

"A Secret You Can Share"

Isaiah 42:5-9; I Corinthians 2:1-10

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

February 14, 2016 – 1st Sunday in Lent – Rev. Ronald Botts

In one of Mark Twain's short stories he tells of a man who returned to a small town. Now he had visited there only once, and that about a year before. On this occasion he stayed just briefly and made but one call, on an officer of the local bank. Actually, the banker never saw the stranger, but instead found a sack that he left with a note attached.

The letter said that the bag contained 160 pounds of gold. This gold was to go to an unknown resident of the town who had helped the stranger when he visited earlier. The only condition for claiming the bag was that the recipient be able to repeat the kind remark he made at that time.

The instructions further stipulated that, inside the sack, was a sealed envelope which contained the remark. Neither the sack, nor the envelope, was to be opened before the person identified himself as the one who had assisted the stranger. The time and place for claiming the reward was to be in a mass meeting at the town hall thirty days after the day the sack was left.

When an account of the mysterious bag of gold was published in the local newspaper, it stirred up public interest like few things ever had done there before. Everyone tried to recall if it had been they who had been helpful to some stranger in the past year. All thought about the gold and what they could do with it.

The story became so big that it spread across the country through a wire service article. Now the eyes of the whole country were turned to the little town of Hadleysburg and the meeting to be held there. Who would lay rightful claim to the gold? The townsfolk always thought highly of themselves as an upright community, perhaps better than most; now all America would soon know it. So they swelled with pride as the big day approached.

When everyone assembled at the town hall on the prescribed day, something unexpected happened: not just one person stepped forward to recite what they had said, but a second, then a third. In all, nineteen of Hadleysburg's leading citizens each claimed to have made the remark to the stranger in need. They couldn't all have said it, and so it was obvious to everyone, including reporters from across the nation, that the town's reputation for integrity was being called to question.

As it turned out the stranger's actual intention was not what it seemed. The story had been fabricated to point out the hypocrisy of the town. Indeed he had visited there earlier, but he had not been helped. No one at all offered a kind remark. So the stranger devised a way to get back at this community by exposing the secret and hidden greed of its citizens. He determined to make fools of them in a most public way. What promised to be gold, was actually common lead. Through this ruse he showed the world the true nature of that smug town. He got the last laugh.

In the dictionary one definition for the word *secret* is "something not yet known or discovered." Perhaps Mark Twain applies it here to the secret nature of the townspeople. They had an inflated sense of their righteousness until the real truth was revealed.

This understanding, "something not yet known," also fits Paul's usage of "secret" in today's text. The apostle employs it, however, for quite a different purpose.

While Twain uses the word to lift up something negative that is exposed, the apostle uses "secret" to convey knowledge that is positive when he says "we speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age. But we speak God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory."

Paul tells the people in the church that they have a secret, something which they are coming to know and understand, but which the world at large has yet to recognize. It's the good news of God's love as revealed through the life of Jesus Christ. This is a message of acceptance for who we are, and not based on accomplishment. This is the realization that God has a meaning and purpose for each one of us and is ready to lead us toward fulfilling that potential.

This "secret" or concealed knowledge referred to by Paul is also reflected in the older reading for the day from Isaiah. "I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness."

The prophet Isaiah declares that the people of Israel, the people of God's choosing, are the ones empowered and charged with taking this message of salvation to the ends of the earth. They are to carry the flame of this saving knowledge and share it with the world, so everyone might come to know what they already know. It is a secret that is to be shared; in fact, **must** be shared.

The people of Corinth were certainly influenced by Greek appreciation for knowledge and wisdom. Taken to an extreme, however, it intimates that people must pull themselves up the ladder of knowledge. Paul advises his folks not to think that human endeavor alone will bring them all they need. This life-giving knowledge he speaks of is not waiting inside to be discovered one day on our own.

He writes: "For... no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we [might] understand the gifts bestowed upon us by God." So in brevity, Paul says, it is God's Spirit at work in us which allows us to discern God's activity around us.

Let's take the Bible, for example. It's an interesting book to someone who chooses to study it just as a piece of literature. It has poetry, history, narrative, and songs. It has some humorous sections and others which are dramatic. It has simple passages and those which are harder to understand. While it may be a significant writing to the secular scholar, it has no real power. The Bible loses its full impact if read only through worldly eyes. Only when it is

seen through the perspective of faith does it reveal itself in its entirety. It is secret, hidden, yet to be discovered unless one engages it at a deeper level.

If we try to understand the spiritual world with only our physical senses, it will leave perplexed every time. Even to bring our intellectual side into full play will not be enough. No, only the spiritual can interpret the spiritual, and it comes as a gift. Jesus promised us a helper, a companion, to assist us in following him. The Holy Spirit, omnipresent, is that power... available and accessible to each one of us.

When we allow God's Spirit to be alive within us we can begin to see life in new perspective. Now if you get anything lasting from this sermon it won't be because of my oratory. My desire that this be meaningful to you, no matter how sincere it is, will make no difference at all. You must bring the receptivity to this moment.

Spending an hour here, listening to the readings and interpretation, participating in litanies and singing songs, could seem like the ultimate waste of a Sunday morning, or it can be the most important time spent all week. The world puts no value on this kind of activity, but most of us find that we cannot live as well without it. And in God's wisdom we experience this life-changing, life-sustaining happening not in isolation but in a community of people who are also seeking and also finding, God. We have been given us each other.

Much of life is hard. Every day has its challenges, and some have more than their share. There are plenty of times when we raise the questions "Why does it have to be this way? Why did this happen to me? What lesson can I learn from this? In what way might I better myself, at least a bit, in the living of this day?"

We know there's more to life than the two-dimensional picture of it we see portrayed on TV, and our being here today is evidence that we have come to find or deepen that understanding. God does have a secret, but it's one that's meant for us to know. It is not something intentionally hidden away, impossible to comprehend, but one not fully discovered yet by so many. Most of us are just coming to understand it in fullness ourselves. That reality Jesus both revealed and was part of.

Just as an iceberg exposes only a tiny part of itself through what is seen on the surface, the spiritual side of life has much to be explored and discovered. It requires engagement; you can't acquire it passively. Find that good news of life for yourself, then pass it on to another. It may well be one of life's greatest secrets, but one that is intended to be shared and spread.