

SECRETS

Ash Wednesday – March 9, 2011

And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

SECRETS. SECRETS.

Hazel was an elder in her church. She was a Sunday School teacher. She was a stalwart in the church kitchen. In her congregation, no one was more respected as a leader than was Hazel. Beside all those churchy things, she was a grandmother. Her hair, because of her age, had grown gray but, you know, she kind of fixed it up with that blue rinse. Hazel had eight decades under her belt. She was gentle, and she was thoughtful, and she was always interested in others...and, at least to me, she never seemed to be interested in herself.

And I had the joy of getting to know her because I was, at least for a couple of years, her student pastor. Because Hazel was so very active in that church, it didn't take us very long to meet and to get to know each other. Several months later, we found ourselves working on a project together and, as we worked on that project, Hazel began to tell me how much her church meant to her...how much her church had done for her. And then she told me her secret. In her grandmotherly voice she said to me:

I was a prostitute. The church saved me. The church saved my life.

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You know how the conversation goes when you meet a friend on the street:

Hey Randy! How are ya? You're peachy? Are ya? Okay.

Randy said he's peachy. I might have said, if it was the other way around – reversed – if you would ask me: *Hi, Chuck. How are you?* I might have said: *I'm fine.*

But, you know, the truth is that maybe Randy isn't really peachy. Maybe Randy is worried about work...or maybe he's not feeling very well...or one of his kids is in a crisis...or maybe he just doesn't know how to bring up that very difficult topic that he's been tiptoeing around with Connie.

You know how it is. Sometimes when we say we're peachy, or when we say we're fine, we're really just pretending; we're putting on that happy face. And what we're doing really is fooling our friends and, maybe, maybe we're fooling ourselves because, you know, if we can say when somebody asks us *How ya doing?* – if we can say *Fine*, then, you know, maybe it will be so.

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Jesus' point this evening is very simple, and it has three parts. First of all, we all have secrets. Some of them gnaw at us and diminish us everyday because they're always on our minds, no matter how we wish they weren't. And some of those secrets have been so submerged in us that we don't even realize they're still a part of us. That's the first part of Jesus' simple point: We've all got secrets...all of us.

Second, God knows every one. God knows each of the secrets. We can pretend with others. We can tell the world that we're fine, but we can't pretend with God. We can even fool our friends and our family members, but we can't fool God. We can't pretend with God.

And third, Jesus' simple point is that we can't be spiritually healthy until we face what God already knows...until we're honest with God and, in the process, we become honest with ourselves.

So Jesus says:

When you pray, pray in secret, where God is. Pray honestly to God, not pretentiously in public so that others will be impressed. And when you pray in secret, pray that God's goodness will prevail and fill the whole world. Let that be your prayer.

And when you give gifts, give those gifts in secret where God is, so that only God knows...so that the only purpose of the gift is to do God's work and not to dazzle others.

And when you fast, fast in secret, where God is, so that God alone knows the cost of our commitment. Don't fast moaning, and groaning, and whining, and complaining, and looking miserable all day long so that others praise you for your piety. Fast in secret so that others might eat.

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What are your secrets? What are the secrets that no one but God knows about you? What are the secrets that you harbor in your hearts that keep you from loving with that whole heart and serving God with all your strength? What are your secrets?

This evening I want to invite you to take that little piece of purple paper and on it write one word. Draw a little picture that only you understand; a word or a picture that represents your secret. And no, we're not going to collect them. Instead, I want you to take it with you. File it away and keep it with you through this Lenten season. Keep it with you as long as you need to this Lent until you're ready to let it go. And, when you're ready, take it out and tear it up...burn it...shred it...get rid of it. And, as you do, know the freedom and the joy of forgiveness.

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In this Lent, let us give them up to our God. Let us release them and, in the places that they leave empty in our lives, let God fill those places with grace, and peace, and hope, and joy, and love. As Jesus says:

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart shall be also.

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