

**The 12th SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST**  
**August 23, 2020**  
**PROPER 16**

**The Lessons:** Isaiah 51:1-6  
 Psalm 138  
 Romans 11:33 – 12:8  
 Matthew 16:13-20

**The Hymns:** # 644 (1,2,4) “The Church’s One Foundation”  
 # 575 (1-3) “My Hope Is Built On Nothing Less”  
 # 662 (1-4) “Onward Christian Soldiers”

**The Collect:** Almighty God, whom to know is everlasting life, grant us to know Your Son, Jesus, to be the way, the truth, and the life that we may boldly confess Him to be the Christ and steadfastly walk in the way that leads to life eternal; through the same Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

**The Sermon:**  
 Whatever  
 Matthew 16:13-20  
 Pentecost 12

The Word of the Lord from Matthew 16:18: Jesus said, “On this rock I will build My church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of 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.” This is our text.

Dear Friends in Christ,

I. Peter’s Confession

The gates of hell shall not prevail against it. That’s what Jesus says about the foundation on which the Church is built. That’s quite a claim, because you can’t find much that’s hell-proof in this world. Death and devil go with hell, and they’re quite a busy pair. Nothing in this world lasts forever: it all falls apart. This is certainly true of human beings, cursed because of sin. And even as the first death separates the body from the soul, the second death wants to separate the soul from God and leave it in hell forever. No matter the philosophies, scientific breakthroughs and intentions of man, death can’t be beaten. There’s nothing you can do or build that hell can’t prevail against.

The devil is prowling around like a lion and seeking someone to devour. He’s too much for you: the evil one is skilled at what he does, and he’s going to beat you every time. When you think you’ve conquered one sin, chances are very high that he’s just led you into another one instead. He’s working to convince you either that hell doesn’t exist or that you’ve no hope of beating it. You can’t beat the devil, which means you can’t prevail against hell, either.

You've got nothing that beats hell. You try to bluff, of course: one of the great temptations of being young is to believe that you're invincible, that you're never going to get old or hurt or dead. How clearly that attitude has been demonstrated by reports of young people gathering together despite clear indications that they are not immune from the Covid virus. That feeling of invincibility doesn't just lead to doing stupid things and risking injury, but it leads many away from the Church, since the invincible believe that they don't need grace, thinking that Grace is only good for rising from the dead anyway. And after all, you're healthy and even death is not in your range of possibilities.

Growing older and wiser, you try to bluff that you're good enough and you've done enough good to hold off hell when you die. But death and devil know it's a bluff, and you're only fooling yourself. You've got nothing that beats hell.

Peter can't prevail against hell. He's not the rock that crushes the devil: his name means "pebble," after all. He's the star student of our reading for the day when he confesses who Jesus is; but a few verses later—as you'll hear next week, he's going to be rebuked by Jesus for working with the devil against Him. In the meantime, it's not who Peter is that defeats hell. It's what Peter says.

"Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" asks Jesus at the start of our Gospel lesson. There's a lot of speculation flying around Galilee, because Jesus has been teaching and performing miracles for a while. The disciples respond with the latest: "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." They're interesting guesses, and they're all pious guesses, too; but they're also all wrong guesses. The people are aiming too low. They figure that Jesus is some revered saint, come back from the dead to do great things. Apparently, it doesn't occur to them that He could be the Son of God in human flesh, come from heaven to save.

The disciples ought to know better than the crowds, because they've been listening to Jesus the most. Jesus says to them, "But who do you say that I am?" It's no surprise that Peter is the one who speaks up. He says, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

"You are the Christ," says Peter. You are the Messiah—the One whom God has anointed to save His people. You're the One that the Scriptures have talked about and pointed to since Genesis 3, the One whom God has promised throughout the centuries. You're the One whom Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David and the rest looked for and believed in. You are the Christ.

"You are the Son of the living God," says Peter. You're not just a mighty man or one who is destined to be a great king for a time. You may have flesh and blood—we've met your mother Mary, after all—but You're also the Son of God Most High.

Now, if Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, then He's also the One who will crush the devil: why, God promised that already back in Genesis 3. And in Hosea, God promised that the Christ would be the death of death. If the Christ is greater than both death and devil, then the gates of hell cannot prevail against Him.

So Jesus says, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." Peter, He says, you're a pebble. But what you've said is the truth, the rock on which the Church is built. I am the Christ, the Son of the living God. The gates

of hell shall not prevail against Me, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against the people who are built on Me.

This isn't just an earth-shattering moment, but better: it's a hell-shattering moment. Jesus has just declared that He's come to defeat sin, death and devil. Not only that, but He's going to share the victory with His people—He's going to build His Church upon Himself, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

## II. Whatever

So it would be good to be Peter—at least for these verses, not so much next week's. It would be good for Jesus to tell you that you are so blessed as Peter is.

Here is Good News: you are. Listen again to what Jesus says: "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."

"Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you," says Jesus, "but My Father who is in heaven." How did Peter know that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God? It wasn't from flesh and blood: a survey of flesh and blood said that Jesus was John, Elijah, Jeremiah or anybody but the Son of the living God. No, Peter knew that Jesus is the Son of the living God because the Father revealed it to him. But how? We have no record in Scripture that God spoke to Peter directly from the heavens, and Peter wasn't a disciple yet when Jesus was baptized and the Father did say, "This is My beloved Son." How did the Father reveal this to Peter? By His Word—by the Word that Jesus taught them. By the same Word you hear this day. Just as none of the world can prevail against hell, neither can the world tell you of Jesus apart from the Word of God. But you have heard—it has been revealed to you. By the Word of God, God has revealed to you that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. Blessed are you! And you are blessed as much as Peter—for you know the One who has conquered hell by His life, death and resurrection.

Furthermore, you know that Christ has conquered hell for you. Jesus goes on to say, "I will give you the keys of 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."

Jesus has given the keys of the kingdom of heaven—not just to Peter, but to the Church. Whatever is bound on earth is bound in heaven. Whatever is loosed on earth is loosed in heaven.

What is "whatever"? It's whatever sin. When it comes to sin, Jesus doesn't deal in quantities and numbers. He doesn't say, "I forgive you for big sins" or "I forgive you for little ones." He doesn't say, "I've atoned for the first 490 sins, but after that you've got to start making payments." He doesn't say "I'll forgive you the first time you commit any sin, but the repeats are on you." He tells Peter, "Whatever sin you bind on earth—big, small, the first one or the last one, the original or the repeated one—whatever sin you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven." He says, "Whatever sin you loose on earth—big, small, the first one or the last one, the original or the repeated one—whatever sin you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

And how are these sins bound or loosed? Simple: it is by the same Word of God.

The Law of God binds sins. It says to you, “What you’ve done—or what you’ve failed to do—is wrong because it violates the Law of God.” It doesn’t matter if it’s a big sin or a little sin: whatever sin you have is enough for hell to prevail against you, for you to suffer eternal judgment. That’s why you are to repent of your sin. If you don’t—if you’d rather persist in that sin, indulge in it, rationalize it or justify it, then you’re saying, “I’d like to hold onto this sin for a while.” In that case, the Law of God is clear: it says, “As long as you hold onto that sin, you’re stuck with it. It’s stuck to you—it’s bound to you. And as long as that sin is bound to you, the gates of heaven are locked and you’re on the outside.

Remember, this is about “whatever” sin. One of the silliest ways to be condemned is to think that you can hold onto little sins because Jesus only really cares about the big ones. That is the way of the Pharisee, and whatever sin you hold onto will condemn you. That’s why, as the Small Catechism says, “before God you should plead guilty of all sins, even of those that you do not know.”

The Gospel of Christ looses sins. To the one who repents, Jesus says, “I died on the cross for that sin, whatever it is. I’ve paid the price for it already, and so I forgive you for that sin. It’s loosed—I’ve sent it as far away from you as the East is from the West.” And so the gates of heaven are opened to you, all for the sake of Jesus. What comfort! The devil will take your biggest sins, hold them before your eyes and say, “This is much too big to be forgiven for.” But you hear Jesus’ words, and so you say, “Whatever.” As in, “Whatever sin I have committed, Christ has died for it and so I am sure of my salvation.”

So you are blessed – just as blessed as Peter. By His Word, the Father has revealed to you Jesus—the Christ, the Son of the living God. By His Word, the Lord has shown you your sin: by His Law, He has let you feel them bind you so that you repent, and by His Gospel He releases them from you so that you might have salvation.

It is sure, because Christ has conquered sin and death, devil and hell.

So next time you hear the Absolution, listen carefully: it’s not just words, but a proclamation so powerful that the devil can’t contradict it, that the very gates of hell can’t prevail against it. When you kneel at the altar, rejoice that you receive the body and blood of the Son of the living God, the body and blood that opens the gates of heaven for you. You are built on Christ, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against Him or His people. Where Christ is, the devil must flee; and when your sins are loosed, he has nothing left to work with. So let us send the evil one scurrying away again: You are forgiven all your sins!

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen