

## “The Secret We Can’t Keep”

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Text: Matthew 10:26-33

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A preacher was standing in the receiving line after his very first service at church to which he had just been called. Everyone said, “Nice sermon.” A strange looking man came through the line, grabbed the preacher hard and said, “Preacher, that was the worst sermon I ever heard.” The pastor was a little surprised, but went on shaking hands. A few minutes later the same guy came through the line again, shook the preacher’s hand, and said, “That sermon had absolutely nothing to do with the Biblical text.” Later, the same fellow showed up, “Preacher,” he said, “if all your sermons are as boring as that one, I’m never coming back here again.” At that point, a considerate member of the Pastoral Relations Committee drew the pastor aside and said, “Listen, don’t worry about him. He just has a little problem. He repeats what he hears everyone else saying.”

Jesus told His disciples, “What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light. And what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops.” Does that mean that things we hear behind closed doors, we are to share that information in the hallways? Secrets that are whispered to us – do we tell others in a clear, loud voice?

- A secret is like an aching tooth – it keeps you uneasy till it comes out.
- The only way to keep a secret is not to tell it.
- Secrets are a burden. That’s the reason we are so anxious to have somebody help us carry them.

“What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light.” “What you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops.” What was Jesus getting at here, anyway? Was he instructing His disciples on being better gossips? These days, what is there that’s told in the dark that’s worth repeating? Shouldn’t whispers remain whispers? To help us understand this passage in Matthew, we need to back up and review this tenth chapter. Jesus enumerates once and for all the power and authority that is to be accorded His disciples. The entire chapter focuses on the missionizing responsibility Jesus bestows upon His followers. He gathers them together, calls them by name, and preaches an ordination sermon. He invites the twelve to be extensions of His own ministry – healing the sick in body and spirit – and to expect nothing in return for their efforts, except perhaps, violence and persecution. After painting a fairly bleak and fearful picture of what they may encounter on their journeys, Jesus leaves His disciples with words of encouragement, empowering them with assurances of strength and ability.

Being a disciples of Jesus, then, means persecution – persecution (ridicule, threats, fear for their lives). That was true of Jesus’ followers during His lifetime, and true also of followers a generation or two later when Matthew was writing. That meant that the gospel message wasn’t popular – that the disciples were under pressure – put into fear-producing situations, they met in the dark and dared to only whisper their messages to each other. That is why Jesus tells them to tell in the light what they hear in the dark and proclaim from the housetops that which has been whispered.

We 21st Century North American Christians don’t have to deal with persecution. As a church, as individuals, we enjoy great freedom when it comes to our faith. We worship where we choose and how we choose – we don’t face torture or imprisonment or death threats because we exercise our faith. We can speak out of our Christian convictions without fear of physical harm. No, persecution is not the church’s problem today in North America. The church’s problem in our day is one of being ignored!

We’re one voice among so many today, and more often than not, we’re a voice that gets tuned out. Instead of being a major player in setting the agenda for society, the church has found itself merely loitering in the hallways where real power is exercised. Our role is marginal at best. We talk a great game on Sunday, but at the end of the service, a drawbridge goes up, and the Sunday morning language doesn’t fit in with the Monday morning world.

When I was serving a church in Kansas City I had several occasions to offer the opening prayer for the City Council of Kansas City, Missouri. The mayor’s office called every so often and wanted different clergy to participate. I’d get dressed up and drive to the downtown area – wander around the city hall building – find the Council chambers – and there visiting with each other would be men and women whose names I had read in the paper – people who were involved with the management of Kansas City, Missouri, people who routinely met and made decisions that affected the lives of hundreds of thousands of people. The mayor – Mayor Berkley – would walk in just before the meeting was to begin, introduce me to the council, and say that I would

offer the invocation. Council members would stand and I'd offer my prayer – being mindful that several religious traditions were represented in that room. After I was done praying, the council would be seated, the mayor would shake my hand, and thank me, and then they didn't know what to do with me. I was welcome to stay, but I felt awkward and so did they. In their minds I had pronounced God's blessing on their meeting and that was enough. Having had a religious opening, the meeting could proceed on to secular business. The only times clergy were ever specifically invited to City Council functions was times when someone was needed to pray.

Please don't misunderstand me, I'm happy to pray for any group anytime, but it becomes a problem when that's all the clergy or the church is asked to do or asks to do. You know when the church has been under persecution, the church has been a force to be reckoned with – oftentimes, the body of Christ gives its best witness when in a minority position – maybe we need a little persecution today. The church needs to get off the sidelines and get into the game – we need to be part of the agenda – not just the opening prayer.

Perhaps the major reason the church has become marginalized, why our voice is no longer listened to is there is no voice to listen to! Often we are silent – silent because of our concern or fear over results. We often hesitate to speak God's truth to others because we're not sure how they'll react. We think to ourselves, "What will happen if I invite my neighbor to church? What will my co-workers think if I talk about my faith? How would people in our community react if I spoke out on a particular issue?" Why are we so careful about what we say about our faith lives, and so loose about what we say about everything else? Why can we yell and scream and sing and cheer and dance in the aisle and wear team emblems and colors, but we wouldn't dream of showing that kind of emotion or demonstrate that kind of fanatical support for our faith or our church?

Why can't Christians be as gregarious in the gospel as we are in our gossip? Why are we so bad at keeping secrets about our neighbors and our church and our family and so good at keeping the biggest secret in the world – the good news of Jesus Christ? Did you hear about the person passing on dripping juicy news to another person? The listener was intrigued and wanted to know more. "I can't tell you any more," the informant replied, "I've already told you more than I heard." Most of us are not too good at keeping secrets – unless it's the one secret we are supposed to tell – the world's best-kept secret – God's love for us made known in Jesus Christ!

What would it mean for us to lay claim to the promise that God's truth will prevail or as Matthew tells us that there is nothing secret that will not become known, that we aren't to be afraid of the results, for God's truth will ultimately prevail. Can we lay claim to the promise that we have nothing to fear from speaking with boldness the message that we've received. As Diogenes said, "Truth is like light to sore eyes." What would it mean then for us to let loose in the room – the Word of God. To utter the words about God's love and salvation and let them take off in the light? To remember that God is in charge of the results – not us – and that just the act of speaking sets God's word in motion?

What would it mean to others to take a whispered message and proclaim it from the roof of the courthouse or the Meadowlark Hills – or the Law Enforcement Center, or the hospital or Kansas State University, or our neighborhood or wherever. Remember, just the act of speaking sets God's word in motion. The proclamation of God's word belong to all of us – not just to us clergy – God's word can go with you as a layperson where we as pastors cannot. You can speak where we cannot You can reach those we cannot.

Telling in the light what has been said in the dark, proclaiming in an audible voice that which has been whispered, is not an optional exercise. Consider these words of Jesus, "Everyone who acknowledges me before others, I will acknowledge before God, but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before God in heaven."

Did you hear the warning in those words? He warns you and me about being a hypocrite. But it's not what you might think. We tend to think of a hypocrite as one who is pretending to be a believer when one is not – pretending to be a disciple when the heart and mind are set on other values. That definition of a hypocrite is what some use as an excuse to stay away from church. "Oh, they're just a bunch of hypocrites at that church." "They're not really Christians, they just pretend to be." That's not what Jesus is getting at here – He's warning about something far worse – reverse hypocrisy – pretending not to be a disciple when in reality one has made a commitment to follow Jesus. For you see, in the eyes of Jesus, pretending to be a Christian is far less dangerous than pretending not to be.

O God, open our hearts, untie our tongues, turn us loose with the Gospel. Amen.