

“THE SECRET CURE”

A Sermon for the Third Sunday after Pentecost, June 25, 2017

Text: Matthew 10:24-39

When I googled the phrase “the secret cure doctors don’t want you to know about,” the first thing that came up was a blog by a Dr. Joe Imperato.

I have heard that phrase often enough. I never read on, because I am very skeptical. Sure enough, Dr. Imperato says that whenever you run across that phrase in the introduction to an announcement about a secret miracle cure for anything, you should be extremely skeptical. He writes that there are no such secrets. The truth is, there are many secrets your doctors do want people to know, but generally people don’t want to hear them. They have to do with things like diet and exercise, you know. Boring.

I won’t tell you everything Dr. Imperato said about this phrase, but since I was going to use it as an illustration I wanted to be sure that you don’t think I’m telling you there are such secrets, which the medical industry and big pharma don’t want you to know about because they like making money off of people’s ignorance. I don’t think that is the case. I tend to be skeptical of any conspiracy theory, of course. I know that I’ve never had a doctor that I thought wanted to make money by keeping me ignorant.

But you know, sometimes people don’t want you to hear the truth. Sometimes, it is true, people hate it when the truth comes out. And I want to use that fact to make an analogy which I hope will shed light on our lessons today.

Jesus tells his disciples today that when they share the good news of the gospel they can expect resistance. People will not want to hear it. They will shut their ears. They will go even further. They will persecute, maybe even kill you. But don’t be afraid of them, Jesus says. Go ahead and tell the secret.

Jesus knew that the good news of the kingdom of God was not going to make everybody feel good. “I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” Here he is not talking about true peace, he’s talking about superficial peace. Jesus did not come to make everybody just agree with and like everybody else. He had a particular message, which brings true peace. And some people will have a vested interest in fighting that gospel. They will refuse it and they will oppose it, with all their might.

Still, we should pick up that gospel message, that legacy-message of Jesus, we should pick it up fearlessly and go forward, spreading the true peace of God to all who will receive it.

Now, why would anyone oppose a message of peace and forgiveness and good will? Why in the world?

We know that Jesus was opposed! Even killed! Because of what he brought. So we know he was telling the truth. But why did it have to be this way?

Because the truth of the gospel undermines Certain Vested Interests.

Just like in the urban myth about doctors keeping secret certain easy and cheap cures for serious diseases. Except, in this case, it is true. This is no urban myth.

The forgiveness of sins is that cheap, secret cure. For sin. For enmity. For all that is wrong in us, and in society. It is cheap, because we don’t have to pay a price. Nor do we have to exact a price, as in get revenge. We don’t have to make everything even steven. We have merely to accept the forgiveness offered us for all our sins for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ, because of his death on the cross. That is ridiculously cheap. And simple. Unbelievable.

Sounds too good to believe, but—unlike other things—that doesn't mean it is foolish to believe.

That the forgiveness of sins is free, not for sale, and that it is available to and through all people for Jesus' sake, and that what we forgive on earth is forgiven in heaven? That you don't have to do penance, get a minister's authority, satisfy certain requirements in order to qualify for it? Are you kidding? That the forgiveness of sins applies to every kind of sin? (Except, of course, logically, the sin of failing to believe in it.)

If the forgiveness of one another and therefore making friends with enemies and becoming one family, if that is the kingdom of God which Jesus Christ is bringing into being as his kingdom grows, baptism by simple baptism, one believer at a time, then what?

Well, for one thing, the church of the sixteenth century badly needed to be reorganized around its distinctive gift. Because in those days, people were being told by the so-called "keepers of the keys" that there were a lot of conditions to be met before one could qualify for the kingdom and receive the peace of God.

So when Philip Melanchthon, on June 25, 1530, stood before the Holy Roman Emperor and read out the Augsburg Confession to him and his court, in the presence of representatives of the Pope, Melanchthon stood in great danger. Not only he, of course, but all who followed Martin Luther's teachings.

Because they were—to make an analogy—proclaiming that the church had been concealing the secret simple cure for what is wrong with people, namely sin. What saves us? The good news about Jesus Christ, which we receive through hearing it. What is the church? Simply the assembly of people who hear the proclaimed gospel and celebrate the sacraments according to that gospel, they said. Representatives of Rome quaked. This whistleblower

Melanchthon and his friend Luther were going to make it far too easy and cheap for people to know themselves as children of God. Whatever would happen to all their income streams, their institutions, their traditions, their power over kings, and so on?

Last summer I had the pleasure of visiting the home of Philip Melanchthon in Wittenberg, Germany, and had my photo taken by his statue in the city square. On the base of the statue is a bronze plaque with Psalm 119:46 "I will also speak of your decrees before kings, and shall not be put to shame." I hope you notice how that inscription echoes both our first reading and our gospel today. To speak for God is not always popular, and can even cost people their lives.

Martin Luther lived the last 25 years of his life as an outlaw. Literally, he lived without the protections of the law. If someone had killed him, they could not have been convicted for murder, because in the eyes of the law Martin Luther did not exist.

But he was willing to suffer that not—and here is the distinction that is crucial for us, which is really good news—he did not suffer being an outlaw for revealing how difficult it is to be a Christian, but how easy. He was not persecuted for raising the bar, putting peace out of reach for simple people. He was persecuted for lowering the bar all the way to the ground. Today, when we listen to Luther's teachings we hear the voice of one who, like Jesus himself, did not seek people who qualified to belong to God—but rather sought to give peace freely to those who never could qualify.

How is this relevant to us today? There are people today who want to open our eyes to how much more difficult it is to belong to God than we think. Take the popular book "The Benediction Option," if you will. This is not what Melanchthon and Luther taught at Augsburg, and it is also not the truth today. Bethlehem Lutheran Church, by way of illustration, could not be subdivided into the "really good

members” and the “indifferent” members, or “bad” members, according to how active we are or how much good we do. We do not seek through word and sacrament to raise your game to help you qualify for grace. We simply offer the “secret cure” of forgiveness for Christ’s sake, over and over, because we always stand in need of it and because it is the gospel truth about God’s will.

This is the secret. And the secret is out. We are worth more than many sparrows, to the God who has made us all and loves us all so much that he gave his only Son to die for us, that we may not perish but have eternal life.

Amen.

