answer to Jesus' question is one of critical importance! For with the answer ***“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God”*** Peter and the Twelve and you and me and all who confess this are admitting that we cannot do it. That there is only One, and apart from Him, we have nothing, we can do nothing, we are nothing. And so it is upon this confession that the Church is built. The Church, which is not a monument to a dead king, like Graceland, but which is the throneroom of our living King, where He reigns by forgiveness. Where He reigns by giving life to us who are dead in our trespasses and sin. And it is He who is building His Church, not us. As if we could. We who cannot even save ourselves. ***“On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”*** And that is important for us to remember – especially us, trying to establish our little church named St. Athanasius. Only Christ can build His Church. His Spirit works where and when He wills, not where and when we will. And it is only established on this confession of faith, on ***“the Christ, the Son of the living God.”*** On His work, on His death and resurrection, on His Word, on His gifts, on His Sacraments. And ***“the gates of hell shall not prevail against such a church”*** because He Himself descended into hell, as both God and man, and kicked down those gates Himself!

“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” That is why we are here. That is what makes our King so great. That is what's different about Him, and separates Him from the rest. That He is not one among many, but the one and only. The only one with the Key to the Kingdom of Heaven and eternal life. . . . But as we heard in the Holy Gospel, that is a key that Jesus doesn't keep to Himself, and that He will exercise only at some time in the

future, and until then we're all left standing outside the door, waiting for it to be opened on the last day, and until then . . . ! No! To the Church that confesses His Name, that He is ***"the Christ, the Son of the living God,"*** He gives this key to use, even now! For where this confession of Christ is, there is He; and where Christ is, there is His Church; and where the Church is, there are the keys. For as Jesus said, ***"I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."*** And this is not mere talk! When I give my car keys to someone, I am giving them permission to drive my car. When I give someone the keys to my house, I am giving that person permission to enter it. I am not relinquishing ownership of my car or my house when I give the keys, but I am permitting someone else to use them. . . . And here, this is what we see Jesus doing. He gives His keys to His Bride, the Church. And He expects her to use them.

And so while Christ is the One building His Kingdom, because He is the only One who can, He is not doing it in a way that cannot be seen, or cannot be known, or that is mysterious and mystical and beyond our grasp . . . He is building through His Church. Through the Church which confesses Him as ***"the Christ, the Son of the living God,"*** and through the Church which uses the keys given to her. The keys of the Kingdom of Heaven. The keys of forgiveness. And so that's what our Divine Service is all about. That is what our liturgy and preaching is all about. The confession of Christ, and the use of the keys. Creed and gifts. Word and Sacrament. Here we are not only talking about Christ, we meet Him and commune with Him. Here we are not only talking about forgiveness, we receive it. Here we are not only looking forward to the Kingdom of Heaven, but are in it already. What happens here is real, or as we confess in the words of the Small Catechism: ***"this is just as valid and certain, even in heaven, as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us Himself."***

And so for those who are locked up in their sin, locked up in fear, locked up in dread and terror of God's judgment, for those who want to be free, there is a key, the proclamation of good news, the absolving Word which declares to the broken hearted and the sorrowful: Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God, died for you. You are forgiven. You are free. And not just some day in the future – but even now! . . . But for those who wish to remain locked up in their sin and who do not want to be free from it, who do not desire forgiveness, there is also a key – a key that must also be proclaimed, the binding Word of the Law, when forgiveness cannot be given. And it is with both keys that Christ is building His Church, His Kingdom. The sin in us cannot be ignored or excused or explained away as if it doesn't matter, but must be condemned in the harshest way; but also, then, the comfort of sins forgiven must be given in the sweetest way. For Jesus wants no one to be locked out of His Kingdom, but that all would come to know Him, and who He is, and what He has done for all men. That He is not just one among many, that He is not just one in a list of options. But that He is the only One who can, who is able, and who did!

And that is why we are here. That is what makes our King so great. That is what's different about Him, and separates Him from the rest. Earthly kings come and go. Holy men are here today and gone tomorrow. Self-proclaimed gurus telling you what to do and how to do it are a dime a dozen. But there is only One with the Key. There is only One who lived and died and lives again. There is only One who says to you, you cannot do it; I did it for you, in your place. . . . And that is why we are here; to gather in His Name and in His presence, to receive His gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation. There is no one else who has them, and no one else who can give them. ***"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."*** That is the confession that we make to the world, and that makes all the difference in the world.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.