



The Big Secret

Mark 8:27-38

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Last Friday was the eighth time our calendars read September 11 since that fateful, beautiful, horrible, cloudless day in 2001, the day our lives changed irrevocably.

On September 11, 2001, I was to fly to Los Angeles from Raleigh, North Carolina, to have dinner with an old church friend and then, the next day, audition for Jeopardy. As I parked my car at the airport, Valerie called to say a plane had crashed into the WTC. Remembering the Air Force bomber that once flew into the Empire State Building, and figuring it was just a Cessna or something like that, I wondered what had really happened, hoped no one was hurt, checked in, and headed for the plane.

I arrived at the gate just after the second plane hit. There were TV's in the lounges and at the gates; we watched in horrified fascination. A couple of airlines started announcing delays.

Then something very strange happened: airport security personnel went through and turned off every single TV, and went into the gift shops and confiscated all the radios. For some reason, someone had decided to try and keep it quiet. I'm sorry; you can't keep something that big a secret.

There are secrets, and there are secrets. We keep information from other people for lots of reasons, some good, some bad. "Mommy! We got you a necklace for Mothers' Day, but we can't tell you 'cause it's a secret!" Some self-help programs like to say that "you're only as sick as your secrets," by which they mean that what you're holding back may be a lot more harmful kept to yourself than if you tell someone else about it. There are family secrets: "We never speak about that Thanksgiving when Uncle Joe got into the rum balls," sometimes things much darker. There are secrets we keep because they're fun, like Christmas. And sometimes we want people to know a little more before we tell them the whole story, so they can understand what we're telling them.

Jesus, well, Jesus can't help helping people. But the plain fact is that no one, not even the disciples, really understands who he is and what he's doing.

That, in a nutshell, is why he keeps telling people to be quiet about what he's done for them. And what takes place in today's Gospel makes that clear.

This is the middle of Mark's Gospel, this event the pivot, the turning point of the whole story. Up to now, Jesus has been healing and teaching and gathering followers; from now on, he's heading for the cross.

"Who do you say I am?" he asks. Peter says it plainly: "You are the Messiah." Peter takes thousands of years of human experience with God and puts it in one short sentence.

It's an inspired statement; Peter's actually saying more than he knows. But he's got the essential fact, and now Jesus tells them all the rest, though the time isn't right for them to spread this news to the world. Jesus takes them through the classic journalist questions: *who, what, when, where, and why*. Who: I am the Messiah, or we say, the Christ. What: these things have to happen. When: soon! Where: in Jerusalem. Why: because it's God's plan for the salvation of humankind.

This is the first time Jesus has talked about the path he will walk. Right away Peter thinks he knows better, thinks he's got the whole thing wrapped up, and Jesus has to scold him back to his senses. "Get behind me, Satan! You're thinking about human things, not divine things."

And he is: Peter and the disciples now know the secret, but they don't yet know what to do with it.

The big secret Jesus shares with them is his message, the message: that he is God's son, sent to proclaim God's forgiveness, and then pay for that forgiveness with his death and resurrection. That's a message that humanity will never completely understand.

It's a message all of us have heard, in one form or another. But each of us has experienced it differently: God touches us in very personal ways.

Friday, Dave Horton gave a book report as continuing education for the Stephen Ministers of our church. It was an excellent report, about an excellent book, "Any Bitter Thing," but it was how he began that really got my attention. He asked: "When do you get to know Dave Horton?"

He was talking about the details of Dave, the inner stuff that makes him who he is, that fills out his personality more than just being some guy we've met or seen at church.

That's tricky material, all that personal history. He used the idea as a way to get into the book, but I got to thinking, how much would I need to know about him before I could say I know him?

That may seem like an odd question, but different people have different levels of familiarity. Men and women typically have very different ideas about what it means to know someone. Take my Dad, for example. I used to say his friendships were like two cats sitting on a back fence. They'd maybe say half a dozen words over the course of an hour or so, then go their separate ways, feeling like they understood each other perfectly. "Where've you been?" my Mom would ask. "With Joe." "Joe. You mean Joe Smith?" "Yes." "Bertha Smith, the woman who volunteers at the soup kitchen, her husband?" Dad would say, "I have no idea."

My Mom's idea of friendship is relationally-based: who's connected to whom, and what do they do? She places people in context. My Dad's focus was just on the person, right there, whatever that person chose to bring to the moment. Sadie and Seth come home full of news about their new friends: Seth says his friend likes baseball, Sadie says her friend is also friends with this other girl and that other girl, and neither of them will know anyone's last name. Seth probably won't have a first name, either. But they're best friends!

How much do you need to know about someone before you let them in? How much would you tell that person about yourself? How well would you have to know another before telling something truly personal? When would your sharing go beyond "need to know", and get down inside, from "Doing great, thanks!" to "Well, really, not so good"?

There was a time in the early days of the Christian church when this Christian faith was something new – and it was shared freely and often, as news. Now, it's assumed – at least here in church. We all assume that we believe about the same things, that we have experienced God in roughly the same way. But each one of us has had a unique experience of God – and that's a part of who and what we are. It's a part of us that's worth knowing, a part that can help us and others grow in faith. But that stuff, well, that's deep inside the privacy boundary, isn't it?

Here's a funny thing: Back in the day, Jesus couldn't get people to keep quiet. He ordered the wind and the waves to calm down, he casts out demons, but he can't get folks to keep his secret, no matter what he says. Entering Jerusalem on his way to the cross, he'll tell the leaders trying to quiet the crowds that even if he could silence the people, the rocks would cry out! And it gets even louder after Easter. The book of Acts and the letters of the New Testament make clear that no one seems to be able to keep quiet about what God is doing in and through them: it just spills out.

For the early believers, the message of the Gospel is so urgent, so amazing, that it can't be kept secret, no matter what, no matter when, no matter who.

Great. Then what happened to us? Jesus couldn't keep 'em quiet, we can't get anybody to talk about it!

Is that because it's so powerful that we're afraid of it? So personal, it's like telling a family secret?

What has being a believer done for you? What has the ministry of this congregation done for you? And have you ever told anyone about it?

The Big Secret was that Jesus is the Messiah that God had been telling his people was coming. That was hard for them to hear, since Jesus didn't look or sound like what they expected, because their expectations were wrapped around their human hopes and human desires. So while Jesus was doing things that sure looked like God-things, they could neither see him as he was, nor understand what he had to do until he did it. But then...

God's power often isn't like what we expect or even imagine: it works in slowly, in our hearts, and just as a tiny drip over time can amount to tons of water, the Kingdom inundates the empty parts of our lives, and we are changed. Sometimes the only way to recognize what's happened is to talk about God with someone else.

Once, no one could keep quiet about Jesus Christ. Today, the Big Secret is Christ himself.

So, the more Jesus told everyone to keep what he was doing hush-hush, the louder they shouted it from the rooftops. Sounds almost like reverse psychology, doesn't it? Let's try it: don't tell a soul!