

"WHY THE BIG SECRET?"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION

As you read the Gospel of Mark, you pick up the impression that Jesus wasn't turned on by crowds...which is strange for a Messiah who has come to save the whole world. And what's even stranger is that there are several times when He hides the fact that He is the Messiah. When He is recognized by someone, Jesus tells them, "Don't tell anybody. Keep it quiet". You wonder...what's the big secret...and why?

And what makes it even more mysterious is that all of this comes during the time of His greatest popularity, right at the beginning of His ministry, when He is preaching in Galilee, when the crowds are the largest and the enthusiasm of the people most contagious. Mark records it in this fashion,

"At once His fame spread throughout all
the surrounding region of Galilee".

This is the first chapter of Mark's Gospel. Jesus was a tremendous hit in all of Galilee. His fame was spreading everywhere. That's the verse preceding our text for this morning. The popularity and fame of Jesus are expanding, growing everywhere.

DEVELOPMENT

Then follow three incidents, vignettes of His experience in Galilee. First, He goes to the house of Simon and Andrew, the brothers. James and John, the other brothers, are also there. Simon's moth-in-law is in the house sick. Jesus takes her by the hand, lifts her up, and heals her. Just like that. It's a dazzling feat - a miracle.

It was the kind of thing He was doing in Galilee, and the word was spreading about His supernatural powers. His fame was growing. The crowds were getting bigger and bigger. Who could ask for anything more, especially a Messiah who has come to save the people.

And then this scene. It's evening, at sundown, and they brought all who were sick or possessed with demons. Mark says, "The whole city was there at the door". That's a detail not to be overlooked. "The whole city" was there. He healed those who were sick and He cast out the demons of those who were crazy. Then comes this strange verse,

"And He would not permit the demons to
speak because they knew Him".

WHY

Why the big secret? It appears He had it made. Even the enemy...the demons...recognized who He is. They were willing to tell everybody who He is. He's the Messiah. The entire city was there at the doorstep. What kind of a Messiah is it who wants to travel incognito? Hasn't He come to win the world over? So...why the big secret?

Go to the next scene. He's still acting strange. "A great while before day, Jesus went off by Himself". Peter found Him. Simon, he's called at this point in the Gospel..."Simon chased Him down". That's the literal translation of the Greek word. That is to say He abruptly and rudely came upon Jesus as He was praying. He comes running up to Him and says,

"Lord, I'm glad I found You. Where have You been? The whole countryside is abuzz with the news about You. It's the crack of dawn and everybody is up in Galilee walking around...looking for You. You're on a roll, Jesus. Man, I mean it. You're fabulous, really something. You're the biggest thing ever to hit Galilee, that's for sure. Bigger even than John the Baptist and he was plenty big. So come on Jesus...get with it. They're all waiting for you.... everyone in Galilee is searching for You".

And what did He do? Jesus said, "It's time for us to go someplace else". And He turned His back on the crowd, gave up all of that fame, all of that success. When everyone is looking for Him He leaves. And, when somebody recognizes Him He says, "Keep it quiet...don't tell anybody". Well, you can begin to see why some people wondered about Mark's Gospel. What's He up to? What's He doing? Why the big secret? What is Mark trying to tell us.

JESUS DIDN'T LIKE CROWDS

The first thing and perhaps the most obvious thing for me is that Jesus simply didn't like crowds. Wherever He went the crowds were enormous. "His fame spread everywhere. The whole city came out to see Him". Simon adds, "Everybody in Galilee is searching for You". And He walks away from all that. He turns His back on it. You begin to get the impression that He wasn't turned on by crowds.

Which ought to say something to us who follow Him today. Maybe Mark in writing up this account is giving a warning to the Church about success. How many of us assume that the standards for success in the world are applicable as standards of success in the Church?

How do you measure success in the world? You measure it by the volume of sales. You measure it by the attendance of crowds. By the standard of the world, a crowd is always a success. I can't think of any institution in the world that doesn't want a crowd. We all want crowds, even in Church. There isn't a preacher in this world who doesn't want a crowd. In the world a crowd means you're a success.

But, think for a moment, of what a crowd means in the Bible. Take that word "crowd" and look for it in the Bible. In the Bible, crowd has a different meaning. In the Bible, "the crowd" is what Jesus tried to get away from. In the Bible, "the crowd" is those who want to use Him and not follow Him. In the Bible, it will be "the crowd" that on one day will sing, "Hosanna. Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!" And a few days later will say, "Give us Barabbas. Crucify Jesus".

That's what a crowd means in the Bible. Crowds in the Bible are not signs of success. Crowds in the Bible are the signs of the fickleness of the world. Maybe that's why the secret is telling us, "Don't make popularity a sign of success for the Church". The crowd doesn't want to follow Jesus. The crowd wants to use Jesus. So, be careful.

NOT TO BE EQUATED WITH SHOW BUSINESS

Or, Maybe Mark is telling the story

of Jesus in this way in order to tell us that Christianity is not to be equated with show business. It's precisely those deeds that could be labeled spectacular that Jesus is the most uneasy about. Oh, He does them. Mark says He comes casting out demons and performing miracles. But then he adds, whenever He did them, He said, "Keep it quiet. Don't tell anybody".

So, He's obviously not interested in being known as a miracle worker. That's not why He came. He does not win us over by dazzling us with supernatural power so that we have no choice but to bow down and worship Him. That was the temptation, you know. In fact, that was literally "the temptation"...what the temptations in the desert were all about. Remember how the devil tempted Him to turn stones into bread and to jump off the tower. Spectacular feats of supernatural power. And He rejected that.

But the argument for accepting it was certainly cogent enough. In fact, we've heard such arguments many times. Why doesn't God intervene and wipe out disease? Why doesn't God do something to end the hunger? Why doesn't God do something spectacular over the Kremlin to make believers out of them. Or, why doesn't God do something to make my life better? I would believe if He would only give me a signal. The world would believe if it could see something.

The temptation of Jesus was to equate the satisfaction of the crowd with the fulfillment of His mission. And maybe Mark knows that the Church is going to be faced with the same temptation. That is, we're going to be faced with the temptation to confuse the will of God with the attention of the world.

ILLUSTRATION Phil Donahue, in his autobiography, tells of the time he was starting out as a young television reporter. He was sent to cover a mine disaster. It was late at night. Snow was on the ground. It was freezing cold. The rescue team was down in the mine shaft. The worried relatives and friends were gathered at the opening to the mine, waiting anxiously for some word of hope.

Someone began to sing, "What a friend we have in Jesus...." Other people joined in the singing, "...all our sins and griefs to bear..." Still more voices joined in, "...what a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer".

Then it was quiet. A minister stepped out of the crowd and said, "Let us pray...." It was brief but very moving prayer. Donahue said it was such a moving scene that he got goose bumps. The only problem was that it was so cold that the television camera froze up, couldn't use it. Donahue held the camera against his body, rubbed it to get it functioning. He got it working, went to the minister, asked him to repeat the prayer so he could get it on television. The minister said, "No". Donahue said,

"I'm a T. V. reporter. I represent 260 stations. Millions of people will be able to see you and to hear that beautiful prayer."

The minister said, "No".

Donahue said,

"Maybe you don't understand. I'm not representing some

local T. V. Station. I'm with CBS. The whole nation will be able to see this".

The old country preacher said, "No"...turned his back and walked away.

Donahue was dumbfounded and furious. He couldn't understand it. But about a year later he said that it hit him. He wrote that he realized that he was witnessing something called "integrity". He wrote,

"The man wouldn't showbiz for Jesus. He wouldn't sell his soul for TV...not even for national TV...not even, Praise God, for CBS".

"They're looking for You" Simon said to Jesus. They are all here. They're all looking for you. You're a hit. It was precisely then that Jesus said, "Then we'd better be moving on". Because Christianity, you see, is not about show business.

NOT IN GALILEE WITH THE CROWDS, BUT IN JERUSALEM AT THE CROSS

And then I thought of another reason for the secret. I didn't think of it, really...it's obvious if you read the Gospel. It's there for everybody to see. You can't miss it. It says, if you really want to know who Jesus is, you won't discover it in Galilee with the crowds, but in Jerusalem at the Cross.

He says that throughout all the Gospel. Who He is is revealed not in His healings and His exorcisms. Who He is is revealed in His suffering and His dying. That's what it says. And then He drives it home. He says, if you want to be My disciple, which means, if you want to know who I am, because that's what it means to be a disciple, then you will take up your cross and follow Me to Jerusalem. There were not a lot of takers...not then and not now.

I read an article the other day written by Virginia Owen who teaches English at Texas A & M. She said that she assigns her students to write an essay on the Sermon on the Mount. Now Texas is in the Bible belt, and most of her students come from middle class, respectable, conservative Christian homes, so she thought she could get away with that - assigning an essay on the Sermon on the Mount.

What she got back was a surprise to her. What she got back was anger. Someone wrote, "The Sermon on the Mount is stupid". Another wrote, "It's the dumbest thing I ever read". Another said, "It made me feel bad". Another said, "It made me feel bad because I had to be perfect. No one is perfect."

Owen summarized their reactions as being not intellectual agnosticism, which is what you expect from sophomores in college. It was, she said, "down home hedonism" - the real article, the kind of thing that Jesus encountered in the last days of the Roman Empire in the first century. The hedonism that wants to be served, that wants pleasure in all things, that sees sacrifice as an evil, and a disciplined life as useless. A hedonism that knows nothing of loving the neighbor, much less the enemy. That knows nothing of sacrifice for a higher goal, much less giving your life in order to find it. That knows nothing of going out of your way to help somebody else, much less going the second mile. That knows nothing of a demanding ethic, such as "The Ten Commandments", much less an absolute ethic like "The Sermon On the Mount".

Virginia Owen is convinced that we're back in first century times and that it is now the way it was then. So, she says, forget all those statistics about church growth in the Bible belt. Forget all the talk about conversions. Forget all the talk about how many people in the United States believe in God. Forget all the talk about the United States being a Christian nation. What we've got, she said, is people who are waiting for spectacular miracles to solve their problems and make life easier for them. That will assist them in reaching their goals, and support them in what they want to do and not require anything from them.

And here comes Jesus. They flock to Him because He promises to be what they are looking for. He is reputed to have supernatural powers. He can work miracles. And they want that. So the crowds come. They want to make a deal with Him. You give us what we want, and we'll give you what You want. You give us what we want and we will call you "Lord".

"And He turned His back on them
and went on to the next town."

SO, WHY THE BIG SECRET?

So, why the big secret? I think that Mark wrote this Gospel for us. We are the ones who know the secret. That is what it means to be the Church - we know the secret. We know who He really is. Paul defined the Church in that way for the Corinthians. It was one of our readings for this morning. Paul said to be the Church means that we possess a great wisdom, a wisdom hidden from the world. A big secret. It's a secret because the world doesn't understand it. To the world the Gospel appears as foolishness, which is exactly what those students in Texas said it was. To the world the Gospel always appears to be stupid.

So Mark knows that the temptation for us will be to make it acceptable, to make it conform to the world's standards of success, to "give them what they want". That's the rule of all business. "Give them what they want". But it is the death of Christianity.

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE / AUTHENTIC CHRISTIANITY

You know what it looks like, authentic Christianity? Jesus drew pictures of it so we know what it looks like. They are called "parables". There isn't a parable that includes a crowd. Never does Jesus hold up a large gathering of people and say, "Behold the Kingdom of God".

You know what He says the Kingdom of God looks like? It looks like one woman calling on a sick friend. It looks like a man helping a stranger. It looks like a widow giving of her resources in stewardship. It looks like someone forgiving an enemy. It looks like a Samaritan on the road to Jericho stopping to help a wounded Jew in a ditch.

A man was confronted by one of those aggressive Christians who buttonholed him and asked, "Are you a Christian?" The man stopped and thought for a moment. He said, "I really don't know". Then he took a piece of paper and a pencil and wrote some names on it. He gave the paper to the questioner, and said,

"Here. These are the names of people. This name here, the first one, that's a member of my family. This next name, he's a business associate. The

last name, she's my neighbor. Ask them if I'm a Christian."

Because Christianity is not about crowds coming to Jesus. Christianity is about you following Jesus.

PRAYER

Lord, speak to us that we may speak. Tell us where to go and what to do; open our ears to hear the message, and give us the will to do what we are told. Help us to see the opportunities which thou hast given us to continue the ministry of Jesus in the world and then give us the grace and the will to do it, knowing that we are sent into this world where there is trouble and distress and sorrow and sin, to bring something of His light and love into the valleys of the shadow of darkness. In His name we pray.

PASTORAL PRAYER: May 15, 1988

ETERNAL SPIRIT...Father of our spirits and the Father of all mankind. We have come to Your house this day from different backgrounds and for different purposes.

SOME OF US are here because we're feeling the pressure and stress of life in the city...crowding in on us...and we have come to know from past experience that we cannot always handle the "bumps and bruises" of life entirely on our own...that things seem to go so much better for us when we slow down, think of You, and pause to see life from the "higher ground" of worship.

SOME OF US are here because we're lonely. We walk the crowded streets of this city...people pass us by...no one seems to notice...to care. We have "low" moments when we feel that no one loves us, but then deep in our hearts we feel that tug from You that reminds us that You care, that You love us, that our lives are precious in Your sight.

OTHERS OF US are here because at other times and in other places we have felt close to You...we have had a "mountain top" experience, a fleeting glimpse, an inner vision of what life could be if only all people took You seriously and lived by the Words You have given us in the Bible.

AND SO WE ARE HERE....anxious, but uncertain...seeking always to hear Your voice and to put our convictions into action.

LORD, GOD, whatever the reason may be that has brought us here this day, may each of us feel and experience something that will work a miracle in our lives, something that will permit Your peace and power to flow through us into the lives of others.

Help us to slow down that our "restless spirits" may grow quiet and serene as we feel the gentle invasion of Your love.

MAY WE DEPART from this sanctuary of worship spiritually refreshed - with renewed insight, a better perspective, with courage and also with compassion, with faith and also with trust to do battle with the stress and struggles of another week in this city.

May we carry away from here something of Your love for all mankind, and help us to share that love with others - the hurt, homeless, and hungry - the tempted and the troubled - the sick and discouraged and the dying.

All of this we ask in the strong name and the loving spirit of Christ, our Lord.