

Like secrets? Most people do, in one way or another. Although I suspect it is much harder to keep a secret than to share one or eagerly hear one. In this information age, a secret is a powerful thing – it signifies that we know something, indeed something a lot of other people would love to know if they had the chance.

Keeping a secret? That is much, much more difficult. Many of us learned the lessons of early friendships based on whether or not that other person could be trusted with a secret, and a lot of people cannot be trusted with secrets – if you have had or currently have a friend that does not blab, consider yourself fortunate. They are rare friends.

As hard as it may be to keep a secret, and as tempting and titillating it can be to share or learn a secret, our world is riddled with secrecy. Where would we be without our secret PIN numbers – how many do you currently have, between your ATM and computer secrets? There are secrets to be found – perhaps at times told – everywhere, be it family life, politics, business, medicine, relationships. I guess there is a lot we simply do not want to share, particularly since a powerful media loves noting more than revealing secrets. Be it a Kiss-n-tell book, the nightly revelations of Entertainment Extra, or the identity thefts that so plague us, our culture seems to be hungry to know more about the other. Not surprisingly, then, our daily mail includes updates on privacy acts or policies, forms for us to sign should information be revealed or not revealed to others. We have to protect ourselves against those who would love to know our secrets.

“My daughter and I have no secrets,” a mother proudly proclaims. I would guess mother isn’t in touch as much as she might like to think. For relationships of whatever kind rarely involve complete honesty, no secrets, no parts of ourselves left for the other not to know or still yet to know. As St. Francis said to his friend, Claire, “The closer we get, the more secrets we need.” Relationships are an ever-evolving process of discovering what the other person is about, what heretofore has not been revealed, be it intentionally or unintentionally. Yes, we can think alike, be about to say the very same thing or accurately anticipate what the other person is about to say, but know everything? I suspect not.

So some secrets need to be just that – at least for now. Certainly those secrets that are kept for the good of others, or the time is not right, or are things which words simply cannot capture. In a world where it is assumed that everything should be “out there,” including, at times, what we might regard as “too much information,” the activity of pondering something in our heart, as of now reserved, is perhaps not the most popular notion. You go against the grain when it is determined that it is best not said.

Other secrets would be better shared. A vestry sits around and looks in frustration at the pledging results – clearly there need to be more folks in the pews. “But we have such a great parish,” one might be heard to say. “Why don’t more people know about us?” Someone once said that the only words of Jesus that Episcopalians take literally are, “Tell no one what you saw.” Those too-well-kept secrets, for our own good and the good of others, need to be told.

In the Epistle for today, Paul speaks of secrets, what he refers to as the secret purposes of God revealed through the spirit. As in most cases with Paul, there is a context for these words. The sophisticated Corinthian folks thought Paul was too crude and unpolished, intellectually and rhetorically over his head, at least when it came to dealing with the likes of themselves. Paul, in response, would content that the Corinthians were so enamored with their own sophistication, that they were missing the essential point of the gospel. So concerned about the form, the packaging of the message, the Corinthians did not get the point of the message. Thus, Paul spoke of the secret wisdom of God – not that it was actually a secretive thing (although some early Christian groups loved to view the gospel message as something revealed to a select few), but it became secret-like, because those in Corinth were not open to hearing about it. It apparently wasn’t up to their standards, the style just did not speak to them.

Some secrets, apparently, become such because people don’t notice, or don’t want to notice.

When I was in my last year in seminary, a secret was brewing inside of me, one which I simply did not notice. How could I have noticed? After all, I thought – as I worked with a church youth group each Sunday evening – that I simply was not cut out for that kind of ministry. Young people and I could not connect. Perhaps I thought that way because I was not that much older than them; or that I went to a diocesan youth event in Hartford and saw the likes of priests such as John Branson, at that point doing very good youth ministry at Trinity Church, and I said to myself, “I am just not up to this.” It didn’t help that the church I was working at had just lost its assistant, and he was, as far as I could see, the most incredible youth minister I had ever seen. A seminarian like me was a pretty poor substitute for the likes of him.

The secret finally got out – at least out from under my layers of denial. I went on to establish what I think it is fair to say was an exciting and energetic youth group in my first parish. Then, much to my surprise, I made the decision to take a job as a school chaplain, realizing that if one really wanted to work with young people then the place to do it was where they spent most of their lives, in school. The rest is history – in one way or another, directly or indirectly, I have spent my ministry in the world of schools, finding there as substantive and spiritually uplifting form of ministry as I could imagine existing anywhere.

Now, one of my tasks is to tell what you might call the secret of Episcopal schools, around the country and beyond. They are one of the liveliest places of mission, outreach, and connecting with children and young people as can be found anywhere in the Episcopal church. Of course, a lot of the church does not know about them – that there are, in fact, over 1,000 such schools in our country, be they early childhood centers, parish day schools, diocesan schools, boarding schools. Given the fact that only about 20% of the students in these schools, nationwide, are in fact Episcopalians, there is a unique, unparalleled opportunity for outreach and impression on young people of the openness and love for diversity in the Episcopal world. Given the religious diversity of many of our schools, we are one of the best positioned branches of the Episcopal church to enter into the necessary and emerging interfaith discussions so necessary today for our culture. Also, in spite of what some would think, our schools are not bastions of wealth and privilege – in so many cases, they are more diverse than their public school counterparts. Last week I visited a school recently founded in Dorchester, in Boston. All of the students attending that Episcopal school are on full scholarship, a great many have breakfast, lunch and dinner at the school. The school has become a place of focus and equipping not only students, but their families, offering them counseling on careers and how to work the systems which dominate their lives. They, like countless other schools in our network, serve not just children; many in fact are the only institution to which families affiliate in their busy lives. Many of the students at that school in Boston have been eyewitnesses to shootings – a couple of them right outside the doors of the school. Inside, however, miracles are taking place. Secrets like Epiphany School in Boston need no longer be kept to a few – their story, and the story of all of our schools, needs to be broken out into the open.

Baron von Hugel once said, “Be silent about great things. Let them grow inside you.” Surely he was right in one way, that which is of most meaning to us frequently cannot be put into words. Rather than distort them, best let them be unarticulated.

There are other secrets which cry out to be told. Secrets such as the miraculous works of God, that even when Jesus told his disciples not to tell people about them could not be held back. Secrets that remain secrets not because we want them to be, but because people simply do not notice, as Paul would say about the Corinthians. Secrets, as well, about the ministry of our schools – schools that stand as testimony to the fact that one can be welcoming of diversity yet stand for something, schools that remind us where the future of our church and the common life rests, secrets that long to be shared so that more and more young people and their families can thrive.

I myself like secrets, I like to think I can keep secrets, and have discovered a lot of secrets about myself, over the years, but there is one secret – our schools – that I cannot, nor for the good of our church and society – should not keep!