

[Opinion](#)

[Spirituality](#)

[Scripture for Life](#)



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"Mother, Mother, May I go out to swim? Yes, my darling daughter. Hang your clothes on a hickory limb. But don't go near the water." So sang my mother to me when I was little, and I could never understand why. What a conundrum! Why say yes and no at the same time — and with such precise instructions to boot? What was right? What was wrong?

Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time

[August 23, 2020](#)

Isaiah 22:19-23

Psalm 138

Romans 11:33-36

Matthew 16:13-20

Maybe the point was to teach me that things are rarely as cut and dried as we would like them to be.

Wasn't that Peter's dilemma in today's Gospel? He proclaimed his absolute faith in Jesus as the Christ, and Jesus blessed him, announcing that Peter had received a revelation from God. Next Jesus told him: "I give you the keys to the kingdom." Wow!

Then, Jesus undercut it all by saying, "Tell no one about it." ("Don't go near the water.")

Matthew is the only evangelist to describe the conversation that ensued. That included Jesus' comments about Peter's rocky faith, the permission to bind and loose, and Jesus' warning to say nothing.

The Catholic Church has built a lot of teaching and practice around this scriptural conundrum, emphasizing everything except the final command. Unlike our Protestant brethren, we've used this passage to validate the priestly ministry of forgiveness of sin and highlight Peter as the pioneer of papal primacy.

A careful look at Peter's life reveals a rocky path of growth. From this point on in Matthew's Gospel, Peter begins to play a larger role. Following the conversation we hear today, Jesus explained that he was going to suffer and die, which led Peter to his first attempt to bind and loose. Peter proclaimed that such a thing should never happen and Jesus retorted that he was thinking like Satan, not God.

Though he may have been slow, Peter learned. From his proclamation of Jesus as the Christ, all the way through the events of Jesus' death and resurrection, Peter waffled between pompousness and repentance.

Eventually, after weeping over denying Jesus and being charged to feed Jesus' sheep, Peter's grandiosity was transformed into evangelical audacity. He risked his life to proclaim the Gospel message of forgiveness and the love of God. He accepted Jesus' words and allowed himself to be led where he would rather not go.

Peter's experience with Jesus slowly taught him the Gospel meaning of binding and loosing. That came from the realization that that seventy-times-seven keys to the kingdom of heaven open the doors of forgiveness.

That is precisely why the netherworld, the power of death, cannot prevail against it. Death pretends to be an absolute; people who live by that power believe only in their infallible version of the truth. Their greatest weakness is their brittleness: Because they will not change, they cannot grow — and that is the definition of real death, and perhaps of hell.

Peter slowly learned that binding and loosing are not opposites, but stages interspersed along the way. Binding and loosing, unlike legalists' narrow precision, is exemplified by Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, which fulfills the broad intent of the Law. Peter learned to be poor in spirit rather than to pretend infallibility.

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That brings Peter into synch with St. Paul, and especially with today's selection from Romans. In this letter, Paul struggled with the pain he felt at Jews' rejection of Jesus, and yet he refused to believe that God would forsake this people. Finally, rather than pretend to understand, Paul began to sing the praises of God's wisdom and knowledge, God's wonderful and unfathomable ways. He let God be God.

The earliest Christian communities under the leadership of Peter and Paul had the grace-filled advantage of knowing they had a great deal to learn. Jesus had promised much, but the communities knew their weakness, beginning with the fact that one of their primary leaders had denied knowing Jesus and the other had led the persecution of Christians. Those resumes don't outline perfection, but they apparently have plenty of room for Christian sanctity, an always-in-need-of-conversion brand of holiness that surpasses the sanctimonious attitudes of righteous perfectionists.

The one thing that Peter — and eventually Paul — got really right was the proclamation that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God. Because he let God be God, Peter slowly learned how to handle the keys of forgiveness and how to spread the Gospel Jesus proclaimed by binding people to hope and loosing them from past failure.

Today's liturgy reminds us that Christianity demands lots of practice. Humbly accepting that we won't ever do it perfectly, we slowly learn to balance humility and evangelical audacity.

Perhaps binding and loosing are summarized by saying that only God is God; the rest of us are just called to be forgivers.

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