

“The secret”

March 28, 2010

Text: *Isaiah 50:4-9, Philippians 2:1-11*

I.

I’m wondering, aren’t you curious about the sermon title for the morning? *The secret!* That’s an intriguing title, don’t you think?

I mean, don’t we all want to know *the secret*? The secret to anything, really.

1. The secret to good health and a long life ...
2. the secret to being a good student or to learning another language ...
3. the secret to a happy and fulfilling marriage ...
4. the secret to success in Washington politics (wouldn’t we all like to know what that is?).

I’ve always had the sense that the *secret* to the Christian life—what makes our Christian faith unique—is related to the *suffering love* of Jesus which culminates in his crucifixion. With Jesus, there is always this sense of his sacrificial spirit, much akin to Paul’s words in verse 4 of **Philippians 2**, which I just shared with us:

Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Paul’s writing this from prison to the Philippian Church. He’s trying to inspire them and reassure them, all at the same time.

Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. And then, going on: *Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.* This sounds Christian, doesn’t it?

- For sure, there’s a sacrificial spirit there;
- there’s a sense of *love your neighbor as yourself*;
- there’s a clear note of *humility*, of being aware of the other person, the other life.

For me, this comes as close as anything to *The secret* to the Christian life.

II.

Having said that, I want to make what might seem like a strange connection, now, to a book on basketball that was given to me over the Christmas holidays by my son-in-law, Lawrence Ezrow. The book—almost 700 pages—is aptly entitled *The Book of Basketball*, and it’s written by a zealous young sports fan named **Bill Simmons** who writes *The Sports Guy* column for *ESPN: The Magazine*.

The book is mostly about the NBA, about the greatest basketball teams and players of

all time. Whether we agree with Bill Simmons' *takes* and *spins* on things or not—clearly—the guy knows a lot about these topics. For a lifetime NBA nut like me, it's interesting reading all the way.

In the book, Simmons refers again and again—throughout the book—to what he calls, ***The Secret***, with a capital “T” and a capital “S.” In fact, ***The Secret*** is even cited in the Index, in the back of the book, with numerous references.

The Secret he's referring to came from a media interview with Isiah Thomas, the great Hall-of-Fame point guard of the Detroit Pistons, during the '89 finals (this is the year the Pistons won the first of their two consecutive NBA titles). Thomas is trying to talk to the media about *the key to winning*.

It's not about the physical skills, he tells them. ***It goes far beyond that.***

And then he talks to them about how so many championship teams, the year after they win it, self-destruct. He mentions **Pat Riley's** book, *Show Time* and what Riley calls *the disease of more*, where Riley makes a compelling point.

Check it out: a team wins the title one year and the next year, immediately, every player wants more: more minutes, more shots, more money ... in other words, *more me*.

Going on, Thomas observes, ***It's hard not to be selfish. The art of winning is complicated by statistics, which for us becomes money. Well, you gotta fight that***, he says, ***and find a way around it. And I think we have*** (again, he's referring to his '89 Pistons who are on the brink of their first championship).

Then he talks about how the great dynasties of the past (like the Celtics and Lakers, for example) were teams filled with great talent, but how *that's not the only reason they won*.

They won because they liked each other, knew their roles, ignored the statistics, and valued winning over everything else. They won because their best players sacrificed to make everyone else happy.

In other words, Isiah Thomas is saying that *the secret of basketball is that it's not about basketball*.

Author, Simmons, goes on, saying, *It's not about statistics and talent as much as making teammates better and putting your team ahead of yourself*.

When a team of talented players can do it for one season, they can be unstoppable. When they can do it over a period of years, they become a dynasty. Simmons' final note on this is:

When we measure teams and players against one another in an historical context, *The Secret* matters more than anything else.

That's both a stunning and a truthful observation—stunning because I've never heard it put quite like that. NBA executives and GM's ought to listen up.

III.

As I was reading this, it occurred to me again and again of the parallels with our Christian faith. This emphasis on making whatever sacrifices we need for the good of the whole—the family, the community, the nation, the planet—is precisely what the best of our Christian faith calls us to.

Hear Paul again on this in Philippians—where he's exhorting the people: *be of the same mind ...*

- *having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.*
- *Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit ...* culminating in:
- *Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.*

And then the cruncher: *Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.*

Somewhere in there is *The Secret*—

- having a sacrificial spirit, sacrificing for the good of the whole ...
- understanding our own well being in light of the needs of the team, family or community.

That's not only how you win in sports, it's how we live a faithful and fulfilling life, as well. *The Secret* to basketball and to all of team sports is not about the sport itself. It's about the willingness to do what's best for the team. In a word, it's putting the team first.

IV.

Our reading from **Isaiah 50** is one of four *servant songs* in the prophetic activity of **Second Isaiah**. These songs are in many ways like *poetry of protest*. No doubt the content of their message emerged over time as the sheer weight of exile took its toll.

A note of abject humility runs throughout the songs, a humility that has risen up in Israel's soul. It's like, now, due to her long experience of suffering, she has this new identity, this new sense of who she is. This *new sense* is all about *The Secret*.

Check it out: *The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backwards. I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult or spitting.*

In an earlier *servant song*, Israel's suffering has been transmuted and re-interpreted to where the prophet says—as part of the song:

*It is too light a thing that you should be my servant
to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel;
I will give you as **a light to the nations**. (i.e., Israel will be a *model* nation)*

This humble response serves to invite other people in—other nations. In this sense, it sounds a distinctive chord of universalism. That's the role of the servant ... it's the role of sacrificial love. It's what we do when we choose to ***look not just to our own interests, but to the interests of others.***

Again, that's ***The Secret*** to inter-personal and international relations on all levels.

V.

Friends, this is the primal message of Christianity. This is the highest ground to which God calls us in Christ. It is a calling of sacrificial love and subordinating one's own ego and interests to the needs and interests of the whole.

That's ***The Secret***. That's how we make our marriage work, along with our families. It's how we make our businesses and corporations work. It's how our communities, our nation, and our international communities work—putting the needs of the whole first.

If we stick with this emphasis on ***The Secret***, it can help us understand how individual freedom, about which we Americans have deep passions and much to say, is inextricably linked to individual responsibility. You can't have freedom apart from responsibility and still call yourself a moral and ethical person.

Perhaps this helps us better understand the urgent need for the *landmark* Health Care Reform legislation that was passed by *congress* this past week.

The Secret to lives of fairness and justice in our great nation is that every human being has some form of adequate health insurance. Sure, it's important that we have choices about what plan we want and which doctor we want to see. And we do. But more important, still, is that we move in the direction of universal coverage. As a child of God, every human being deserves access to adequate health care.

How can a Christian view of community life come to any other conclusion? Again, that's part of what Paul means when he says to the Philippians:

Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.

When we apply ***The Secret*** to Health Care Reform, we're reminded that our freedom to choose is not greater than our responsibility to do our part in looking out for the well-

being of the whole human family.

To use the sports analogy again, it's not just about me—my own numbers and my own needs; it's about us ... all of us. It's about the team, the family, the community, the nation, the world.

Freedom and responsibility aren't enemies; they work together, each feeding off the other. We're free to choose, but in the context of being responsible.

VI.

The Secret is out ... and it's a beautiful vision of community life. Hear it again from Paul:

Be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit ... Let each one of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.

The best of sports and the best of life is when we understand that it all comes down to relationships—to the love, compassion and commitments we share, with and for one another.

On this Palm Sunday, we remember once again Jesus' triumphant entrance into Jerusalem, the *holy city* ... on the back of a donkey, an image of humility that invites us all in.

This humbling image should not be lost on us. It was this same experience of Jesus' humbling presence that led our Redeemer God to highly exalt him, as Philippians reminds us:

*Giving him the name that is above every name,
So that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend,
In heaven and on earth ... and every tongue confess
That Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of the Father.*

All praise be unto God! Amen!

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