



Secrets

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Claire Nevin-Field
Sunday, June 22, 2008*

Matthew 10:24–39:

Jesus said to the twelve apostles, “A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household! So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows. Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven. Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

I love a good story: good stories catch and hold our attention. take us somewhere else and often shake us up with a few surprises along the way. Stories are an integral part of life. They are how we make sense of the world and how we find our place in it. All of us weave a story about who we are. Those stories can be fairly accurate reflections or they can be a little, or even more than a little, off base. Sometimes, if we are lucky, others will point out to us when our inner story seems to be out of whack with our outer story. But sometimes not and we, both as individuals and as institutions, fumble on cocooned in our own mythical narrative, harboring a blind spot that threatens to engulf us.

One of the dangerous aspects of the blind spot, the unexposed, untrue story, whether it is personal, church related or national, is that it is *blind*—it is a secret. A secret that can be individually held or a pact that we all tacitly enter into, agreeing not to expose. But of course not talking about it, not acknowledging it, does not make a secret go away. And it certainly does not mean that it has no effect on us, no power. In fact, the deeper the secret, the more power it holds.

Fred Buechner, in his moving book, *Telling Secrets*, writes openly about his father’s suicide, which occurred when he was a young boy and which had a profound impact on the rest of his life. Buechner writes of his father, “He was cremated, his ashes buried in a cemetery in Brooklyn, and I have no idea who if anybody was present. I know only that my mother, brother and I were not . . . (we) rarely talked about him much ever again. . . . His suicide was a secret we tried to keep as best we could, and after a while my father himself became such a secret. . . . we soon simply stopped remembering at all.*” Buechner struggled for a good deal of his life to come to terms with his father’s death and then his daughter’s anorexia, which he believes was caused, in part, by his own personality distortion as the result of bearing the secret of his father’s death. As a young adult he wrote a short story that obliquely talked about his father.

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*Frederick Buechner, *Telling Secrets*, Harper, San Francisco, 1991.

His mother, he writes, was “furious,” accusing him of breaking a sacred trust, breaking the family secret. Buechner was full of guilt and remorse and was never able to speak or write of his father again until after his mother’s death. As a result of this experience, he observes that two of the most powerful tensions in life are the desire to share our secrets and our almost paralyzing fear of them. “I not only have my secrets,” writes Buechner, “I am my secrets. And you are your secrets . . . our trusting each other enough to share them with each other has much to do with the secret of what it is to be human.”[†] Sharing our secrets, as painful as that may be, allows us to enter more deeply into relationship with others.

We mistakenly believe that the way to impress people, to have and keep friends, relationships, is to project an image, to be someone other than who we are—to keep who we really are a secret. We want people to think we are full of accomplishments and skills. The irony of that of course is that not only does it deepen our sense that people might not like us for who we really are—given the clear evidence that they love this glittering image—but that the more impressive we project ourselves to be, the more intimidated and alienated others tend to feel around us. When we share our struggles, our wounds, our secrets, then we invite people into the truth of who we are, into real relationship.

As many of you are aware, the trial of our Bishop, Charles Bennisson, ended just over a week ago. While the outcome of the trial is unknown at this time, one thing became abundantly clear as the testimony unfolded. And that is that secrets and the shame that tends to follow them destroy lives, to use Jesus’ words, destroy souls. And that destruction echoes on through individuals, families, as lived by Fred Buechner, and larger systems—like a ripple in a pond. Keeping some secrets can lead to self-hatred, despair and isolation—isolation from ourselves and from those who could help us heal. An isolation that is an ugly, dark wound on our souls impeding us from relationship with ourselves, with each other and with God—the source of all healing. As a survivor of abuse myself, I am intimately acquainted with the awful power of secrets, and I would hazard a guess that I am not alone in this room as one who knows all too well about secrets and their aftershocks—whether that secret is domestic violence, alcoholism, incest, adultery, financial misconduct or something else. Some secrets are like an infection—spreading, begetting other secrets, as in the case of the Episcopal Church and our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters, threatening to make the entire system ill. And the cure, of course, is to uncover what is covered—bring what is hidden out into the light.

All of which is very easy to stand here and say, and not at all easy to do. “Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.” This is a wonderfully honest statement about the need for the sword of truth. Given that it is a sword means, unfortunately, that it inflicts pain; whether that sword is directed at our selves, at our church or at our nation, honesty is often painful and difficult. When Jesus talks about not bringing peace but a sword, he is observing that when the sword of truth is applied, peace is not the immediate aftermath; in fact, the aftermath is often turmoil and pain, division and discord. The sword of truth can disrupt and destroy families—members fighting over whether or not a secret should be told; arguing over what exactly happened, who did what to whom—all of which can lead to bitterness and division. The plain, bald truth about ourselves, our churches and our nation is hard, and there are parts of that truth that are difficult to look at—that we would much rather ignore or pretend are external to us. But ignoring and pretending are not where healing is found. As painful and as awful as events such as the trial of Charles Bennisson are, they are the necessary beginning to any hope of wholeness, of salvation. It is only in descending into the depths of pain, deep into the heart of the secret that healing can begin. Healing begins when everything within us is shouting, don’t go there, but we hear the faint whisper, go there, I am with you. Urged on, stirred by the Spirit, in acknowledging, in truth telling, there is healing. There is healing when the alcoholic first begins to think he has a drinking problem, when the abuser recognizes that she is out of control, when the unfaithful spouse faces up to the hurt and pain he is causing—it is then that the Spirit of God breaks into life with a burst of the light of honesty and our wounds have even the faintest of chances of being healed.

We are at times afraid of the truth, afraid that what is revealed about us is too awful to bear, too ugly to love. We close ranks on ourselves, our families and our institutions, thinking we are hiding what is unacceptable. We draw lines around self and family, lines we are totally unprepared to cross. But we don’t need to hide, to draw lines. God is compassionate beyond our wildest imagination. God’s love for us is immeasurable. Do not be afraid—you are worth far more than the sparrows—God counts every hair on your head. There is nothing about you that God does not know and love. As Buechner writes, “The God of Biblical faith is the God who meets us at those moments in which for better or worse we are being most human, most ourselves, and if we lose touch with those moments, if we don’t stop from time to time to notice what is happening to us and around us and inside us, we run the tragic risk of losing touch with God too.”[‡]

The God, as the Collect says, “from whom no secrets are hid,” is also the God who will descend with us into the depths of our being, who will walk with us as we tentatively and fearfully begin to take steps into the recesses of our souls, carrying a small light to illuminate that which is dark. That is not a journey we have to take alone, and there is nothing we can find there that will make us ultimately unlovable, unacceptable to God. True, the immediate aftermath of self-discovery is often intense discomfort at best, but the healing power of self-discovery—the sapping of the strength of the secret—will eventually prevail.

[†]Buechner, *Telling Secrets*, p. 39.

[‡]Buechner, pp. 35–36.

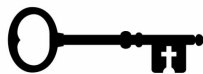
It takes courage to take a long hard look in the mirror, to acknowledge those things about ourselves that we are not proud of, those things we have done or have had done to us that we are ashamed of, those secrets we are carrying-or that are carrying us. As hard as it is, I invite you to take a look in the mirror, to pick up the sword of truth. Sword wielding is dangerous business indeed-but it is the way to wholeness, the way of God.

Buechner, at the end of *Telling Secrets*, writes,

If, as someone has said, we are as sick as our secrets, then to get well is to air those secrets if only in our own hearts, which the Collect for purity asks God to air and cleanse. When our secrets are guilt secrets . . . we can start to make amends, to change what can be changed; we can start to heal. When they are sad and hurtful, we can in a way honor that hurt by letting ourselves feel it as we never let ourselves feel it before, and, having felt it, by laying it aside; we can start to take care of ourselves the way we take care of people we love. To love our neighbors as we love ourselves means also to love ourselves as we love our neighbors. And as we listen to others tell their stories, their secrets we find that we hear our secrets on their lips. (To love) means to trust ourselves with as much kindness and understanding as we would the person next door who is in trouble. Little by little we begin to be able to look at each other's faces, and at our own faces in the mirror, without the intervening shadows that unaired secrets cast. We begin to find a source of new life in what the 91st Psalm calls "the secret place of the Most High," which I believe dwells in all of us as the image of God and in which I believe some part of all of us dwells.

Finally, I suspect that it is by entering that deep place inside us where our secrets are kept that we come perhaps closer than we do anywhere else to the One who, whether we realize it or not, is of all our secrets the most telling and the most precious we have to tell.[§]

[§]Buechner, pp. 73–76.



Open hearts. Open minds.