

I've Got a Secret

You know what, I've got a secret. You know what it is? I'm a Christian. Don't tell anybody. They might get the wrong idea. I go to church on Sunday. I sort of sit on the back row so nobody will notice. I don't dare volunteer to do anything and when the nominating committee calls me to serve on a board, I always say "no" I'm just too busy. Well I am, I have to work sometimes 60 hours a week, well maybe 40 hours, but if there is overtime, I have to work 60. I just don't have time to be involved at church. I read my Bible, well maybe, sometimes. If I am not too tired, I pray before I go to sleep at night. I am real good at keeping the commandments—I don't kill, steal, commit adultery, or lie (well maybe every now and then but I ask forgiveness). Now as far as the commandment that Jesus gave to love your neighbor..I do love my neighbor, well at least some of them, except the ones who let their dog knock over the trash or chase the car down the road and won't do anything about it. Now I have to admit it's hard to love my enemies and pray for them. I have to pray for terrorists? No way! Well maybe sometimes I do pray for my enemies, but I wouldn't want anyone to know that I do..I've got a secret...I'm a Christian. I wear a cross around my neck—Jesus wants me to take up his cross...well I do take it up and put it around my neck. Be a witness to others...Are you crazy? Someone might think I'm a Jesus freak! Sell everything I have and follow Jesus..I like my stuff too much to do that? Give to the poor..I do that, I occasionally remember to bring a can of beans on Loaves and Fishes Sunday. I have to slip in the box without anyone noticing though...remember...I've got a secret...I'm a Christian but I don't want anyone to know! (Illustration idea from Saturday Night Theologian)

Well, my opening illustration is quite to contrary to our gospel lesson today. This gospel lesson follows the scripture where Jesus has just picked his twelve disciples and he is beginning to give them instruction. Not easy instruction a very difficult challenge. He is telling the disciples what they must do to proclaim the gospel, not hide the gospel. "What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops."

The gospel lesson in Matthew is asking that them not only proclaim but not to fear—"don't fear what is covered up it will be uncovered," (v26), "Do not fear those that kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell".. (v28) "So do not be afraid for you are more value than many sparrows." (vs 30) In these verses, Jesus is setting forth a directive to the disciples, that they will be persecuted for their following him. But he also assures, them that God will protect them as he does the sparrows. They just have to do what they have been commissioned to do.

Will this go without consequences? Probably not...Jesus then comes to that verse that kind of x's out that Blessed are the peacemakers verse from the Sermon on the Mount when he says, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword." (v34) What happened to my "peaceful Jesus?" However, if you read the next verses about the family relationships, it really blows your mind! Man against father, daughter against mother, daughter-in-law against mother-in-law, one's foes will be members of his own house. What is that about? Well you see, in Jesus time, even much more than today, the family unit was a much more important structure than it is today. Kate Huey writes: "And broken relationships meant more than

hard feelings and spoiled family functions and fights over inheritances: they could be a matter of life and death in a culture where family identity and connections protect you from the many dangers of life.” (Huey, 2) Another theologian writes “Matthew’s gospel was written in part to encourage synagogue members to risk separation from family and friends in order to follow Jesus. Christianity was not just counter culture, it was dangerous.” (Huey,2) So by Jesus asking these disciples to up and leave their families was a quite a controversial move. In some ways, Jesus represented the sword that of division in the family. If the family didn’t support their discipleship, that family tie was then cut. This still holds in some Jewish cultures today. Elizabeth Beck writes “I love to cite examples of early Christian martyrs and their stories from missionaries about those who suffered for their faith.” In talking to her confirmation class, she says “I told them about a man who was raised in an Orthodox Jewish Family. When he fell in love with the daughter of a Methodist minister and became a Christian, his family said “Shiva,” mourned his “death,” and never had contact with him again. Grandparents, cousins, the whole extended family, were lost to this man. That was the price he paid for becoming a Christian.” This is a modern day story, but imagine what it was like for those disciples. How their faith had to be strong in order to make such a sacrifice as their family to follow Jesus. (Beck,1)

Fred Craddock observes, “Jesus gave his call for loyalty over against the strongest, not the weakest, claim a person otherwise knew, the claim of family love. Jesus never offered himself as an alternative to the worst but to the best in society.” This was Jesus who wanted to touch the most powerful heart-connected part of human life, and that the love of God and the demands of Faith were even more powerful. (Huey, 2)

What does that mean for us? Does it mean in this day and time that we give up our family to follow Jesus? Does it mean Jesus still comes between us and our family? Barbara Brown Taylor, who is one my favorite preachers says this, “I am a daughter, a wife, a sister, an aunt, and each of these identities shape my life, but none of them contains me. I am Barbara, I am Christian, I am a child of God. That is my true identity and all the others grow out of it. You are God’s child first, that is no role. That is who you truly are.” She goes on to say, “We live in a different world with different consequences for believing in God, but one thing that has not changed is our deep desire for kinship. Some of us find that in our families and some do not...Whether we do or don’t, however, Jesus’ demand is the same. We are to love him above all other loves, and if that means losing those we love, we are not to fear, because buried in that demand is a promise: that what we lose for his sake, we shall find again, returned to us more alive than ever before” (Huey,3)

So what is the purpose of my message today? Do you have a secret life as a Christian? Are you hiding out or shouting from the housetops as Jesus challenges the disciples to do? What does it mean to witness? Now I know that I really like to throw out the questions to get your wheels to turning. So in answer to my first question, the purpose of my message today, is to move you from having a “secret” to be a witness for Christ. How do you do it? Do you shout it from the rooftops? Well, that could be one way, but is that the most effective way to get the message out. Witnessing to other the love of Christ can be done in many different ways. Telling others about your personal relationship is one way of witness. Father Larry Gillick writes in his daily reflection on

this passage: “I personally never won an argument about God, religion, spirituality, and the like, mainly because very early in my life I found it a bad investment of time and words. Arguing is different from witnessing. Proclaiming is different from denouncing. On our campus here at this Jesuit Catholic University we have students of various faiths, some who tell others that they are not going to heaven, because they are in this group or that. There is much more witnessing than arguing....Arguing about who is going to heaven and who is going to hell is not of any import. WE hear in the whispering and dark of our personal relationship with Jesus what is to be lived despite our fears of rejection.” (Gillick, 2) Do you ever feel persecuted for what you believe? Do you feel you have to argue with people because you are part of the United Church of Christ and our “liberal” stance on issues? I know from my own personal life, I often back down from my husband and his quite conservative stance. I believe differently than he does, but as Father Larry says, is that arguing or witnessing? I let my views be known, but I know in the end, it’s not worth the argument that will ensue. I do know one thing to be true—that I am called to discipleship and now in a very special way, through my call to ministry. I no longer can be one who can be a “secret” Christian, hoping to slip into church and out without anyone noticing. I have been called to discipleship—to go and preach, and teach and baptize all nations. Is that what God is calling you to do? Maybe not in such a way that you are to called to be a pastor, but you are each called to be disciples, to be bold in your faith. Not to fear, but show Christ shines in you.

You know this past week with Vacation Bible School, we had a very special group of disciples that worked hard to study their lessons they shared with the children, even my conservative husband came out to play the part of rabbi and shared with the children his pictures of Jerusalem, the Mount of Olives, and the Jewish customs and rituals. And in the end did the children learn from these disciples, I think they did. They learned the stories of Jesus’ time, but the also learned love and compassion, the sharing of food and fellowship and play, all part of being God’s kingdom here on earth. These children learned what it means to be followers of Jesus.

Are you ready to be a follower of Jesus? In The Message, the new way of putting this passage is this: “Don’t be bluffed into silence by the threats of bullies. There’s nothing they can do to your soul, your core being. Save your fear for God, who holds your entire life-body and soul- in his hands...This is a large work I’ve called you into, but don’t be overwhelmed by it. It’s best to start small. Give a cool cup of water to someone who is thirsty, for instance. The smallest act of giving and receiving makes you a true apprentice. You won’t lose out on a thing.” (The Message).

So I ask you again, do you have a secret? Are you a “secret” Christian or are you ready to step up to the challenge and be a “daring disciple” for Christ?

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