Sunday, July 13, 1986
IT' S A SECRET (No. 1 in a Series)
Judges 16:4-17; John 7:1-9

This morning, I am beginning a three-part sermon series on the subject of "secrets." In this first sermon, we will be looking at the need for having secrets as individuals, particularly as we are growing up, and how this relates to our Christian faith. The second sermon will explore how some of our secrets affect us and will give some suggestions from the teachings of Jesus as to what secrets should be told and what should remain secret within us forever. Then the third sermon in the series will be entitled, "God's Secrets and Our Secrets."

In one of his books, Paul Tournier, a Swiss psychiatrist and a dedicated Christian, tells this story. A little girl is coming home from school. Her name is Frances. Until now, her mother had always taken her and gone to get her. It wasn't very far: a street running uphill. Frances and her mother would sometimes take the sidewalk on the left, which ran by stores with their beautiful display windows; sometimes they walked on the other side where there were no stores.

But now her mother considers her big enough to let her go alone. For every child, the day when she's allowed to go to school alone is an important promotion. Frances was quite proud and is now radiantly returning home. She hugs her mother's neck. The mother is even more emotional and questions her daughter rather sharply, "Did it go all right? Did you walk by yourself? Were you with some friends? Did you take the store side of the street or the other one?"

Under this flood of questions, Frances feels completely ill at ease. "I took the store side," she says. And yet, she had indeed taken the other side. She is quite astonished at herself, a little confused, having answered thus. Is it a lie? After all, what importance does it make whether she took the sidewalk on one side or the other? And why did this false answer come out of her mouth before she had even thought?

But also, why then did her mother ask her the question? Why does she want to know which sidewalk she took? Perhaps her mother doesn't think it important. She only needs to talk, to ask questions, lots of questions, as a release for her emotions. The result was this flood of questions which Frances resented because it was prying. If her mother considers her big enough to go to school by herself now, she should no longer demand that Frances tell her everything she has done.

Dr. Tournier believes that Frances has not told a lie. She is a very good and very candid little girl, who came straight home from school without having a good time on the way. Frances feels in a perplexed way that she has answered that way in order to have a secret. She would not be able to hide anything important from her mother, but she is beginning to need to no longer tell her mother everything now that she can go to school by herself. She needs to have a secret, at least a tiny little secret. That is what is important, and that is what her mother has not understood. She has indiscreetly plied her with too many questions in an attempt to learn everything. All she should have asked her daughter is, "How did it go?"

Until birth, the child is part of the mother. It doesn't matter if the umbilical cord is cut; for a long time, she will remain closely connected. She is an individual and yet not an individual. She is only her mother's baby and totally dependent on her.

The years pass, the child grows. The child goes to school. She goes to school by herself. She will have to free herself, little by little, from her parents in order to become an individual in her own right. And her secrets are going to be an indispensable part of this emancipation. As children grow up, they have more and more secrets from their parents. It is to the extent that she has secrets from her parents that she gains an awareness of self. It is to the extent that she has become free to keep her secrets from them that she gets an awareness of being distinct from them, of having her own individuality, of being a person in her own right. That's why some young people begin diaries. It's their own book of secrets.

So having secrets and knowing how to keep them to oneself and to give them up only willingly without coercion is an important part of the formation of our individuality. Think of it! What a feeling of power when a child realizes that she knows something that certainly no one else knows — not even her father or mother. Therefore, they don't know everything. That's quite a discovery. We all like to know things that others do not know. Do you remember as a child saying not only to your parents but to your brothers or sisters or others near your own age, "I know something you don't know"? Even as adults, we like this kind of power.

There's also a certain fascination with secrecy and with learning secrets. Why do you suppose news sheets like the National Enquirer and others like it have such a large market? They promise to reveal untold secrets of the private lives of movie stars with photographs taken with a telescopic lens. And there are also the magazines of secret confessions and love stories.

In addition to discovering secrets and holding on to them, we also enjoy telling the secrets to others — but not to everyone. Sometimes we call this gossip. It gives us a sense of power or of superiority to know something that no one else knows and then to have the opportunity to tell it to whom we choose.

Children learn quickly that adults have their secrets and that some of these secrets are highly charged with emotion. There are some things that adults never talk about in front of them and to which some friend, or someone older, or some other person outside the family makes mysterious allusions. If a child questions the parents, they answer sharply, "That will be explained to you when you are older."

The child wonders, "How do babies come into the world?" and "What does this word 'adultery' or 'homosexual' mean," which the child has overheard by chance? Or this word "sex appeal," which the child has seen on the cover of a magazine in the newsrack in the drugstore?

The fact is that no one reaches maturity without secret anguishes, secret searches, and secret regrets. We all have our secret problems, our secret weaknesses, and our secret strengths, and when and to whom these secrets are told is a decision we all have to make time and time again.

Children seem to have a quick intuition for what is hidden from them. Why do a child's parents require him or her to attend Sunday church school while the parents themselves do not attend worship at the same time? There's a secret there. Why did the parents have such a gloomy look that night that they sent the child to bed earlier than usual? There's a secret there.

Sometimes parents keep too many secrets from their children and thus the child imagines ones that do not exist. "Am I adopted?" wonders the child, "and are they afraid to tell me?" "Is

there some serious trouble in the family of which I am not aware?" The child might even be afraid to ask for fear of having confirmed that which is most dreaded.

There is a reciprocal bond between secrecy and emotion. Secrecy makes things valuable. On the other hand, many important things take on an air of secrecy because they are discussed only in confidential tones. When I had laryngitis earlier this spring, some people thought that I was being very confidential in my conversations with them because all I could do was whisper. They thought I was telling them secrets. Frequently, I found people would soon be whispering back to me, and we would be talking in softer and softer tones.

There's always been a close relationship between religions and secrets. Various religions have included secrets that are revealed only to members. Even today, only Mormons can go into the Mormon Temple in Salt Lake City, while non-members can go into the Tabernacle only. In the Old Testament, when the temple in Jerusalem was there, only the high priest could enter the "Holy of Holies."

Every church has rites and rituals whose meanings seem shrouded in secrecy. Fraternities, sororities, and fraternal orders like the Masonic Lodge and others have their secret initiations, passwords, and handshakes. Each symbol, each formula, has a secret meaning which confers upon it a kind of sacredness.

When individuals join such fraternal orders, they take an oath never to reveal the sacred secrets to the uninitiated. So, what does all this about secrets have to do with our Christian faith?

The first point is — for our natural development as an individual in God's image, on reaching a certain age, each child needs some secrets and will have even more as the child grows up. Most parents are irritated when they realize that their child is hiding something from them. They do not understand how necessary it is to the child in order for him or her to become an individual. What they understand very well is that the child is beginning to escape from them, and their irritation is a very natural revolt against this breaking away of their child.
To be able to have something private and secret is a characteristic of being an individual in one's own right. The parents who deprive their children of their private life prevent them from becoming individuals. As a child of God, every person, to feel respected as an individual, needs to feel absolutely free to say what he or she wishes and to keep secret what he or she wishes.

As I mentioned earlier, a certain feeling of power is always attached to the keeping of a secret. If we parents can trust our children enough to let them have their secrets and to not always be questioning them in detail, then they may not have to show their independence in more dramatic ways in their adolescence and teenage years. One advantage of a young person going away from home to college or at least living away from home is that he or she develops a private life in this way.

So, secrets are a part of our natural development as human beings in God's image and are not to be denied. And secrets give us some power.

The second point about our secrets is this — we can lose the power that a secret gives us if we tell our secret to the wrong person. That's what the story of Samson and Delilah is all about that we read earlier from the Book of Judges in the Old Testament. There are some people we can trust with our secrets, and there are some people we cannot trust.

It was Delilah's assignment as an enemy agent to get the secret of Samson's power. After misleading her for a time by giving her false information, Samson finally gave in and told her the secret of his power. He had been dedicated to God from his birth, and the symbol of his dedication and commitment was in the fact that he had never shaved or cut his hair. Thus, if anyone would cut off all his hair, he would become weak. Delilah now had his secret. She arranged to have his hair cut while he was sleeping, and he was then captured by the enemy.

There are some people we can trust with our secrets and some we cannot. We'll be talking more about this in detail in next week's sermon.

And there's another matter in this telling of our secrets that's more than a question of trust. There are some who cannot bear our secrets, or they are not ready to hear them. Personally, I'm glad that I do not know all of my children's secrets. Some of them, I'm sure I couldn't bear. In the same token, my children might not be able to handle some or all of my secrets.
Jesus knew this about we human beings and our secrets. He said to his disciples at one point, "I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now." A paraphrase might be, "I have yet many secrets to tell you, but you are not ready for them now."

In the story read earlier from the Gospel of John, some of Jesus' followers were urging him to go to Jerusalem for a religious festival and there to demonstrate his power. They said to him, "For no one works in secret if he seeks to be known openly." But Jesus knew that many people at that festival were not yet ready for his secret to be revealed — the secret that he was God's love fully expressed in a human being. So Jesus said, "My time has not yet come."

Some people are ready for our secrets and some are not. Only God can bear all of our secrets and still love us. Amen.