

The Unhackable Key

Matthew 18:15-20 | 9/10/2017

Electronic keycards have been familiar features in hotel rooms for years now. A guest uses such a keycard by inserting it into a slot above the door handle. Hotel companies love the technology. It offers many advantages over old-fashioned metal keys -- which, when lost, are costly to reproduce. Then, too, hotel managers worried about possible breaches of security. What if a former guest returned with the metal key he or she had walked off with?

The downside with keycards is that sometimes they flat-out don't work. In that case, it's a fairly simple matter for the front desk staff to reprogram or replace the card. Just the same, it's irritating and it's a frustration, however minor, that you don't want to deal with when you're traveling.

But what if all the keys in a hotel stopped working all at once? And what if the hotel staff were unable to fix the problem?

That's exactly what happened in January 2017 at the luxury RomantikSeehotelJaegerwirt, in the Austrian Alps. Hackers took over the hotel's computer system. They demanded nearly \$1,600 worth of the shadowy electronic currency, bitcoin, to get the hotel's keycards working again.

The hotel promptly paid up. They weren't happy about paying blackmail, but keeping their customers satisfied was far more important to them. After pocketing the cash, the hackers obligingly restored the hotel's access to its own system. Soon after, the hotel ditched keycards altogether, going back to old-fashioned metal keys.

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. In Matthew 16:13 he promises 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." Later, in verse 18 of today's text, Jesus repeats the promise about binding and loosing, expanding it to the church in general.

Early Christian commentators 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 good 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 some instruction about conflict resolution in today's Gospel reading. *Think of it, in practical terms, as three separate keys.*

Jesus' model of conflict resolution is a carefully staged process. If another member of the church has wronged you, he says, take out Key One: Go to the other person and point out what that one has done wrong. No witnesses. Just the two of you.

If that doesn't work, try another key, Key Two. Take one or two others along with you, and repeat the process. There's a very practical reason for bringing the others along. They can serve as witnesses if Key Two likewise doesn't work.

You're going to need those witnesses if you pull out Key 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, and repenting for it. 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." These careful, measured, slowly escalating steps became the foundation of the disciplinary procedures of a great many modern Christian churches, including ours.

The theological foundation of this process is the power of the keys. To the question "What is the power of the keys?" the Heidelberg Catechism supplies this answer: *"The preaching of the holy gospel and Christian discipline toward repentance.* The goal of the process is reconciliation. But there are times when that's 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 that last bit sounds harsh coming from the mouth of Jesus, then think on 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, always hoped for reconciliation.

Yet, there does sometimes come a point when active intervention must cease. If wrongdoers, confronted by the whole church, stubbornly refuse to mend their 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 protracted, unresolved conflict. Christ calls us to be a community of peace.

It's helpful to read this Scripture passage along with another one that provides advice for conflict resolution. The other passage is Matthew 5:23-24. It 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 how, in this second passage, the roles are reversed. In today's passage, from Matthew 18, 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 passages 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. There's none of this, "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. We're talking Hatfields and McCoys, here.

If you follow Jesus' advice in these two passages from Matthew that sort of thing never ought to happen. Whether you're the injured party (chapter 18), or whether you're the one whose brother or sister has something against you (chapter 5), Jesus says, "Don't put it off. Just go. Mend the rift. Heal the relationship."

Here's another way to look at it. Two parties in a relationship are sitting on opposite sides of a table. It's the 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!" Reconciliation's never going to happen, though, as long as it remains "us versus them." Somehow, a third element has got to be introduced.

Let's call that third element The Problem. The two parties have got to stop seeing the other person as the problem, and 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 connects 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.

Almost always, the two get up and start walking around the table, to get a different perspective on the emerging picture -- or maybe to pick up a stray puzzle piece, to see if it belongs to the section they've been working on. They may even start talking to one another -- imagine that! "Hand me that piece of blue sky over there please."

Ultimately, it no longer makes sense to speak of "my side" or "your side" of the table. There's only The Problem -- and it takes both parties, working together, to solve it. "Us versus them" has got to be transformed into "Us and Us." It's the only way reconciliation ever happens. It's the unhackable key.

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