Sunday, January 16, 1994
THE KEYS OF THE KINGDOM
Matthew 16:13-19

When the committee for the dedication of our new building addition began its planning, one of the first things it did was search for an appropriate symbol of what this new building addition means for us as a congregation and for the community in which our church exists. The dedication committee also wanted to be able to give each child and young person a tangible object that could be taken home as a remembrance of this day. And so "the key" was selected. It's an excellent symbol and metaphor for our new building addition and for the ministry this congregation continues to carry out.

The word "key" as a noun, in both its singular and plural forms, is used only eight times in all the sixty-six books of the Bible. In all but one of these instances, it is used as a metaphor, as is the case in the scripture reading from the Gospel of Matthew.

Here's what happened, according to Matthew. One day, Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am? What are the rumors going around about me?" They told Jesus what they had been hearing. Some had him confused with John the Baptist; others were sure that he was Elijah, the Old Testament prophet who had returned, or maybe Jeremiah.

Then Jesus asked them the same question—"But who do you say that I am?" And Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

It was then that Jesus replied, "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock (on the kind of faith you have stated) I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you (and believers like you, many of whom comprise what we today call the church) the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

Did you hear that? We who are followers of Jesus are given the "keys of the kingdom of heaven." What are some of the things Jesus meant with this metaphor? What does it mean to have "the keys of the kingdom of heaven," and how are we to use them?

Later in this worship service, as part of our dedication Sunday ceremonies, you will hear read from the dedication brochure, which you already have in your hands, some of the very specific doors these keys to our new church building addition will unlock and open. Look at these now just for a moment, and you will see that by the phrase "keys of the kingdom of heaven," Jesus meant more — and we mean much more — than just life after death, although it includes that as well. The keys to the kingdom of heaven unlock and open all kinds of doors in our day-to-day living.

To put it another way, when Jesus gave us the "keys of the kingdom of heaven," he was primarily talking about life in the here and now. As Jesus said in another place, "I have come that you might have life and have it more abundantly." Or as the inscription over the main front doors of this church building reminds us, "Come unto me all you that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

Keys and the doors they lock and unlock are fascinating. Notice, for example, the key I am wearing on this chain around my neck. It's an old jail or prison key. It was given to me ten

years ago in appreciation for co-chairing a committee that worked at getting a bond issue passed so we could have a new county-city jail. The bond issue was voted down several times, but we have a new jail anyway, and at a higher cost to all of us as taxpayers. But that's another story.

If you're like me, you have all kinds of old keys around your house. Every now and then, I come across one or more keys, and I have no idea what locks they were for. Yet, for some reason, I hesitate to throw them away.

Doors are as fascinating as keys. Think about the many different kinds of doors there are in our world — open doors, closed doors, secret doors, closet doors, hidden doors, trap doors, front doors, back doors, side doors, half doors, screen doors, storm doors, automatic doors, revolving doors, swinging doors, sliding doors, pocket doors, and double doors.

Doors can have a mysterious quality to them. There's the mystery of what is behind a closed door. Some of you will remember a television program called "Let's Make a Deal." The winning contestant, at one point in the program, has to choose one of three identical-looking doors to be opened, but behind each door, there are different prizes. Many times in life, it's difficult to choose which door to open and which one to close.

Some doors and doorways are inviting, and others seem forbidding. The most forbidding doors that I have ever entered are those that lead into a jail or prison when I have gone there to visit someone. Whenever I hear those large steel-barred doors bang shut, I shudder. I don't like having those doors closed and locked behind me because someone else is in control of unlocking and opening them again.

On the other hand, think of the inviting main front doors of this church, which have above them the words of Jesus that I quoted earlier, "Come unto me all you that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." I especially like the new doors off 20th Street into our new addition because they are wide and inviting, and we tried to make the entrance on the east side of the building more accessible and hospitable as well.

Some doors that may seem open and inviting to us can be forbidding to others. That's why, as a congregation, we have taken another very important and long overdue step with our new building addition and with the modifications we made in the existing building. Our entire church building is now more accessible to everyone. All the doors are wide enough for wheelchairs to go through. We have removed as many barriers as possible. The new restrooms are designed for accessibility, and the old restrooms have been rebuilt to be accessible to all. This building now has three handicapped-accessible entrances — on the west, the north, and the east.

As we say in the dedication brochure, "With these keys, we unlock these doors to everyone who feels God's outstretched hand, to those of us who walk with assistance and those who walk alone, to those of us who use wheelchairs and those who find elevators more accessible than stairs, to those of us for whom even a short distance seems beyond reach."

Keys and doors are fascinating. Both are revealing metaphors for our life together. I know some people, for example, for whom life is like a revolving door. They go from one job to another, from one marriage to another, from one addiction to treatment and back to addiction. They go round and round, in and out, and never seem to get anywhere.

In addition to giving us the keys to the kingdom, Jesus used the door or gate as a metaphor. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is quoted as saying, “Enter by the narrow gate (or door), for the gate is wide and easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter it are many. For the gate (or door) is narrow, and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.”

One of my favorite passages in the Bible, in which a door is used as a metaphor, is in the book of Revelation. The author, in his vision, sees Jesus, and he is saying to all of us, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.” What an invitation. Jesus, the love of God in the flesh, is continually knocking on our door and asking to be invited into our lives.

I still remember as a child in Sunday School first seeing this Bible passage in the form of a picture painted by Holman Hunt, titled, “Christ Standing At The Door Knocking.” I’m sure most of you are familiar with the painting. I can also remember the Sunday School teacher, a loving and patient man, carefully asking our small class to look very closely at the picture to see if we noticed anything unusual about the door. None of us did. Then he pointed to the place on the outside of the door where there would normally be a door handle or keyhole with which to open the door from the outside. And he said, “Notice, there’s no handle or keyhole there. The painter wants us to know that although Jesus patiently and gently knocks at the door of each of our lives, he does not force his way in. Each one of us, from the inside of our house, has to unlock and open the door.”

A mother and her daughter were looking at this picture of “Christ Standing At the Door Knocking.” They gazed for a few moments at the picture of Jesus standing motionless before the closed door, his hand raised as if knocking repeatedly. The mother said to her daughter, “I wonder why they won’t let him in.” After a bit of thought, the child replied, “Maybe they’re down in the basement and can’t hear him knocking, or maybe they’re too busy with other things.”

“All metaphors are imperfect,” said Robert Frost, “and that is the beauty of them.”

I like the metaphors of keys and doors because, in our lives as people trying to follow Jesus, there are doors to open and doors to close, both for ourselves and others.

Today, as we dedicate this new building addition and rededicate the existing building, which we inherited from the past, we are thinking primarily about the keys and the doors they will unlock and open for untold numbers of people.

In addition, there are doors in each one of our personal lives that we need to unlock and open, and there are those we need to close and lock. For example, each one of us has to open our own door to friendship and other healthy human relationships. And others have to open the door to us. Another human being cannot force his or her way into your life, and you cannot force yourself into someone else’s life.

There are times when it is necessary for you to open the door to forgiveness. If you are sick and want to get well, you have to open the door to healing.

Remember, too, that you can unlock and open the door to others, but those for whom you have done so have to decide whether or not to enter that doorway and walk through. Today, we are delighted to open the doors of this church to any and all people, especially those who are hurting and seeking the presence of God. Hopefully, we will continue to practice

unconditional hospitality; however, each individual must decide whether or not to walk through that unlocked and open door.

As people who follow the way of Jesus and have been given the keys of the kingdom, we are to use those keys to be continually unlocking and opening doors to God's love.

A sermon using keys and doors as metaphors would not be complete without noting that there are also doors in our lives that need to be closed and locked. We all know that the best way to handle some situations is to simply and gently close the door — not slam it, but close it.

When our children were growing up, especially in their teen years, it was their responsibility to keep their own rooms in some order. Sometimes a room was so messy that we could not stand to look in it, and we soon learned that a good way to deal with the problem, instead of nagging, was to simply close the door on that room and keep it closed as much as possible.

The same is true of life. There are times when we need to close the door. We can close the door on our mistakes and failures. We can close the door on our regrets, and we can close the door on hurts from the past.

But most of all, today we are emphasizing using the keys of the kingdom to unlock and open doors. Above all, it is the good news of the Christian faith that God's door is always open to you and to everyone. Amen.