Sunday, July 20, 1986
YOU AND YOUR SECRETS (No. 2 in a Series)
Matthew 6:1-4

Last week, I began a sermon series on the subject of "secrets." I noted that we all have a need to have some secrets. It's connected with our desire to be an individual. Thus, as little children, we begin to have some secrets from our parents and from others in authority. Then, we know something that others do not know. For our natural development as an individual in God's image, we all have some secrets.

This morning, in the second sermon in this series, we are going to look at how some of our secrets affect us and to whom we might tell some of our secrets and what secrets to keep to ourselves.

When I was a teenager, I read a novel that I have never forgotten. It had a deep effect on me. The author's name was Lloyd C. Douglas. Perhaps some of you here this morning, or listening on the radio, have read some of his books. His most well-known book is one called "The Robe." It was made into a movie many years ago and is the story of what happened to the robe that Jesus wore before He was crucified.

However, the novel that made such a deep impression on me was entitled "The Magnificent Obsession." Part of the story in that novel has to do with secrets. Let me explain. One of the main characters, Dr. Wayne Hudson, who is on the edge of failure and in a 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 eccentric but talented sculptor, Clive Randolph. Sensing the doctor's state of mind, Mr. 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. Later on in the story, we see that this "secret" does indeed turn the doctor's life completely around.

At no place in the novel is the "secret" fully and explicitly stated, but when pieced together, it runs something like this: most of us live depleted lives. That is, our lives have a certain kind of emptiness. Some of our lives are weak, lack zest, are apprehensive, pessimistic, afraid, even neurotic. The reason is that when we perform a good deed, we tend to 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 for our goodness 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, even to ourselves if we can, with the result that the "credit" for this kind of action remains with us and accumulates. It builds up within us and can poison us.

Thus, persons who follow this kind of life, and many of us do, are chronically bankrupt. We have no confidence or joy in our living, and we lack creativity. Furthermore, we find that we have to spend too much of our energy pretending, covering up, protecting ourselves, guarding ourselves, afraid of being found out, of being known as we are deep down. Thus, we may not have much energy left for anything else. Such people are usually tired, seem 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? The alternative is to simply reverse the whole strategy. We then confess, admit, and thus divest ourselves of our weaknesses, our errors, our sins, our meanness, our fears, and our doubts; and at the same time, we hide, we conceal, we keep secret our charities, our good deeds, our virtues. Thus, 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 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 less afraid, less 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 saw it in our text for this morning, from the Sermon on the Mount.

Jesus said, “Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them, for then you have no reward from God. Thus, when you give alms, that is, when you do any kind of good works, let no one know about it, keep it a secret.” “Be so secret,” said Jesus, “that your left hand does not know what your right hand is doing.” In other words, don’t even pat yourself on the back.

Jesus went on to say, “This is what the hypocrites do — they boast about their goodness so that they can be praised by other people. They then have their reward.” It is the praise of others which doesn’t last very long and is soon forgotten. In fact, said Jesus, in the long run, it is really no reward at all.

Now, what does all this have to do with us and our secrets? Simply this: the text is saying, and many persons have discovered the truth of Jesus’ teaching, 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 much of our energy is wasted. But if we reverse the process and do good deeds, but do them secretly and keep them secret, then we become that kind of person, and God’s Spirit works in us more fully.

So, there are some secrets we should tell and some we should keep always to ourselves. Let’s look at this now from another angle.

Last week, I noted that having and keeping a secret is one of the first steps in the formation of our individuality. Now comes the second part of that process — being able to tell a secret to a freely chosen confidant is the second step in this formation of the individual.

Freedom is what makes the individual. Keeping a secret is an early assertion of freedom; telling it to someone that one chooses is going to be a later assertion of freedom of even greater value. A person who cannot keep a secret is not free. But a person who never reveals it is not free either. Remember, we are now talking about revealing those secrets to someone we freely choose, and we are not going to reveal to anyone the good deeds we have done.

By opening up, by telling one's secrets — but freely this time — and to those people we believe we can trust, one becomes personally linked with those to whom he or she reveals them and becomes fully a person thereby. We are individuals and each one of us unique, yet we are not fully persons until we are also connected with others, and telling secrets connects us.

So, secrets, in a sense, separate us from others and confirm our individuality, yet we also have to be able to give ourselves to others in order to be fully a human being. This double action of withdrawal and giving of self is repeated throughout a person's life. In order to give one's self, it is first necessary to possess one's self; but it serves no useful purpose to possess one's self if it is not in order to be able to give one's self.

And since, as we have seen, we are our secrets, it then follows that if we are able to freely tell someone we can trust of our weaknesses, of our sins, our fears, our failures, then we are on the way to being free of such things. That's what the word "confession" is all about. If we confess our sins, we are on the way to being free of them.

There is now overwhelming evidence to show that the breakthrough to healing, to becoming a new person, a forgiven person, to being released, to being free, comes from confession. Part of the success of any counseling situation is that the person seeking help is finally able to tell the deep secrets that have for so long been 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 that person wanted to be rid of for years and years.

There are people who appear on the exterior to be secure and unafraid, but who deep down want to say to someone they can trust, "If you only knew how tormented I am," or, "If you only knew the bad things that I have done."

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 or her sins or failures and weaknesses and fears is utterly alone. A person who is alone with his or her good works is a different matter.

You are your secrets!

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

So, part of our process of maturing as human beings and as Christians is that we have to learn little by little this delicate and significant game, this game of secrecy and openness, of silence and of speech; how far one can go in telling secrets to this person or that person, and where one must stop. As Jesus knew, some people cannot bear all that we would like to tell them. It is quite an art, this revealing of secrets, and knowing to whom we can tell them, and like all arts, it is learned at the price of many trying experiences.

In our significant relationships with others, there is at every moment, without our even being aware of it, a small measure of our personal secrets we reveal and a small measure that we keep.

One becomes more fully a person by means of these genuine and intimate encounters. That's what deep friendships are all about. We are enriched by them, and part of it comes from our telling of secrets to friends we can trust. As Jesus said, "It is by giving of one's self that one finds one's self." To tell a secret is to give one's self. It is a most precious gift. For most people, that is one of the greatest and most beautiful experiences of adolescence — this age when we make the passionate discovery of the value of friendship — this real communion which is established by a mutual gift of secrets.

We've been talking mostly about the telling of secrets and the fact that we are to tell of our weaknesses, our failures, and of course, there are other kinds of secrets. But the good deeds that we do are to be kept secret — for you are your secrets.

Now, however, I need to say a little about the receiving of a secret. To receive a secret constitutes an enormous responsibility always. A confession, which may constitute a remarkable liberation for an individual if he or she is sure the secret will be kept, will, on the other hand, be destructive if the secret is disclosed. When you receive a secret from someone, it is a sacred trust, never to be revealed without his or her permission.

In the story, "The Magnificent Obsession," Dr. Hudson takes the advice of the artist named Randolph and begins to do good works in all sorts of quiet ways, but always in secret, and his life does change. It is filled with a joy and peace that he had never known before. His doing good in secret becomes his "magnificent obsession."

Jesus Christ tells us that the same thing can happen to each one of us. You will become what your secrets are. Amen.