

PUBLIC SECRET

Today is the last Sunday in the season of Epiphany.
This week we begin forty days of Lent with Ash Wednesday.

The word "epiphany" means disclosure, manifestation, unveiling or appearance. So, how fitting that today's Gospel text describes one of the greatest "epiphanies" ever — the Transfiguration of Jesus, complete with blinding light, a heavenly voice, and visions of Moses and Elijah.

I think both the Matthew and Exodus passages expose a love affair.

There is the dramatic, passionate climb up a mountain.
There are glowing, radiant faces. Love can do that. It can make one's face flush.
Also, both narratives include a personal and direct encounter with God.
God is reaching out for a reason, and that reason is love.
Moreover, God blesses Jesus as God's personal affirmation saying, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with him I am well pleased, Listen to him."

That is a statement of deep, sincere love--true and pure love.

But, it may seem strange that this disclosure concludes in all three synoptic Gospels with a command of secrecy. Jesus told his disciples after the Transfiguration, "Don't tell anyone what you have seen,".

However, this isn't strange. Instead this is another indicator that exposes the depth of the love--The public secret.

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This public secret is known as the Messianic Secret, and it has caused much debate by scholars, over the centuries.

Depending on how you count them, about 15 different times in the Gospels Jesus explicitly suppresses knowledge about his identity. There are at least 13 occurrences in Mark alone.

Jesus conceals knowledge about himself in several different ways.  
Several times he silenced the evil spirits that he exorcised: "he would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was."  
He ordered his own disciples to keep silent about what they had experienced — after Peter's confession of Christ as Messiah, and after the Transfiguration.

Jesus also told some of the people he had healed to keep silent: "Jesus sent him away with a strong warning: 'See to it that you don't tell this to anyone.'"

This is a *public* secret because the message was still shared, yet in a different context. How something is said Makes a Huge difference.

Also, Jesus desired that part of the message was to be suppressed, but not all of it. By labelling it a secret, it was hoped the truer and more vital part of the message / the experience would be shared, and the rest confined / limited.

For example, Jesus wanted to impress upon people the love of God--the power of God's love. He did not want to be known as a superhero or "THE Greatest miracle worker who ever lived", or even the Messiah, in the traditional perception of that role.

That part Jesus wanted suppressed, but I don't think he minded people whispering to each other that they had met a loving man of God and had experienced the touch of God's love.

Privately whispering a message, changes the meaning of the message.  
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To be sure, there are different nuances to a what is a secret.

There are secrets that a meant to be hidden and kept by only a few.
I don't care for those type of secrets.
I greatly appreciate that Edward Snowden publicized those government secrets. Government secrets especially make me nervous.
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Sometimes a secret really isn't a secret, such as when the information is intentionally leaked. Labelling a spin a secret gives it more traction.

Also, there are temporal secrets which is a message that is to be confidential for a short while.

And, there are public secrets for the purpose of minimizing sensationalism --to avoid a misinterpretation being expressed.

That was what Jesus did. He didn't want the miracle or the label to be the message. He had a greater message that he wished to be shared--a message about God's justice, love and grace.  
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Public secrets often arise from expressions of true and pure love.

When someone broadcasts a love message on a billboard, such as at a sports event, it reveals a strong, giddy emotions, including romantic infatuation. Observers are tickled and entertained by such a display, yet the statement is superficial because of the method.

In contrast, when two people say nothing about their mutual affection, yet others can't help but see their interactions and the devotion in their eyes, and start whispering about the couple, they are witnessing a more selfless and deeper love affair. And, that public secret is usually expressed tenderly and respectfully.

The difference is one is more of a "catch"--look what I want and have, and the other is a journey into a deeper, , more sincere love.

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The word love is an umbrella term; it covers lots of things, including shallow fascination and infatuation.

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Here's an illustration from my past:

I attended a large middle school; there were about 4 homerooms for grade 8, alone. The practice there to express romance, called "going steady" was to exchange rings. The girl would wear the boys ring on a string around her neck, and the boy would do the same with her ring--as a way of broadcasting the romantic relationship.

You were likely more sophisticated here in Saskatchewan, at least I hope you were.

Anyways, there was this cute girl named Debbie, and I would smile at her when I saw her in the hallway.

In those days, we didn't have text messaging. Instead, we relied on hand written notes and friends relaying messages.

One day, Debbie's friend handed me note that said, "Debbie would go steady with you if you want to."

Oh my goodness, I thought I was slain by love."

The next day, I gave her friend my ring, and later in the day, I received hers, from the friend.

For nearly a week we wore each other's rings; we were going steady.

And, I was in love.

The whole world could see "we were going steady."

We even went to a basketball game together.

Sadly though, at the end of the week, the same friend gave me back my ring, sharing that Debbie didn't want to go steady with me anymore, and I gave her Debbie's ring.

As breakups go, this one was rather simple, yet it was not without its pain and sorrow.

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The funny part is that I never spoke directly to Debbie. In fact, I never, ever said one word to her, before, during or after our courtship.

I don't think what I was feeling was love, yet that was the moniker for the whole affair, albeit short affair.

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It's a pity that English has only one word for Love, so we need to give it adjectives, such as "true", "real" or "deep".

True / real love is a soul experience. It doesn't need to be broadcasted, and it doesn't blend well with boasting.

True / real love shows; it emanates from the source.

Real love is exposed by the actions and the attitudes--the passionate, compassion.

Real love is a faithful commitment.

Real love is devotion, without asking anything in return.

Real love includes a sincere respect, and respect is part of doing justice.

Real love affirms and validates, and it always assumes the best, even during misunderstandings.

Real / true love does NOT mock, tease or devalue.

Needing to belittle or put someone down because he/she is different, in order to build self up....is NOT loving. That is exploitation.

In addition, true love does not betray, ignore or neglect. Instead, it honours and affirms, as God did for Jesus.

And, true love does Not withhold information.

There are no secrets, except public secrets.

The Messianic secret was Jesus' attempt to make sure the message was shared correctly.

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I think popular Christianity / the cosmopolitan evangelicals are emitting the wrong message, and therefore they are confusing people.

Churches that rave about Jesus and demand conformity are projecting the wrong message. They are NOT emphasizing God's love.

Christians who enjoy and strive for social privileges by wearing their faith on their sleeves, are showing that they fail to understand the nature of God's love.

When an individual loves it comes out as righteousness.

When a faith community loves it is demonstrated through compassion and justice.

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Love is a verb, and action makes a lousy secret.

It's nice to say, "I love you", but if it isn't already obvious, then something is wrong.

When love **HAS** to be stated, then it is merely a hope, a seduction or a misunderstanding.

Moreover, some truths are best seen, and only comprehended when whispered as a public secret.

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When I first became a Mennonite, I was perplexed by the description, "The quiet in the land."

Baptists tend to NOT be very quiet.

However, over time, I've come to appreciate and respect the practice of being the "quiet in the land."

Sharing God's love through service and doing justice is the better way of expression.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote that "the Christian cause will be a silent and hidden affair."

However, I do think some things need to be spoken to the public, such as defending the poor and weak, speaking out for justice, advocating for creation care and explaining the way of peace.

Yet, we need not and Can Not depend on words to tell others about God's love and how that love has touched and affected us.

Love is best kept as a secret--a secret that others can't help but see.

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May our lives decipher the Messianic Secret.

May no one wonder if we truly love our partner or each other.

May everyone who has contact with our church see the secret that we really do love God / that God's love is alive and well among us all and is reaching out to others.

And, may all who witness how we live.... conclude that we are in love.

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And,..... if anyone asks about God's peace, grace and love, then whisper your answer,..... because it's a secret.