

The Power of Secrets, I II Sam. 11 & 12; Ps. 51 9/15/19

A few years ago I heard a Radio Lab program about a guy named Frank Warren, who began inviting people to send him anonymous postcards on which they wrote secrets they had been hiding. Ten years later, his Germantown, Md. basement was filled with over 500,000 postcards! And, there is some amazing stuff on those cards.

He received one from a man who disappeared on 9/11, and everyone thinks he's dead, but he isn't. The day of the interview he received one from a woman that read, "I once had an abortion. Does my baby forgive me?" Another person confessed that she was much happier being single than she is being married! One person attached an unused suicide note, saying he overcame his depression and is now "the happiest person in the world!" When asked what he had learned from this experience, Warren said that he was astounded by the huge amount of energy that people put into keeping their secrets.

Secrets. Maybe about sins. Or regrets. Hurts or humiliations. Addictions. Family secrets. And, sexual secrets. The "Me Too" movement has exposed a lot of secrets recently, as have investigations into sexual misconduct by priests in the Roman Catholic Church. Those popular genetic testing kits like "23 and Me" or "Ancestry.com" can be a lot of fun, but one by-product of them is that people are uncovering secrets regarding

their parentage or the parentage of others. It seems that we all have secrets.

Secrets are very powerful. A recent article in *Psychology Today* described three kinds of family secrets that can be harmful to families and individuals. Individual Secrets are hidden by one member of the family from the rest of the family, like a spouse's affair or excessive credit card spending. Such secrets can create tremendous anxiety in the secret-keeper and confusion in the rest of the family. They sense that something is wrong, but can't figure out what it is, and don't know how to respond.

Internal Family Secrets involve at least two members of a family keeping a secret from other family members. A father tells his daughter he is going to file for divorce from her mother, without telling his wife. For the daughter, this creates a split loyalty between her two parents, an impossible situation. The child has no healthy way to relate to the family as a whole, and other members of the family can't understand her reactions in certain situations. And, Internal Family Secrets create problems among adult members, too, as those "in the know" feel, think, and act differently than those who don't know.

Then there are Shared Family Secrets, known within the family, but not to outsiders. A parent's alcoholism or the abuse of a spouse are classic examples of this kind of secret. Each family member is expected to

protect the family secret at all costs. This can inhibit a family member's ability to form close relationships with those outside the family or to get help to deal with the fallout from the secret behavior.

Whether they are individual, internal, or shared family secrets, secrets are powerfully destructive things that can paralyze our actions and reactions. I imagine that some of you have experienced the power of such secrets in your own life.

There are a number of biblical examples of the destructive power of secrets. One well-known one is found in II Sam. 11 & 12. It involves King David, who spies the attractive Bathsheba and decides that he must have her, even though she is married to a faithful soldier serving away from home on David's behalf. David sends for her (she would have had little choice in the matter), has sex with her, and she becomes pregnant with his child. Since knowledge of this matter would have been detrimental to David's reign, a secret is born. David calls her husband, Uriah, back from the front ostensibly to report on the war. David tries to arrange for him to sleep with his wife, hoping he will believe the child is his. But Uriah refuses to do so out of loyalty to his troops who are sleeping out on the battlefield. David then enlists others to cover up his secret, arranging for Uriah to be killed in battle. Finally, David marries the now-widowed Bathsheba, taking her into the royal harem. It appears that his secret is safe.

But God knows about this secret and is not pleased. He sends the prophet Nathan to David to call him out for what he has done. To his credit, David acknowledges his wrong and repents. ¹³*David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the LORD." Nathan said to David, "Now the LORD has put away your sin; you shall not die. (II Sam. 12:13)* And then David writes one of our best-known Psalms, Psalm 51, a psalm of repentance. The superscription above the Psalm reads, "A Psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba." The Psalm begins,

¹*Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. ²Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. ³For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. ⁴Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment. (Ps. 51:1-4)*

It is only when his secret is revealed that David's sin can be dealt with and his relationship with God restored. (It may appear to some of you that David gets off easy here, and you may be right. But keep in mind that the baby died, and that this incident paved the way for his son, Absalom, to revolt against David years later.)

At any rate, many secrets can become toxic if they aren't dealt with. A man having a secret affair is bound to treat his wife differently, which will be confusing to her, increasing the distance between them. A woman hiding her alcoholism may become secretive in other ways, fearing that her addiction will be discovered. That will create barriers to her closeness with other family members and friends. These kinds of secrets are corrosive to relationships. Of course, the alternative is to reveal our secrets, but the problem is that harm may come from revealing some secrets. So, what's the best thing to do?

Generally, it is best for things to be out in the open, with appropriate exceptions regarding the age of any children involved. Only when secrets are revealed is there any hope that they can be dealt with in a healthy way. However, since most of us are so close to these matters, and have become accustomed to working around our secrets, we would benefit from talking to a third party before choosing to reveal a secret. Another person can help you explore the likely outcomes of sharing your secret. A trusted friend, pastor, or counselor could be valuable in deciding whether to share a secret, with whom, and how to do so.

We should point out that toxic secrets can also impact our relationship with God. For example, some of us have learned from an early age that certain things are too dangerous or shameful to be shared with

others; They must be kept secret. We can easily import that attitude into our relationship with God. We can wall parts of ourselves off from God. Or, we can try to avoid God, because of our shame. Think about Adam and Eve in the garden after they disobeyed God in Genesis 3. What did they do? They covered themselves up and they hid! We often try to do the same thing!

It's best to be open and honest with God about our deepest secrets, allowing his warm, embracing love to forgive us and heal us. I mean, God knows our secrets anyway, right? But God would like to hear us voice them, so he can work with us on them.

I hope this sermon about secrets has been helpful to you. Remember that God wants to help you deal with your secrets in a healthy way! God always wants what's best for us. This morning we've looked at some of the negative aspects of secrets. However, some secrets have a positive dimension. We'll look at some of those next week.