Sunday, July 1, 1973
YOU ARE YOUR SECRETS!
Matthew 6:1-4

"Beware of practicing your piety before men in order to be seen by them; for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. Thus, when you give alms, sound no trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets that they may be praised by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you."

Probably a number of you present here this morning have read some of the novels and books written by Lloyd. C. Douglas. The most well-known of his books is no doubt THE ROBE, one of his last ones. Yet there is another one of his novels, his first one, that I would recommend to all of you. It is entitled THE MAGNIFICENT OBSESSION. I remember reading this book years ago when I was in high school, but my attention was called to it recently again in connection with our text for today from the Sermon on the Mount.

Let me explain. There is one particular scene in the book, THE MAGNIFICENT OBSESSION, in which Dr. Wayne Hudson, on the edge of failure and in deep depression following the death of his wife, goes to a monument works to pick out a marker for her grave. There he encounters the ec-centric but strangely talented sculptor, Clive Randolph. Sensing the Doctor's state of mind, Clive Randolph engages him in conversation and gradually as their friendship develops, Randolph imparts to Dr. Hudson a "secret" which can, he says, transform one's whole life, and later on in the novel we see that it does this very thing for Dr. Hudson.

At no place in the novel is the theory full and explicit stated, but when pieced together it runs something like this: Most of us live depleted existences; that is, our lives have a certain kind of emptiness. Some of our lives are weak, lack zest, apprehensive, pessimistic, afraid, even neurotic. And the reason is that when we perform a good deed we advertise it, display it, or let it be known in some way and thus collect and enjoy the credit then and there. We want our reward immediately and we get it to a certain extent.

But on the other hand, when we do something cheap, mean, dishonest or wrong, something we're not proud of, we carefully hide and deny it, if we can, with the result that the "credit" for this kind of action remains with us and L accumulates; it builds up within us and can poison us.

Thus, a person who follows such a style of life, and many of us do, is chronically bankrupt. We have no confidence or zest in our living, and we lack creativity. Furthermore, we find that we have to spend too much of our energy pretending, 9overing up, protecting ourselves, guarding our- selves, afraid of being found out, of being known as we really are deep down. Thus, we may not have much energy left for anything else. Such persons are usually tired, worn out and lack spirit.

What then is the alternative? What is the remedy for us who wish to avoid such a miserable and meaningless existence? Listen carefully! The alternative is to simply reverse the whole strategy. We then admit. confess and thus divest ourselves of our weaknesses, our errors, our sins, our meanness, our fears and doubts, and at the same time, we hide our charities, our good deeds, our virtues. Instead of our sins and weaknesses becoming our innermost secrets, our good deeds become our innermost secrets.

This is in essence what Clive Randolph told Dr. Hudson. This is the secret of that mysterious power. Randolph told Dr. Hudson that by following these instructions to the letter, he would find life changing for him completely. He would find himself becoming a different person altogether. He would find himself no longer afraid, no longer insecure, no longer wasting his energy trying to keep himself together.

But where, Dr. Hudson asks, did Randolph come by such an idea? From the Bible, Randolph tells him, from the life and example of Jesus Christ himself. We see it in our text from the Sermon on the Mount:

“Beware of practicing your piety before men in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in Heaven. Thus, when you give alms, and by alms... we mean when you do any kind of good works — thus when you do good works, good deeds, let no one know about it, keep it a secret. Be so secret about it that your left hand does not know what your right hand is doing. In other words, don’t even boast to yourself. Jesus went on to say — this is what the hypocrites do, they boast that they may be praised by other people. They have their reward. Their reward is the praise of others they might receive at that time. But said Jesus, in the long run this is really no reward at all.“

Now what does all this have to do with us? Simply this: The text is saying, and many persons have discovered the truth of it, as did the characters in the Novel — THE MAGNIFICENT OBSESSION — namely, you are your secrets!

That which we keep secret, keep hidden within ourselves is what we become and what we are. If we keep the bad things hidden, our sins hidden, or our fears or doubts, then we become that and all our energy is wasted; but if we reverse the process and do good deeds, do them secretly and keep them secret, then we become that kind of person.

But this, as we know, is not what we usually do. So, let’s look at this principle more deeply. What can we do to reverse the process?

To begin with, many people misunderstand good works, that is, many of us do what good things we do for the wrong reasons. Many of us may go out of our way to do something nice, a favor, a chore, an extra kindness primarily to obtain the praise or the gratitude of others because that makes us feel good at the moment. And some are even in a hurry to collect the gratitude which they think is rightly due them. We want quick payment.

There are, no doubt, many reasons why we are in such a hurry to collect our payment. We want others to know how good we really are. We want to prove to ourselves and others that people generally do not appreciate us as much as they should. And often we expect people to show their appre-ciation to us by acting the way we think they should act and respond. And if they act in any other way, even though they may really be grateful, we do not accept it.

And make no mistake about it, we have some very subtle ways of talking about our goodness, of boasting in order to exact the payment of appreciation and gratitude.

For example, we often want others to know how unprejudiced we are, and we will say — "I’ve associated with blacks and Indians for years — why I’ve even lived among them. I have no prejudice.”

What we may really be saying with such statements is that we want others to know how really good we've always been, and furthermore that those in such minority groups ought to appreciate our goodness.

In a similar way, we parents often make the calamitous mistake of expecting our children to be continually paying us back in gratitude and appreciation for all the sacrifices and advantages, for all the good things we've done for them.

Now this is not to say that we shouldn't teach our children gratitude and thanksgiving, but it is to say that if the only reason we do things for our children is so that they will appreciate us and be grateful to us, we are doing what we're doing for the wrong reason. Furthermore, if a child is grateful to us as his parents, once he's grown, he can best express this gratitude by the way in which he treats and raises his children and by the way he treats and appreciates other people as well as us. Gratitude and appreciation are to be passed on and then such things spread.

And there's a related problem here. If we do things primarily to gain gratitude and appreciation, we may be disappointed quite often. For as we know, the gratitude and appreciation do not always come back to us. And then we may get so disappointed that we become cynical and say that we're through with being nice and helping others since they don't appreciate it any way.

Whereas if we do our good works in secret and if we further insist that we will not even accept payment back to ourselves, that we will not let anyone even know about it — then pretty soon our whole motivation for doing good will change, and in the process, we will become good ourselves; we are our secrets!

Jesus knew that good works are loaded with good potentialities as well as very dangerous potentialities. That is why in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus begins this passage with, "Beware, beware, beware of good works!" They are strewn with roots and stones, and it is surely a miracle of God if you do not trip over your own good works and fall miserably.

You are not out of the woods when you have finally succeeded in wringing from yourself a contribution to some good cause, or given a room to a homeless refugee, or hired a black, or paid your pledge in full to the church. No, the real danger is just beginning. You may drain all the value out of your good works by being all to ready to blow the trumpet whenever you put your hand on your pocketbook and call attention to it, and if not the attention of others, at least your own attention as you remind yourself of how good and righteous and loving you really are.

That is why Jesus utters the warning, "Beware, beware!" Once you have begun to fulfill the commandments of God, then the real problems can begin, then comes the subtle danger. Thus, Jesus says, "Do not let your right hand know what your left hand is doing."

And there's a related issue here. If we expect payment for our kindnesses, then it comes back to us, and our goodness loses much of its power to spread. Jesus would often say to those he helped — do not thank me, but go and do likewise to others. Furthermore, if we do our good works in secret, the person who is the recipient will have to pass it on.

But now let's look at the other side of the matter. Since you are your secrets, it then follows that each of us needs to be able to get rid of our weaknesses, our sins, our fears, our failures by not keeping them secret but by sharing them with someone. The) Christian word is

“confession.” If it is true that we are our secrets, then if we confess our sins, we will be on the way to being free of them.

There’s good common sense to all of this. We can bear our good deeds alone — to keep them secret will cause us no problem. But we all know how heavy a burden it is to carry our failures, our weaknesses, our fears all alone. We need others to help us.

There is now overwhelming evidence to show that the breakthrough to healing, to becoming a new person, a forgiven person, to being released, being free, comes from confession. Part of the success of any counseling situation is that the person seeking help is able to tell the secrets that have been so long poisoning his or her life. Time and time again I have listened to persons telling me things that have long been kept locked in and yet things that person wanted to get rid of for years and years. There are people who on the outside appear secure and unafraid, but who deep down want to say — "if you only knew how tormented I am.”

Often the crucial element in our health and well-being is the degree of openness and communion which a person has with his or her fellow human beings. A person who is alone with his sins and failures and weaknesses and fears is utterly alone. A person who is alone with his good works is a dif-ferent matter. You are your secrets!

We all need persons with whom we can be open and honest, who will accept our weaknesses, fears and failures — persons in whose presence we do not have to be protective and closed for fear they will dislike or disapprove of us.

So many live alone with their sin, their fears, their secrets of this kind. It is in sharing such secrets that healing begins. You are your secrets! And each one of us decides what our secrets will be.

In the novel, THE MAGNIFICENT OBSESSION, Dr. Hudson takes the advice of the artist named Randolph and begins to do good works in all sorts of ways but always in secret, and his life does change, miracles happen. His doing good in secret becomes his “magnificent obsession.”

It is the testimony of the Bible that the same thing can happen to each of us. You will become what your secrets are! Amen.