

25 August 2019 KEEPING SECRETS First Parish Church

I

I had the pleasure of spending time this summer, with two of my favorite literary characters. Both are women. And, both were “appearing” across the street on the Maine State Musical Theatre stage. One born from the pen of Thornton Wilder and given life as the main character in his 1938 play: *The Merchant of Yonkers*, which was renamed, *The Matchmaker*, and eventually became a movie starring the late Shirley Booth. Then in 1964 it was developed as a musical called, *HELLO DOLLY!* - starring the late Carol Channing, and then 50 years ago it was turned into a movie directed by Gene Kelly and starring Barbra Streisand.

If you are unfamiliar with the stage play, musical or movie; Here’s a quick few lines of character development. Dolly Levi is a busy-body! Ever since her late husband, Ephraim passed away; Dolly has made it her life’s goal to “put her hand in” everybody’s business. It was in the 1969 movie, that composer and lyricist Jerry Herman, took liberties with the original song list and wrote a new song for Barbra Streisand. It was called: *Just Leave Everything To Me*. After a number of choruses about what she can do for other people; she sings: “Life is full of secrets, and I keep them!”

My other favorite secret-keeper comes from the pen of L. Frank Baum, in his classic: *The Wizard of OZ*. Dropping in from the sky; she handles the transition of young Dorothy’s arrival in Munchkinland, calming the young girl, assuring the population of munchkins that Dorothy is not evil, and magically securing the Witch of the East’s magical shoes onto Dorothy’s feet. After a scary run in with the Wicked Witch of the West; Dorothy makes it known that all she really wants is it get back home, to Kansas. I’ll assume most of you know this story? However, I will take a moment and introduce a thought some have never pondered: Glinda, the good witch, kept a very important secret from Dorothy around how she could get herself back to Kansas! Of course, if Dorothy had been told then, what she’s told at the end of the story; the book would have been an article in the *New Yorker Magazine*, and Judy Garland would have gone on to make some other movie in 1939!

Secrets. Most of us have held onto a secret for someone or asked someone to hold a secret of ours. Our secrets run the gamut. From simple, innocent secrets – Being the insider for a surprise party. The one planning the party asks you to hold the secret, while the planner goes about getting things set up . . . And you are the one deflecting suspicions, should any arise. There are dark secrets. Unfortunately, we’re all too familiar with them. Not, perhaps, because they are intimately connected to our personal story. No; these are the dark secrets being made known too frequently in the headlines of our news. Since this is not the type of secrets I’ll talk about this morning; I will just leave us to a quiet, sad acknowledgement of this truth.

And, then there’s the “complicated” secrets. They bear complications because of their attachments to ethical situations, and the dilemmas created by both the asker and the receiver(s).

The ethical piece is most often defined by the situation. Who is asking you to keep the secret? And, what consequences – if kept, might this secret create later?

There's a movie in the theatres called: The Farewell. The plot of this movie deals with a Chinese family who has chosen to keep their grandmother's terminal illness a secret. When the granddaughter comes from the United States to visit; she is told that her grandmother thinks everyone has gathered for a family wedding. The movie deals with the inner struggle the granddaughter has with the family's decision and her relationship with her grandmother. I won't tell you anymore, but I can assure you; this movie is a good portrayal of being asked to keep secrets . . . and dealing with the complications when that request is not wholeheartedly embraced.

This is a complicated secret, because it is layered with the life stories of many more than just the grandmother and the granddaughter. And, this is that kind of secret I experience in today's scripture passage!

## II

This text from Mark's gospel hints at how Jesus wanted his ministry to be revealed. Besides paying attention to what Jesus does and says, it's good to pay attention to Jesus' disciples, and with the people he invites to be a part of his message. But first, a **PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT** to promote our Confirmation program this year, and gently remind the young people to be confirmed that they were to have read the gospel of Mark for their summer reading. And, just in case you not only forgot to read Mark's gospel; let me help you remember the additional task asked of you. Once you finish reading the gospel, or while you are reading the chapters; you are invited to write down 5 to 10 questions you have around things you read, things that might have stood out for you, and/or things that totally confused you?!

That last qualifier for writing down questions is my motivation for today's sermon. I have been reading the gospel of Mark this summer, and there have been times while reading, that I'll stop and ponder what Jesus is demanding of his disciples. Today's short passage was one of those times I stopped. After asking his disciples to tell him who people think he is, and hearing their responses. Jesus then asks: "Who do you say that I am?" Peter says that Jesus is the Messiah. What Jesus says next is like hitting turbulence on a flight while you're sleeping. It's surprising. It's unexpected. It's disturbing! It's the way it's written: He **STERNLY ORDERED** them not to tell . . .

But Jesus' insistence to remain unknown, isn't a one time happening. As early as chapter one, Jesus commands demons, who have identified him as the Son of God, to be silent and come out! In chapter 4, after explaining a parable – dealing with the Kingdom of God, to his disciples; Jesus tells them to keep this understanding to themselves and allow those within hearing distance to remain confused around this message. Chapter 5 finds Jesus raising a child from the

dead, in the company of his disciples. Afterwards, Jesus says, “. . . no one should know about this.” And, after the intimate moment of Jesus appearing alongside Moses and Elijah in a holy apparition, and Jesus’ disciples getting so excited about the sacredness of this place and this moment; Jesus orders them to tell no one about what they had seen!

So now I am fully engaged in “teacher mode”!

Off I go to ask “GOOGLE” about this phenomenon! After a couple false starts with the question, I come across a phrase: MESSIANIC SECRET. This theory came about in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. If this were a seminary class, and I was teaching students the synoptic gospels; I’d delve into this possibility – because Mark’s gospel holds so many moments like the one heard this morning, where the story plays out like the dissonant chords in a gospel harmony. However, this is only a moment to acknowledge my curiosity around something that stood out while reading through the chapters of this gospel.

Some researchers believe that Mark’s gospel looks at Jesus’ awareness of his role in Salvation’s history, and his hope to suppress any great surges of popularity, so that more would see, hear and believe. But the writing, after Jesus restores the hearing and speaking ability of one person shows that his requests were not always followed: The disciples went from this healing moment into the town to tell all what they’d seen! Some pondered the possibility that Jesus’ ministry, as written by the community of Mark, was an expression of what is theologically known as the eschatological tension: The belief that God’s Kingdom is fulfilled in Jesus while on earth, and yet it is to come when the final judgement plays out. Some scholars believe that the writers of Mark’s gospel suggest that this writing style, and the messages sent to his followers, was pointing towards his life of service and his eventual suffering and death. It’s written here, in Mark 8:31-32, <sup>31</sup>Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. <sup>32</sup>He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

If Jesus wants to keep this all under wraps, then why even ask:  
“Who do you say that I am?”

I understand this as the question behind the secret? Scripture scholars believe, that in Mark’s gospel; Jesus asks his followers to not reveal the miracles, nor the core truths of his parables because such knowledge could lead to misunderstanding around who Jesus was on earth, and what Jesus was to become for all. It wasn’t until the interaction between Jesus and Peter, that a grand glimpse of Jesus’ part on earth was revealed. Truth spoken that not one of his followers could hear, nor take in the powerful role that their teacher must assume. It was in Jesus’ revealing of his impending suffering and death that he let the secret out. He was the Messiah, but not the victorious warrior they so had hoped for. He would give his life so that there would need to be no more fighting or warring. Alas . . . it was not yet time for his followers to “get it.”

### III

This morning's sermon has been a teachable moment for me, to talk about my curiosity around pieces of Mark's gospel that caused me to step away and ask, "Why?" The learning for me has been twofold: One; the community of Mark, especially the writers of the gospel text, had a reason, or reasons for inserting instances where Jesus exhibits behavior that is Messiah-like, and then without warning and purpose- asks his followers to keep secret what they have seen and heard. Delving into this curiosity showed me new understanding around what were the conceivable intentions of the writers of Mark's gospel. Were they safeguarding information? Important information that would lead to the realization of who Jesus was for this world, and become the foundation of our Christian beliefs.

As I shared earlier; this text caught my attention because of what felt like a recurring question around Jesus' need to keep secrets from his followers. I found myself staying with the question. After my scriptural research and what I learned online: there was still, for me, something missing. So I turned to prayer in the form of scripture meditation called *lectio divina*.

Lectio Divina is a contemplative way of reading the Bible. It is a way of praying the scriptures that leads us deeper into God's word. It asks that you slow down. Read a short passage more than once. Then "chew" it over slowly and carefully. Truly savor it. So I went back to this passage, and prayed the scripture in this style.

I listened as I read, hearing the phrase that stood out. I held onto that phrase, and pondered, not just its meaning, but what caused it to stay with me. And then, as *lectio divina* asks; I said that phrase out loud to myself.

I read this passage again, and this time I pondered what this meant to me and why it spoke directly to me.

Finally I read this passage a third time. As I read through these words, I prayed that I might better understand what moved me to hold onto this phrase.

The phrase I held throughout this prayerful meditation was, ". . . not to tell anyone . . ."

Since that time, my prayer has been for God's Holy Spirit to guide me through each day, giving me the wisdom to know when not to tell. To keep the secrets that need kept, and to be aware of the times when I need to reveal secrets in order to move forward, or perhaps even be open to the good news that's been kept under wraps until now?!

Secrets are curious things. They come in all sizes, and are told according to their degrees of importance. Dolly Levi could keep almost every one's business a secret in Yonkers, and Glinda knew that she must hold the secret to Dorothy's quest for home until it was the "right" time. Let us pray to know when the time is right to tell the secrets we hold, and the wisdom to know when not to tell anyone.