

Electronic keycards have been a familiar feature in hotel rooms for years now, and for the most part they are fairly simple to use. You insert a card into a slot above a door handle, or swipe it alongside a electronic reader, and hopefully a green flashes, inviting you to “come inside.” The downside with these keycards, though, is that sometimes they flat-out don't work. And if that happens usually the only way to fix the problem is to go to the front desk at the Hotel and have a staff member reprogram it, or replace it for you. Although it is a fairly easy process to help us correct an irritating issue, it's a problem most people don't want to have deal with, especially when they're traveling!

I'm certain that I'm not the only one who has had to deal with a hotel keycard not working, and often times they fail us when we really need them to work. In fact, I still remember the immense frustration I went through years ago when I interviewed for my very first call as a Pastor and was staying at Circus Circus in Las Vegas. The day I arrived, I was supposed to meet with a staff member from the church, who had a short window of time to meet with me. After quickly checking in to the Hotel I made the long trek to my room, only to discover that my keycard wasn't working. Needless to say, much to my embarrassment, I had to change my plans with the church's ministry coordinator and meet her nearby at an Inn and Out burger, instead of at the church as expected!

Now, unlike the finicky hotel keycard, we all know that keys have been around since ancient times. The oldest example is from Nineveh, the ancient capital of Assyria. The Egyptians had them. So did the Greeks. Well-to-do Romans wore their keys on their fingers, like rings, not only for convenience, but also as a sort of status symbol, telling the world they had valuables to protect.

Even Jesus talked about keys! Two weeks ago, you may remember hearing him talk about them in our Gospel lesson from Matthew. In it he promised Peter, "I will give you 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." Today, we observe Jesus repeating this same promise about binding and loosing, and he even expands his promise to include the church in general. Early Christian scholars referred to this authority as "the power of the keys," and the name stuck. To this day, the Vatican coat of arms contains a pair of crossed keys surmounted by the papal crown.

The power of the keys comes in handy whenever the church's life is troubled by conflict. Sadly, this is an all-too-common occurrence. Ever since Cain killed his brother Abel, the children of God have gotten pretty skilled at finding things to hate, and distrust about each other. It's such a common feature of human life, in fact, that Jesus himself offers us some instruction on conflict resolution in our story this morning. And the model of conflict resolution he lifts up is a carefully staged process.

Think of it, in practical terms, as three separate keys. If another member of the church has wronged you, he says, take out Key Number One: Go to the other person and point out what he or she has done wrong. No witnesses are needed at this point, it should just be the two of you.

If that doesn't work, try another key, key number Two for example. Take one or two people along with you, and repeat the process. There is, of course, a very practical reason for bringing these individuals along with you. They can serve as witnesses if the second key likewise doesn't work, and more than likely you are going to need those witnesses if you have to pull out Key number Three.

Using this key, you "tell it to the church." There's still hope the other person will come around, realizing what pain he or she has caused you, and that they will show some remorse and repent of the wrong doing that has occurred. But "if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."

Apparently, a careful, measured, series of slowly escalating steps was part of the grievance process of the first-century church. It was the foundation of their disciplinary procedures, and it has been/and is used today to help church members find reconciliation with God and with one another. But as you may already know, or have experienced, there are times when this process seems impossible. Sometimes there's no admission of wrong, no move toward reconciliation, not even when the whole church is calling for it. In such a case, then the Lord's advice is to "let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."

Now, in case this last bit sounds harsh coming from the mouth of Jesus, I invite you to consider this... How was it, again, that Jesus related to Gentiles and tax collectors? He loved them, of course! He loved them unconditionally. He was famous for that. Jesus never gave up on them, always reached out to them, always hoped for reconciliation. Yet, there does come a point when active intervention must cease. If a wrongdoer, confronted by the righteous judgment of the whole church, stubbornly refuses to mend his or her ways, they -- having made that choice -- have effectively removed themselves from the fellowship. That's the harsh reality that comes around to bite them, and us as well, if ever we find ourselves in that position. There's simply no place in the body of Christ for prolonged, lengthy, unresolved conflict. After all, Christ calls us to be a community of peace.

It's instructive to read today's Scripture passage over against another one that provides us with advice on conflict resolution. The other passage is found earlier in Matthew Chapter Five, which says, "So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift."

Notice, that in Matthew's earlier advice on reconciliation, the roles are reversed. In today's passage, the person who takes the initiative to go and visit the

brother or sister, is the person who's been wronged. In chapter 5, it's different. Jesus says, "If you remember that your brother or sister has something against you ..." In other words, you're not the victim this time, but the perpetrator. The remarkable thing about these two narratives is that Jesus' advice is pretty much the same for both parties. Whether you're the one who's been wronged, or the one who's done the wrong, it's still your responsibility to swallow your pride, get up and go to your sister or brother, seeking to be reconciled.

These days I believe we need to learn to let go of thoughts like: "Why should I make the first move? It wasn't my fault. It's the other person who's got to reach out!" That's how feuds get started. Both sides are absolutely convinced it's the other person's fault. They're not going to budge. It can go on for years -- generations, even. Take the Hatfields and McCoys, for example!

If we follow Jesus' advice in these two passages from Matthew, that sort of thing should never really happen. Whether you're the injured party, or whether you're the one whose brother or sister has something against you, Jesus says, "Don't put it off. Just go! Mend the rift. Heal the relationship." In doing so, we not only offer the other person a key to profound inner peace in the Lord, we also claim such a key for ourselves.

Let me offer up another way to look at it. Two parties in a relationship are sitting on opposite sides of a negotiating table. As long as they remain on separate sides of the table, it's "us versus them" -- from both perspectives. Each party says, "'Us' is on my side of the table. 'Them' is over there, and 'Them's' gotta make the first move!" But the truth of the matter is that Reconciliation is never going to happen, as long as there is an "us versus them" mindset. Somehow, a third element has to be introduced.

Let's call this third element **The Problem**. The two parties have got to stop seeing the other person as the problem, and they need to begin seeing the conflict

between them as *The Problem*. It's a problem they can only solve together. Imagine *The Problem* is like a box of jigsaw-puzzle pieces somebody just dumped out onto the table. Silently, unwilling to speak, the two start to examine the pile. Each one sees some pieces that fit together, and they connect them up. The two combatants bend to their work, creating little clusters of puzzle pieces -- a bit of sky here, a patch of grassy lawn there, the red siding of a barn over there. Eventually, they are able to connect the larger clusters together.

Before that happens, though, the two get up and start walking around the table, to get a different perspective on the emerging picture. They may even start talking to one another -- imagine that! "Hand me that piece of blue sky over there, please." Eventually, it no longer makes sense to speak of "my side" or "your side" of the table. There's only the puzzle or the Problem -- and it takes two parties, working together, to solve it. This process is also called mediation. Sometimes when two parties are in conflict—rather than going to court, they engage a mediator. That person helps them come up with a common solution that is good for everyone concerned.

"Us versus them" has got to be transformed into "Us and Us." It's the only way that true reconciliation can happen. It's the only solution that is found in the Gospels as we witness Jesus coming down to us, seeing things from our perspective, and offering up his own life on a cross to show us that God is with us, not against us. It's the perfect key that never fails! And perhaps it's the one true answer that can help us find and achieve a reunion with God and one another. And Thanks be to God for that. Amen.