

1. Growth isn't always a good thing; it's not so great being great. The world's tallest man, Robert Wadlow, was an inch short of nine feet, but he died at age twenty-two. The world's tallest living man walks with crutches. Giants don't often make it to retirement.

“At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”” Who is the big man on campus, the most senior disciple, the greatest follower of Jesus? Jesus takes a little child and tells His disciples, **“Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”**

The Office of the Keys is that special authority which Christ has given to His Church on earth to forgive the sins of repentant sinners, but to withhold forgiveness from the unrepentant as long as they do not repent. Greatness looks different in the Church. It isn't giants, machismo, or self-justification. **“Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”** In so many words, Jesus told his followers that the jockeying for position that they saw all around them would not be tolerated in His Kingdom.

Gigantism is a pathology that needs to be treated, and sometimes that applies to our egos. Nothing deflates an ego like the confession of sin and reception of forgiveness. Nothing takes us to a childlike state unlike saying, “sorry,” waiting for the offended to offer forgiveness. This system in the Church is called the office of the keys and it's how the church stays healthy. The office of the keys is the Church's immune system.

2. Growth isn't always a good thing; that mass shouldn't have gotten bigger. The doctor said it's either your left lung or your life. A little leaven leavens the whole lump, but metastasized cancer is nothing to joke about.

“And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire.” We might think that Jesus is being a bit over the top when it comes to sin. He can't really mean that, can He?

Drunkness, pornography, premarital and extramarital sex, gossip, music and video piracy, slander, fits of rage, truancy from church, hatred, racism—we could name more. Maybe they have new coats of paint, but sin is sin. The Father treats sin more seriously than an oncologist treats cancer. Your sin cost Him the life of His Son. **“Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”** Your sins were bound to Jesus on the cross, that you may be fully and wholly loosed from them through trust in Him.

Remove a body part? Take the poison they call chemotherapy? Blast radiation into my body? Anything to stop that cancerous growth. It is serious

enough that my own immune system couldn't handle it. Kicking a sin habit is painful, but it beats the alternative: losing your faith and spending an eternity in hell.

The Lord doesn't leave us to our own devices. The office of the keys is part of a treatment plan to cut off the foot or tear out the eye. Confession and forgiveness is part of the answer to a sin addiction. Seek out a pastor to confess your sins to so He can pronounce specific absolution and tips for avoiding sin. Seek out another Christian friend to be an accountability partner who also can provide Gospel words of comfort. The office of the keys is a key element in a healthy spirituality. The office of the keys is the Church's immune system.

3. Growth isn't always a good thing; wool can really weigh a sheep down. Nobody knows how long Baarak the sheep was lost, but when they found him, his coat weighed 77 pounds. Shedding is not a desired trait in domestic sheep, but Baarak lost in the woods was reduced to nibbling blades of grass within his reach and he could barely see past his overgrown wool. He was starving because he couldn't walk due to the weight of the wool.

“What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.”

Church growth isn't simply about the quantity of the heads of sheep. It is about the quality of the sheep's care: routine shearing, being fed and watered, and avoiding the dangers of predators. It is about the sheep gathered to hear the good shepherd: God's Word of law shearing them to the heart to let them know something needs to change, God's Word of Gospel enacting that change, the Lord's Supper feeding them, and strong leadership warding away false teachers and others who wish to do the flock harm. “Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” We gather before the good shepherd regularly to have our sins loosed from us.

This Sunday there are empty spots in our pews of people who promised they'd be here but aren't. I'm not talking about someone out of town caring for mom or otherwise faithful members on vacation. Perhaps like Baarak, they wandered away and before they knew it, they were too weighed down to make it back. The office of the keys warns wayward sheep that persistence in this lifestyle can lead to being eternally lost, but it also comes with the rejoicing at the return and restoration of the lost sheep to the ninety-nine. A healthy immune system

recognizes the reattachment of severed fingers and toes, and so do we. The office of the keys is the Church's immune system.

4. Growth isn't always a good thing, especially when it comes to grudges and enemy lists. One man said the church is full of judgmental people and it really isn't for him anymore. "The pastor had had the nerve to question my use of the church credit card. To make matters worse, the pastor met again with me alongside the church treasurer and an elder to review credit card statements. What am I, a teenager who spent too much on clothes at the mall? Can you believe it," the man commented, "The church even formally excommunicated me for embezzling! I got the last laugh, though, the Andersons, the Smiths, and the Deans all agreed with me to leave such a legalistic community."

“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.” If that doesn't work, take one or two others along with you. If that doesn't work, take it to the church, and if the man doesn't listen, formally remove him from membership in the body of Christ until he repents from his sin.

Nothing is more difficult for a pastor or the Church than cases of church discipline. **“Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”** Sometimes that binding key needs to be used when all other avenues are exhausted. With the ultimate goal of repentance, the bad news must be told that if a Christian persists in this sinful behavior, his salvation could be at stake. That illustration of the man who embezzled funds is entirely fictional, but I'm certain those of us experienced in church leadership can think of real-life examples.

The immune system always has as its goal a properly functioning body that can run, play, and enjoy the day. Likewise, the office of the keys has at its heart the proclamation of forgiveness so that you may receive the gifts Jesus won for you from the cross and the open tomb. But there is no forgiveness where there is no repentance. The Church is called to follow Matthew 18 in addressing a wayward sinner who offends the flock. It's never easy, but we can rest in the confidence that Jesus gives us the instructions, so we follow His instructions and leave the results to the Holy Spirit. The office of the keys is the Church's immune system, but we don't get to decide what's a healthy body cell and what's a virus.

“For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.” Jesus is in our midst as we exercise the office of the keys: the forgiving of sins and the withholding of the forgiveness of sins. His Holy Spirit restores us to a childlike state that so idealizes the Church's humility and dependence on God. He walks alongside us as we strive to amputate sin habits out of our life. He is interceding to the Father in the midst of congregational conflict. Ultimately, He rejoices with us at the return of the lost sheep which even includes us sometimes.