

While reading the gospel, I was reminded of a game we used to play with our children when they were little, called “The Secret.” I’d tell them I had a secret and then whisper in their ears “I love mommy.” Then I’d tell them to go share the secret with mom.

They’d get all excited and scamper off to whisper the secret message into my wife’s ear. She’d always respond happily and we’d all come together for a big family hug. It was lots of fun, and we only stopped playing the game when one of the kids looked at me one day and asked “Why is telling someone you love them a secret?” I agreed that indeed, loving someone shouldn’t be a secret at all.

Peter received a secret like that from God himself about who Jesus was. It’s as if God just couldn’t keep it to himself any longer. God revealed to Peter that Jesus was God’s Anointed One; revealing to you and me that in Jesus, God had become what we are so that we could become what God is; removing the distance between us that sin imposes. Like any kind of genuine love, it’s something that shouldn’t be a secret at all.

With great love always comes enormous power and responsibility. When Jesus entrusted the keys to the kingdom to Peter, he gave him the power to bind and loose those things in heaven and earth that bind us together in love and release us from the grip of evil. This is the passage in which Scripture explains the origin, foundation and rationale for the power and responsibility that has been entrusted to the leadership of the Church on earth.

To get a handle on all that, maybe a short lesson in vexillology would be helpful. Vexillology, as some of us might know, is the study of flags. As fate would have it, we just happen to have a couple of flags we can look at today. The American flag and the pope’s flag.

Flags make statements about what they represent. We all know that the American flag has a star representing each state, and a bar for each of the original 13 colonies. The flag's a short history lesson and a description of our country, rolled into one.

Far more significant than the symbolism is the response it evokes in us when we see it. People have died for what this flag represents. The Civil War-era poet Stephen Crane described flags as “the unexplained glory”¹ flying over the heads of soldiers. Having been a soldier myself, I suspect that the far more likely reality is that all soldiers know in their heart full well what's at stake, and that it's never in need of explanation.

The pope's flag makes a statement, too. In the middle you can see the pope's tiara. Like our stars and stripes, this points out that the flag is about the pope, and that there's just one. The crossed keys represent the keys to the kingdom that we just heard about in today's gospel. One key is silver and one is gold. Officially, the gold one represents the spiritual authority of the pope. The silver one represents his earthly authority. They are tied together by a red rope which tells us that these two realms of authority are not really separate thoughts.

Vexillology can only take us so far. It's worth taking a longer look at the symbols on the flag through the eyes of faith, for to understand their deeper meanings is to arrive at the core of the message of today's Scripture.

It would seem that the doorway to the kingdom has a double lock. Fr. Larry Bloom² suggests that the golden key represents the power of the church to forgive sin, just as Jesus did. The silver key represents the requirement for us to repent and forgive one another. One key, the golden key of mercy, goes in on God's side, the other, the silver

¹ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47650/war-is-kind-do-not-weep-maiden-for-war-is-kind>, August 24, 2017

² Fr. Larry Bloom, http://www.homilies.com/frames_weekday_homilies/index.htm, 21st Ordinary - 2005

key of the requirements of justice, goes in on your side and mine. We turn our silver key when we choose to hold no grudges or resentment against those who offend or disappoint us, acknowledge and repent of our own sin, and accept each other in our common love of God.

See how the keys are crossed? That reminds us that justice and mercy meet at the Cross: they aren't separate thoughts. The cord that connects them is red for a reason – it represents the blood of Christ, shed out of love, for the forgiveness of sin; forgiveness being, after all, the ultimate reconciliation of justice and mercy among those who love. For us to forgive and be forgiven is to be tied by the red cord of love to the Passion of Christ Himself at the nexus of justice and mercy.

I'd like to share a little secret with you. This is not just the pope's flag. It's your flag and mine too, just the way the Stars and Stripes is our common possession. Each of us knows our own secret tales of good and evil. Every day, each of us sits alone at the crossroads of justice and mercy, the red cord of love in our hands, to lock and unlock as we choose. The invitation to do so requires no explanation. Love never does.

Perhaps today or sometime soon we will find ourselves deciding to put our silver keys into some locks long left unopened. Whenever we do, we will discover to our astonishment that the golden key has already been turned. It shouldn't come as a surprise that that side of the door is always open. It's no secret after all, that God's love for us is absolutely unconditional.