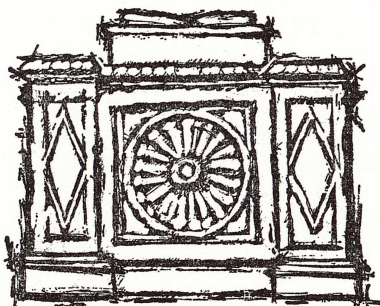


• CRESCENT HILL SERMONS •

CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH



"The Secret of Jesus"

A Sermon by

John R. Claypool

• LOUISVILLE / KENTUCKY •

Scripture Reference: John 14:1-12

Whenever one comes face-to-face with something that is astonishing, he can respond in one of many ways. For example, he can choose the path of celebration, and take off his shoes in wonder and amazement that such an awesome mystery exists at all and is there before him. Or, then again, he may choose the path of curiosity; that is, to recognize that what is there before him does not fit in exactly with what he already knows, and thus the need to explore more deeply and ask and seek and knock at the door of mystery. Both of these responses are authentically human ones, and it would be sad indeed if a person used only one of them in coping with the astonishing. Always to question and to have to have an explanation for everything would rob life of its inherent sense of mystery. Yet at the same time, only to celebrate and never to wonder would also rob a person of one of the joys of life — the adventure of discovery. We need the flexibility to make first one and then the other kind of response, and that is what I would like to invite you to

R

do this morning as we worship together. I want us to focus our powers of curiosity on the central astonishment of the Christian religion; namely, the figure of Jesus of Nazareth Himself. Again and again in this place we have celebrated His uniqueness, and I hope we shall continue to do so. However, today, I want us to be curious in His direction, and ask ourselves — what was the secret of His magnificent life? It has been claimed “that all the armies that ever marched and all the navies that ever sailed and all the parliaments that ever sat have not affected life on this planet as much as His one solitary life,” and I would agree with this. But the question that interests me now is: “Why is that?” How can we account for the incredible influence that this one Figure has wielded over history and continues to wield? Even today, as the institutional Church is having real problems, the figure of Jesus continues to intrigue men. I have met “Jesus freaks” and “death of God theologians” who will have nothing to do with Christianity but who are still very much attracted to Christ, and this is the astonishing phenomenon I want us to examine this morning. What made this Carpenter from Nazareth what He was, and what significance can His secret have for the living of our lives in the middle of the twentieth century?

The best place I know to begin such an inquiry is to listen to the Man Himself and see what clues He might be able to offer into the mystery of His own being. Such clues are not hard to come by, for Jesus made it clear again and again. *The secret of His life was to be found in His relation to God*, or more precisely, in the way He conceived of God and gave Himself to that Reality. It is well-known that Jesus named the Mystery that encompassed all life “Father.” Every man has to come to some conclusion about that Power out of which we come at birth and into which we move at death and by whom we are perennially sustained, and Jesus called that Mystery “Father.” And not only that, He related to that One with all the affection and trust and obedience and intimacy that goes with sonship and fatherhood at its best. It is obvious that Jesus’ feeling for this transcendent Power was not just fear or respect, although these were certainly present. He also *loved* this One, liked Him, if you please, affirmed Him and took delight in Him. As Richard Niebuhr said, “Jesus’ love of the Father was a case of non-possessive Eros”; that is, what God was in His mystery Jesus really affirmed. He actually loved the Father with all His heart and mind and soul and strength, which is a way of saying that emotionally, viscerally, intellectually — in every way a man can love — Jesus loved God. To Him, there was only one Final Good and that was the Father. All other values came to be that way because they were rooted in Him. Thus, there is no way to understand Jesus in His life and death and resurrection apart from this bond with the ultimate context of life whom He called

Father and related to as a loving, trusting, obedient Son.

This is exactly what I hear Jesus claiming in our text of the morning from John's Gospel where He says: "If you had known me, you would have known my Father also" (14: 7). When Philip responded by saying: "Show us the Father, and we shall be satisfied," Jesus answered somewhat in astonishment: "Have you been with me so long, and yet still do not know Me, Philip? Don't you realize — He who has seen me has seen the Father!" Now Jesus is by no means equating Himself here with the Father, as if the two of them were an identical reality. All during His ministry He carefully distinguished Himself from that One who had sent Him and gave Him His words and provided Him His power. What He is affirming here is His relation to the Father and saying in effect: what I am is bound up inextricably with Him. I am in the Father and the Father is in me; that is, we live together in the deepest mutuality and this is the secret of My Being. Without the Father I would be nothing. I can do nothing in my own authority. My relation to Him and His relation to Me is what makes Me what I am. There is no way to understand Me without reference to my Father. The way you see Me live is rooted and grounded in my relation to Him.

I repeat, then: when Jesus is allowed to speak for Himself and shed light on His own mystery, it comes to one word: *Father*. He was what He was because of the way He conceived the Ultimate and related to Him. In the profoundest sense, He loved God, and out of this love, trusted, obeyed and shared life with Him.

But for me, at least, this raises a deeper question: how did such a relation to God come to be? By what means was Jesus able to name the Mystery "Father" and then give Himself in such undivided affection and obedience? The answer to that question is simply this: Jesus was able to love God because He realized the fact that He had first been loved by God. The gift of His affection to God grew out of the prior affection which God had first been willing to give and Jesus to receive. And as so often happens, like has a way of calling forth like. The delight Jesus came to have for the Father was rooted in the delight God first had for Jesus.

At this point we get down to what I think is the deepest truth of Biblical religion; namely, the way God feels about all of us when it is claimed that He loves the world. The philosopher Plato would have shaken his head at such a concept, for in his mind love was equated with need or weakness, and thus could never be attributed to Divinity. The only reason one would ever love something was because he recognized a need in himself and was attracted to this thing as a means of meeting that need, and the great thing about being a God was that One was self-sufficient and did not have to

love anything. Therefore, Plato would have scoffed at the assertion that God loved the world. However, Plato may never have heard of the God of Israel, who down in Egypt centuries before began to manifest in history a wholly different sort of love-reality. It was not something based on need, but was totally and completely a gift. It did not arise out of emptiness in God but rather out of fullness or overflow. Here was love that did not act in order to acquire something, but rather to give something — to share its own experience of joy on as wide a scale as possible. This is the only conclusion the Israelites could come to in light of their own election and deliverance from Egypt. The God Jehovah certainly did not need anything they had. They were a slave people, literally “no people” — the rags and tags of a highly developed society. And yet suddenly, out of sheer grace, they found themselves being called “a chosen and beloved people,” “the apple of Jehovah’s eye.” From this experience in their history eventually grew the doctrine of creation which is found in Genesis 1 and 2. Here it is suggested that the giftedness that was basic to the creation of Israel is basic to the creation of all things. God called the world into being not in order to get something for Himself, but in order to give something — a chance to know the joy of existence as He knew it. This is why delight is written all over the earliest stories of Genesis. God is pictured quite primitively as fashioning the world and growing more excited by the minute at what He was doing. Every time He made something new He could not suppress His joy. Like a child entranced with his own creations, God kept exclaiming: “Look, It is good! It is good! It is very good!” I do not think I am being irreverent to interpret the Genesis stories in picturing God jumping for joy at the sight of what He had made. Expressions like: “Wow!” “Would you look at that!” “O boy!” are colloquial symbols of the genuine delight God took originally in the works of His hands.

Now this primal delight at what things are as they come from God is exactly what Jesus tapped in on and began to appropriate in terms of His own being. When He came out of the baptismal waters and heard the Voice from heaven saying: “This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased,” I imagine He connected this up with the Voice that had said in the beginning: “It is good. It is very good,” and proceeded to personalize the delight that God had for all things into the delight that God had for what He was. As I have suggested many times before, I think Jesus made made this affirmation from heaven the foundation stone of His own identity and the key to how He felt about Himself. *And this is the act of being first loved by God that enabled Him to love God in return!* The reason He could take delight in God and call Him Father and relate to Him in such affection and trust and obedience is because He first received the gift that the Father took de-

light in Him. Do we not usually warm to those who genuinely affirm us and give back love when we have truly received it? I am never more secure and free and joyful and creative than when I am in the presence of those who genuinely take delight in me and say of what I am: "I like that. It is something good." I believe this is precisely how Jesus was able to flourish so magnificently and move through life with such authority and power. He was at one with the Father and the Father was at one with Him. How? Because the gift of delight was first given by God and received by Jesus, and out of this reality, delight was given back to God. Jesus could really take pleasure in what God was and was doing because God had first taken pleasure in what Jesus was. He had communicated: "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased." Out of that gift, Jesus became all that He was, which is the secret we have been talking about all along.

However, I do not think one can fully appreciate how Jesus responded until you set it alongside the way mankind has handled the same situation. All of the Gospels suggest that Jesus was the only one who understood the Voice from heaven. The other people mistook it for thunder or something else, which I find to be a powerful symbol. This is the root human problem, as I see it. From the beginning, men have not understood the way God feels about them or have accepted the delight He has in what they are, and this has been our undoing. Look at the same stories in Genesis that reflect God's pleasure over His creation—they also record how man would not receive that affirmation of God, but rather concluded that as he was, he must not be good and needed to do something in order change himself. Man refused to accept God's positive evaluation of creation, and in dissatisfaction with himself set out to earn worthwhileness and make a name for himself. And what started as dissatisfaction with himself spread to all things. Instead of taking delight in God, he came to distrust Him and believe that He was seeking to hold man down. Instead of taking delight in other people, he became competitive and suspicious and began to kill his brother. Instead of taking delight in the earth, he turned on it savagely and has been plundering it ever since.

Just as delight calls forth delight when given and received, so a spirit of having to earn one's way and fight to achieve calls forth a similiar combativeness, and this, in short, is why history has gone so sour. By not starting with the gift of delight, which is God's starting point, we have turned history into something quite different than He intended — a place where we are striving to earn our worth instead of receiving it as the gift of grace.

This fact was confirmed to me quite powerfully not long ago when a friend shared with me a paragraph out of a textbook that he was using in graduate school. This book

had no relation to Biblical revelation, mind you, but the author had this to say: "A sense of security is only possible if one is sure of his place, sure of his ability to cope with whatever may come, and sure of his worth and value. Anyone who believes he must energetically seek his place will never find it. He does not know that by his mere presence he already does belong and has a place. If one has to be more than he is in order to be somebody, he will never be anybody. If one does not realize that he is good enough as he is, he will never have any reason to assume that he is good enough, regardless of how much money, power, superiority he may amass. It is obvious that in our society few people believe they are good enough as they are, and can therefore be sure of their esteemed place. Everyone tries to be more, to be better, to reach higher, and as a consequence, we are all neurotic, in a neurotic society which pays a premium to the over-ambitious search for prestige and striving for superiority. Underneath we are all frightened people, not sure of ourselves, of our worth, or of our place. It is this doubt of oneself, expressed in a feeling of inadequacy and inferiority, which is at the root of all maladjustment and psychopathology. . . "

I could not agree more; this is the human problem, and at bottom it centers in our not having done what Jesus did; namely, hear that Voice from heaven and believe: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." We have not let ourselves first be loved. We have refused to accept God's verdict: "It is good. It is very good." Thus, we are desperately trying to earn what can only be received as a gift — a sense of worth about ourselves. This is our plight. Who can deliver us from it?

The answer is the same: Jesus can, for precisely what He came to do in history is to show us this Father and connect us up again to that primal delight that is the beginning of salvation. The secret of Jesus is not a closed sort of thing that is possible for Him and Him alone. In our text of the morning He says: "Henceforth you shall know Him and can see Him." The secret of Jesus is open to every man; in fact, to as many as receive it, He gives the Power to become a child of God; that is, feeling for the first time what was central to Jesus; namely, the delight of God in what you are, so that you can begin to become all that He has made you to be. I said earlier in the sermon that we instinctively feel warmth toward those who have shown worth to us, and are never more secure and free and joyful and creative than when we are in the presence of those who delight in us. The ministry of Jesus Christ brings us just this picture of God. He is the One who loves us for what He had made us to be, not for what we have made of ourselves. His is the gift of delight before and beyond anything we have done or failed to do, and to receive this grace is to be able to say: "Abba

Father," and have His Spirit bear witness to our spirits that we are the children of God.

I come back then to a basic assertion and a stupendous claim. What was the secret of Jesus' life? How was He able to be what He was? It was because of His relation to the Father—loving, trusting, obedient. And how did that relation come to be? He allowed Himself first to be loved, to be taken in delight for what He was, and out of that grew His own delight in God and others and the world, yea in all that God had made. And the best of it all is this—Jesus' secret is an open secret. The way He came to joy is open to every one of us. For His Father can be our Father too. His kind of relation to God can be our kind of relation. To as many as received Him, He gave the power to become children of God and to live with this same power. His secret can become our secret!

Well? Will you let God love you in Christ, until you can love Him too with all your heart and mind and soul and strength? Jesus did. That was the secret of His life. Will you let it become your secret as well?