

**Sermon: The Secret**  
**Scripture: John 15:9-17**  
**Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans**  
**Date: May 17, 2009**

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I want to consider this morning the comment that Jesus makes in this Gospel lesson: “so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, He may give it to you.” This sounds initially to be a perfect text for what has come to be known as the Prosperity Gospel, which you can hear preached in churches all over this country and especially in the big churches that draw thousands of people. The Prosperity Gospel basically says that if we have faith enough and pray the right way and live our lives well, we will prosper. In fact, we could ask God for a new Lexus and vwalla, it shall come. Whatever you ask the father in my name, he will give it to you. The non-Christian equivalent to this in the world of new age spirituality is encapsulated in the book and video that you might have heard of called The Secret. And the secret in The Secret is basically if you put out positive energy and focus on what it is that you want or the dream you have for your life and if you do that faithfully and single-mindedly then what you want will amazingly and at times miraculously come to you. In other words: “So that whatever you ask the universe for with intention and focus the Universe will give to you.” It’s quintessentially American spirituality, whether it’s framed in Christian terms or new age terms: you can get what you want by believing.

Now I think there are some problems with this spirituality, but first let’s look at the truth that is there too. Don’t you know the experience when you are having a really good day and putting out positive energy all over the place with smiles and positive words and a light disposition that you get more of the same back to you? And conversely don’t you know when you are having a rotten day and putting out bad vibes and frowns and a cloudy disposition that often what you run into are other grumpy people with even worse dispositions than yours which doesn’t help yours but make it worse and its often a downward spiral. There really is something to that sense we have that when we are having a rotten day the rottenness just seems to snowball as does a good day in the opposite direction. And so experientially I personally can affirm at least some of what

the Secret and the Prosperity Gospel says – that we basically get back to us what we put out there.

But I also think such a spirituality can become a real problem if its not limited to that narrow description that I gave above, when we make a whole life-program out of it. Because I think it breaks down as a way of addressing the complexities of life, like using it to explain why tragedy strikes our lives? Did we have a lapse of faith in God or a lapse in the outward projection of our positive energy and that's why tragedy struck? Or what about the fact that the majority of the world lives well below poverty level? The theology of prosperity breaks down under the gaze of a hungry mother without the resources to care for her hungry child. Do we say that she hasn't trusted enough in God and that's why her child starves? Do we say that she's not putting out positive enough vibes so the Universe is not giving her what she and her child needs? Of course not! I don't think any of us in our right minds would believe such a thing or admit it if we did believe it. The main problem here of course is on one level such a claim blames the victim of suffering and tragedy for her situation – if she only had enough faith, if she only envisioned more fully - and on the other side by placing it all in “spiritual” terms the victimizers, the ones responsible, are let completely off the hook. No, she is suffering and her child is hungry not because she is unworthy or inadequate but because we human beings have not figured out a way to distribute the abundant food that this incredible earth produces in such a way that all humans are well-fed.

Not that God needs me to defend Him, but I have to say it bugs me when I hear people say – how could God allow there to be starving people in this world and how could God allow there to be war? What a cop-out that question is! It's you and I and our systems of government that allows starvation and it's you and I and our governments who go to war. Let's not blame God for that!

But I do understand the thinking. It flows quite naturally from the way we religious or spiritual people express gratitude to God or the universe for all the good things in life. If we do that then it only follows that we should give God or the Universe credit for all the bad things as well. But with that simplistic thinking, we are just inviting self-proclaimed atheists, like Richard Dawkins, to go off about the delusion of God and the virus of religion on this earth, because such a theology has huge holes in it. In fact,

framed in that way – that everything is the result of God’s favor or disfavor – Christian theology is, I’d say, delusional and dangerous. But I don’t think that’s true Christian theology. It was the great preacher and activist William Sloane Coffin who said that when he went to gatherings of professors from the local college where he taught he would inevitably be confronted by an atheist challenging his notions of God and how Coffin would lead off the conversation would be to say: “tell me about the God you don’t believe in, cause chances are I don’t believe in him either.” Rev. Coffin lost a son in an automobile accident, which sent him into a crisis of faith. But what he realized was that it wasn’t that he doubted there was a God after that tragedy but what he did doubt and exorcise from his life was the way God had been explained to him up to that point. He came to deny the existence of a god who would somehow be the cause of such a tragedy, as well-meaning Christians would suggest to him that god wanted his son to come home to heaven or that god or the universe was teaching him through the tragedy. He became an atheist of that little god with a little “g” who would plan such a tragic thing. But through the experience, on the other hand, Rev. Coffin became all the more believing in a God of love who he said had his heart broken right with him over the death of his son.

And that I think is getting us toward the very heart of our Christian faith, the Secret, we might call it, the Secret and strange Heart of our faith. So go back with me just for a moment to our scripture for this morning, because we have got to hear the words that come before the phrase that I quoted at the beginning of my sermon when Jesus says: “so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, He may give it to you.” Before that statement Jesus says – “greater love has no one than this, that someone lays down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command” and what does Jesus command? He says “these things I command you, that you love one another as I have loved you.” That’s Jesus command in a nutshell. Love one another so much that you are willing to lay down your life for one another and if you have this love then whatever you ask the Father in my name and with this love, God will give it to you. So really I think the request for a Lexus LX probably doesn’t fall within the parameters that Jesus is setting up here, because the parameters are established by love, not love for a car mind you, but love one for another. Like if you find yourself standing before a hungry

mother and her starving child and are moved by love to respond with prayer to God, then, it seems Jesus is saying all that you ask and desire in the midst of that love will be granted. And at least part of the response to that prayer will be enfleshed in your own desire and willingness to feed them.

The secret heart of our faith is encapsulated in this word we say a lot at Christmastime – Immanuel, which means God with us. Not God over and above us, nor God as the equivalent of the natural world under our feet, but God with us and another name for God and God with us is LOVE. And what do we know about love? Love does not control, love abides. Love does not dominate, love supports. Love does not force itself upon us but is freely given and freely received (which also means, unfortunately, it can be just as freely rejected). We can say “Jesus is my Lord and Savior” or we can say “Love is my Lord and Savior”, that in so far as Love is the King and Lord and Purpose and Point of my life, I am saved and in so far as something other than love is my Lord and King, my Point and Purpose, I am condemned. Because who is Jesus but love embodied, love incarnated and what does love look like, how big is this Love with a capital “L”? It’s as big as this: *hands spread wide upon a cross*.

And its true, what the Secret says, if we project love out into the world, then love is what will come back to us, but love is not necessarily wealth and love is not necessarily easefulness and prosperity and love is not necessarily the realizing of dreams, but when we have experienced Love we know, don’t we, that anything and everything else is defined by it, as eithe drawing us away from Love or pointing us back into Love’s arms.