

## The Call to Secret Service Matthew 6:1-18

An oxymoron is a descriptive phrase containing a logical contradiction: a deafening silence, a cold fire, or, icy hot.

How incredible that Christ calls us to a private piety – another oxymoron? Piety is a public display. Secret service to God must be a contradiction. To pray only in the privacy of one's room; to be so secretive in giving to charity that the left hand does not know the right hand is writing a check; to tell no one, not even one's spouse, that you're fasting - what kind of piety is that?

And yet that seems the clear call that Jesus issued to his disciples and, through them, to us. What the world calls piety we are to practice in secret. There is to be absolutely no public show of praying, almsgiving, or fasting. This is a secret service that we render to God, which no one else need know about. Like the operatives shown on the news yesterday assassinating a leader of Hamas in their wigs and disguises in a cleverly planned "hit" we are to conceal our religious practices from the world.

What was Jesus thinking? That piety should be a private matter is a radical - revolutionary idea. It goes against the cultural grain. In Roman culture, pietas referred to the public veneration of the gods. Without such a display from prominent citizens, what would happen to the traditional values that were associated with the gods? Pietas was the cultural glue, holding all things Roman in place. How could there be law and order without following the example of the best of citizens?

It was no different among the Jewish leaders, Pharisees and Scribes, who made a big show of letting their money clank clank clank down the metal trumpets that were the coffers for offerings in the temple were simply showing others they should give back to God. It is no different with our politicians – though the intrusion of media into every nook and cranny of people's lives has caused more than one of them considerable pain for their ill-thought actions and the hypocrisy of their personal lives vs. their public political stance.

Jesus called the public show of religious prayers, almsgiving and fasting HYPOCRISY and stated they result in a very limited reward: the approval of others but not of God, who sees the heart and the real reason for our actions. Done publicly for favor they are like snapshots on a camera film accidentally exposed to light - ruined by disclosure.

Jesus' call to a secret service of God was based upon his relationship to the Father who sees in secret. Three times he promised that the person whose piety was practiced in private would be rewarded by "your Father who sees in secret." It is to this One who knows our secret thoughts that we direct our piety. Jesus infers that God is secretly pleased with prayer, almsgiving, and fasting when it is done not for any approval of our fellow human beings-or even with their knowledge - but only for the eyes and ears of God. I believe Jesus would have applauded the woman in the legend who went about with a bucket of hot coals in one hand and a bucket of water in the other. When asked what she intended, she said, "I want to burn up heaven

and put out the fires of hell so that people will love God for God's goodness alone, with no fear of punishment or hope of reward!"

But is it possible to love God in a private way? Some may object that to approve of a secret service is to cut the vital nerve between love of God and love of neighbor. Is not the genius of both Judaism and Christianity a holy triangle, in which love of God and love of neighbor are separate but never separated activities? Did not Jesus say that we are lights in this world? Are we not to act so that others "may see [our] good works and give glory to [our] Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 5:16)? And what of the accusation that not only private but also individual piety -- prayer, alms-giving, fasting -- is a retreat from the real world? Isn't advocacy of a secret service an invitation to private religion, an avoidance of our duties to the poor and oppressed?

No, no, never! Such service is pleasing to the Father in heaven. The Greek word that is translated as "piety" in Matthew 6:1 is the same word that is translated as "righteousness" in 5:20. And behind that Greek word lies the Hebrew word for justice. We owe to God both a public service and a private one; one cannot slip a knife between civic virtues and the life of devotion and say that one is pleasing to God and the other is not. It may be difficult for 21st century Christians to see any casual connection between prayer and politics, but that is the problem!

God knows and sees, and that is all that matters. God knows if our deeds are hypocritical – from the word for Actor, by the way. God also knows that with impure hearts and motivations none of us would stand up to a close look at all of our motivations in any act – even the most selfless. Which is why, on this day that begins our journey of Lent we wear a cross of ashes – an outward reminder for others to see that we have been “owned by the righteousness of Jesus Christ,” that we are marked as belonging to God through the gift of faith, not of works and that there is nothing of which we can boast – nothing but Jesus whose blood and righteousness are our beauty, our glorious dress.

That is the knowledge that sets us free to live, to act, to love as God's people knowing that God has marked us as His own and that all we do gives glory and honor to God's name. May our Secret Service lived out, not for recognition but as a reflection of the humble service of Jesus mark our lives with love this Lenten season and throughout our lives.

AMEN