Sunday, July 27, 1986
GOD'S SECRETS AND OUR SECRETS (No. 3 in a Series)
Psalm 139:1-12; Exodus 33:18-23; Romans 11:33-36

All of us have our secrets, some of which we have never revealed to any other human being. In fact, we humans seem to have a need for secrets. As I pointed out in the first sermon in this series, having secrets and knowing how to keep them to oneself and to be able to give them up willingly to someone we trust is an important part of the development of our individuality. It's part of our becoming an individual in God's image. So it is that early on, children begin to have secrets from their parents and from others.

Last week, in the second sermon in this series, I noted that we tend to become what our secrets are. Thus, if we keep our sins, our weaknesses, and our failures a secret, we become like that. However, if we do good deeds and keep them secret, we become good from the inside out. You are your secrets. We all need people to whom we can make our confession. We need to be able to freely tell someone we can trust our weaknesses, our sins, our fears, and our doubts. But when we do good, according to Jesus, we are not to let our left hand know what our right hand is doing.

Today, we are going to explore this matter of secrets further by looking at God's secrets and our secrets.

According to the Bible, with God we have no secrets, and this fact has strong implications. The most powerful means of getting to know ourselves is to allow ourselves to be examined by God. That is, to be in a relationship with God, for God knows us better than we know ourselves. We can hide things from ourselves and others, but not from God.

Long ago, the writer of the Psalms was aware that before God we have no secrets. Listen again to some of the words of the 139th Psalm:
"O Lord, thou hast searched me and known me!
Thou knowest when I sit down and when I rise up;
Thou discernest my thoughts from afar.
Even before a word is on my tongue, lo, O Lord,
thou knowest it altogether.
Whither shall I go from thy Spirit? Or whither
shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend
to heaven, thou art there. If I make my bed
in hell, thou art there.
If I say, 'Let only darkness cover me, and
the light about me be night,' even the darkness
is not dark to thee, the night is bright as
the day; for darkness is as light with thee."

God knows all our secrets, the good and the bad. Jesus said, "Even the hairs of your head are numbered." "Not even a sparrow falls to the ground without God knowing it." There are no secrets from God.

That is what upsets many people! "What provokes me," said a very devout woman, "is that God always has the last word."

The paradox is that God knows all our secrets, yet according to our faith, we are to bring our secrets to God. God knows all our needs, all our desires, all our fears, our weaknesses, and our hopes, and yet God wants us to express them in our prayers.

Why pray then, since God knows all? As I mentioned in last week's sermon, when we tell a secret to another person we trust, it brings us closer together. It's another way of acting out our connections, and it strengthens that connection. Even more so, it is with us and with God.

Let me try a human analogy. As a parent, I sometimes knew things about one of our children which that child was not aware of. Let's say, for example, the young person came in later one night than expected. I knew the time the daughter came in, and it wasn't a reasonable hour, yet I said nothing. The daughter perhaps thought it was her secret, and I did not let on that I knew her secret. Or she suspected all along that I knew, but I hadn't said anything about it, nor did I question her. Then maybe a day or so later, she told me of her own free will — her telling it made our relationship closer. She had enough trust to tell what had happened. She thought, "He knows anyway, so I might as well tell him and get it off my mind."

That's what telling God our secrets does — it strengthens our relationship with God, even though God already knows the secrets. Because God respects our person, God waits for us to tell our secrets ourselves, freely. Our telling of the secrets is a demonstration of our love and confidence.

God's waiting, infinitely patient and discreet, is very moving. God is waiting to be our confidant, even though God already knows everything about us. And when we make an especially painful confession to God, there is healing in our making that confession, even though God already knows what we are confessing. By confessing it to God, we feel a complete release, for it is to God that we are ultimately responsible. Furthermore, we know that God always forgives us!

There is also a reciprocity in this matter of our secrets and God's secrets. The more we reveal ourselves to God, the more God is made known to us. We in this life will never know all of God's secrets, and we're going to talk more about that in a few moments. But God does reveal many secrets to us. That's part of God's loving nature.

God carries on a continuing revelation. This is at the center of the biblical story, in both the Old Testament and the New. Some people seem to experience God more fully than others, and that's mainly because they let God experience them more completely.

It is our faith as Christians that God has most fully expressed the divine nature in the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Here we see God focused most completely in a human being. Here we see the love of God in a human being dwelling among us. Here we see the communication of God's secrets with God taking the initiative. Revelation is the communication of God's secrets by God.

In spite of the fact that we come to know some of God's secrets, we never know them all. In fact, I suspect that most of us would not want to know all of God's secrets. It would be too much for us to bear. In the Old Testament of the Bible, we are told that no person could stand to see God face to face. I suppose it would be something like being able to see everything that is around us at once, or hearing all the sounds that are around us. What happens, of course, is that our eyes in conjunction with our brain screen out, or filter out, much that is around us. We only see a small portion of what there is to see. In the same way, we only hear a small portion of what there is to hear. Certain animals, for example, like dogs, can hear sounds that our ears

do not pick up. Other creatures are able to see things that we cannot see and smell things that we cannot smell. If we could experience all that was going on around us, we wouldn't be able to stand it. Perhaps it would be something like that if we could see God face to face.

When Moses first encountered God's holiness in the form of a burning bush while he was tending his father-in-law's sheep, God warns Moses, "Do not come near! Put off your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." And we are told that Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God!

Then later in the life of Moses, there is that wonderful story read earlier in our scripture lesson for this morning from the book of Exodus. At this point in his life, Moses has come into a close relationship with God. Yet Moses wants more.

In the story, Moses has been talking with God, and we are earlier told that his relationship with God was so intimate that God spoke to him as a man speaks to his friend. But Moses is not satisfied. He wants more reassurance from God. He wants to penetrate more deeply the mystery that surrounds God's holiness. He wants to know more of God's secrets. God has promised Moses, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest."

But it is still not enough, this reassurance. So Moses said to God, "Show me your glory." But God told him, "I will make all my goodness pass before you and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy." "But," said God, "you cannot see my face." That is, you cannot penetrate all of God's secrets. You wouldn't be able to stand it. And then the story goes on, and God tells Moses to stand by a certain rock, and while God's glory passes by, God will put Moses in the cleft of the rock and will cover him until God's glory has passed by — the implication being that no one can stand God's glory that close. And then said God to Moses, "I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen."

So Moses can only see the backside of God — that's close enough. What a beautiful story and metaphor. There are some of God's secrets we cannot penetrate in this life. That's part of the holiness, the mystery, and the sacredness of God. St. Paul put it this way in 1 Corinthians 13: "For now we see in a mirror dimly."

All religions have had a sacred sense of the secrets of God, the esoteric. Great mystics, those who seem to penetrate most deeply into the secrets of God, speak of God's secrets prudently, with reserve and with difficulty. Some of the greatest secrets are inexpressible. At times in the encounter with God, we have the impression of discovering life's secrets, but we also sense that it is incommunicable. Albert Einstein liked to say, "Subtle is the Lord, but malicious He is not."

Like Moses, we can see at most only the backside of God. We need more of this sense of sacredness and mystery in our time, and with it a humility and tentativeness. We need it as a precaution for those among us who want us to believe that they know all there is to know about God and that God's will is not only for them, but for all of us. And some of them are determined to force that interpretation of God's will on us. They act as if they know all of God's innermost secrets and make such foolish statements that having two women in the race for Nebraska governor are signs of God's curse on people for being willing to let women lead them.

It reminds me of a professor at Harvard who told of receiving a manuscript from one of his young students with an accompanying letter in which the youth said that he intended to write

several books and that this was only the first of them, in which wrote the youth, “I have explained the universe.”

As Christians, we are rather to have a healthy distrust of dogmatism. Beware of those who imply they have seen God face to face and are always certain they know exactly what God’s will is for all things. Harry Emerson Fosdick put it this way, “Whenever you see anyone standing over against the mystery of life, shipping off finalities as though he or she could settle it, distrust that person. Indeed, let us make our distrust of dogmatism comprehensive so that it includes both the dogmatic religionist and the dogmatic irreligionist.” Sometimes, however, I believe the dogmatic religionist is more dangerous because he or she claims to speak for God.

One reason for the popularity of religious cults and sectarian churches in every age is that they promise all the answers with complete certainty. They claim to know all of God’s secrets. There is no mystery to which they do not have the answer. But like Moses and all of us, they can see only the backside of God.

Such people, in their talk with God, seem almost too chummy, too intimate, too informal, as if they talk to God face to face. They imply that they “have God,” as if God were some commodity or genie in a magic lamp or good-luck charm carried about in one’s pocket.

No set of words, no creed, no confession, not even the Bible itself can totally explain the mystery of God or all of God’s secrets. As St. Paul said, “We have this treasure in earthen vessels.” I believe that a degree of uncertainty about the nature of God and God’s secrets represents a healthy respect for the danger of substituting human forms for holy substance. It represents a respect and a reverence for a sense of mystery, of the sacred, of God’s secrets, which always surround God as the ultimate.

It is not the purpose of our Christian faith or the Bible to clear up all mysteries and to have the answers to all questions. Why do we even assume that all questions we ask have answers? Maybe the questions themselves are faulty. Part of the purpose of religion is just the opposite of having answers to all questions — it is to remind us of the sacredness and the mystery of God. St. Paul put it well in Romans 11:33-36, when he wrote: “O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are God’s judgments and how inscrutable God’s ways! For who has known the mind of God, or who has been God’s counselor? For from God and through God and to God are all things. To God be glory forever!” Amen.