

## “The Secret”

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**Colosians 2:1-5**  
**Luke 9:18-21**

For years, I had hanging in my SFTS faculty office a beautifully matted and framed piece of art in the form of calligraphy, done by a member of my religious community. [For any of you who may not know, I am a catholic Sister, and my congregation is called the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary.] Sister Loyola Mary was a master calligrapher and professor of art at Marylhurst University, and her calligraphy was widely praised and imitated in calligraphic circles. This particular piece came to me quite unexpectedly, arriving one day out of the blue, hand carried by one of our Sisters. She presented to me as a thank you for having led the Oregon-based sisters in a retreat on discernment some months previously.

The saying that Loyola Mary had chosen to render in script has always intrigued me. It says: “THE SECRET is to risk disaster, hope for triumph and describe the forms of the incarnation +” [Show it.] You see immediately that this fails as a visual aid, not only because the folks in the back cannot read it under any circumstances, but also because it is now barely readable even if you are close. It says:

**THE SECRET** *is to risk disaster*  
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*and describe the forms of the*  
*incarnation*  
+

We've done a computer imitation in the worship bulletin, so you can get a visual sense of the piece, though to my eye, the calligraphy is exquisitely more beautiful than the computer rendition.

The saying is not attributed. Did the phrase originate with Loyola Mary? She was quite capable of saying it. Did someone else say it? Since she is long dead, I cannot ask her about its authorship, and no one else I have asked has known either. I once even tried typing it into Google, with all sorts of interesting results, but I was no closer to knowing who might have originally said it.

But it was perfect for my office wall, both in the way it had been rendered, lovingly matted and framed and in the saying itself. It always seemed to me to be a stunning metaphor for ministry, for what happens when someone walks into your study at the church, for what happens when you get up to preach, when you sit with someone in a hospital.

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So the saying hung in my office for years, and occasionally it would become the subject of a conversation with someone who stopped into my office. One former student was so intrigued with the saying that he adopted it as his motto, and it follows his name on every e-mail that he sends out to this day. A couple of weeks ago, I preached about

this saying at the Southern California campus opening convocation. Jack Rogers, our esteemed colleague emeritus, was present. After the service he reminded me (I had completely forgotten), about the time we sat in my office and discussed this saying, wondering together who might have originally said it. He copied it that day, and for years, carried it with him.

Eventually, however, it became clear that the red ink in which Loyola Mary had scripted “The SECRET and the small cross that concluded her calligraphic interpretation were fading, slowly and inevitably. Year after year, they became fainter and fainter, until they were barely visible. At this point, I moved the calligraphy to my home, and it now hangs on the wall across from where I sit when I pray. It still works on me and still tries to reveal its secret to me.

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People use the word “secret” in a number of ways. The way that my neighbor kids use it is “Let me tell you a secret. You can’t tell anyone, promise?” For them, a secret is a piece of knowledge shared among a few people and hidden from others. But there is another meaning of “secret,” and it is more, I believe, what this saying wants to communicate. My cello teacher used to put it this way: “the secret is to get this passage into your fingers. You have to practice until your fingers know what to do without your mind telling them.” Secret here means something like “the key.” Once you grasp the key, everything else falls in place around it.

So, then, what is the key to ministry? It's threefold, in our metaphor:

Risk. We risk disaster. There's plenty of risk in ministry these days. If I were a student, I might be pondering questions like this:

--will I be able to do this?

--will I be able to get a call?

--will I be able to support my family doing the work of ministry?

--will I be able to speak coherently of the Scriptures?

--will I be able to preach the Word of God?

--will I be able to stand the grief of a mother on the death of her only child?

--what kind of community will call me to minister among them?

If I were a trustee, I might be pondering such questions as:

--will we be able to regroup the seminary's assets of reputation, personnel, facilities and capital?

--will we make wise decisions at this critical juncture?

Some questions that I do ponder, as incoming Dean:

--will I be able to help this faculty, who are losing so many colleagues, to grieve their losses?

--will I be able to spark the creativity of both faculty and staff under huge pressure to do more with less?

--will we be able get this huge and complex puzzle of personnel, classes and infrastructure to cohere into an excellent education with fewer resources?  
--can the GTU schools figure out realistic ways of collaborating?  
--will we rise to the level of the leadership required of us?  
--can we get a sense of what God is calling us to at this moment in our and the Church's history?

And the biggest risk, the one I only rarely let myself ponder: What if it's all ephemeral? What if there is no God at all?

Yes, we do risk disaster at every turn. When we head into this calling of ours from baptism, we risk a lot, we stake everything.

**T H E S E C R E T** *is to risk disaster*

Hope. Hope for triumph. Not wishful thinking, not optimism, but hope. Wishful thinking dreams about a future without any connection to present reality. We know at some level that there is no basis in reality, but we go on dreaming anyhow, because it is easier than gazing at the present reality, coming to understand it and how God is calling us in this place and time and getting on with the ministry that is right here, right now with these particular people. That means colleagues you agree with and those who seem to have the opposite idea at every turn; students who sparkle and students who plod along, teachers who excite you and teachers who bore you, and . . . (you fill in the blanks here for your particular situation).

Optimism is yet something else again. Optimism is based on cause and effect thinking. We draw conclusions about the future on the basis of our experience with the past and present, believing that events can be explained as effects of previous causes. We are optimistic based on some evidence that the future will unfold as we imagine.

However, if we look clearsightedly around us, our optimism may wear very thin:

- the church shrinking, in its mainline denominational form
- there are too many clergy for the number of PC (USA) churches, except in the rural areas, where it is difficult to support a full-time pastor.
- the church has lost much of its ability to speak to the power brokers of the culture.
- the church is engulfed in deep struggles that threaten to tear it apart at the seams.

We could go on, of course, but you get the idea. Optimism is not likely to sustain us in these times.

Hope, however, is quite different from wishful thinking, or optimism. Hope is not a conviction that things will turn out well despite the evidence, but it is the conviction that, whether or not they turn out “well,” they are worth doing. Hope relies neither on what we do or don’t do, nor on what others do or don’t do, but what God did in Christ and is doing now, bringing to fruition even as we speak. Hope begins precisely where wishful thinking and optimism fail.

Emily Dickinson, with her characteristic shyness about overt religious language, describes hope as “the thing with feathers/ that sits in the soul/ and sings the tune without the words, and never stops at all.” Is Dickinson simply giving us a lovely image of fluid and melodic and constant bird song that lifts up our spirits almost despite ourselves, or is she metaphorically pointing us to the Holy Spirit dwelling wordlessly beyond the ashes of our wishful thinking and optimism?

Installations are often the occasion to lay out a grand vision for where the installee hopes the institution will be in five or ten or twenty years. I do not intend to do that tonight. I do have desires and working models for the next steps that I hope are planted in me by the Holy Spirit. But I have worked with discernment too long to expect a clear vision with all the details laid out. If I had that kind of vision at this point, not only would it be MY vision, rather than OUR vision, I would be relying on either wishful thinking or optimism, rather than hope. On the other hand, hope is not a strategy. We have a lot of work ahead of us.

Vaclav Havel, the Czech playwright, poet and first president of the Czech Republic, says: “The deepest and most important form of hope, the only one that can keep us above water and urge us to good works, and the only true source of the breathtaking dimension of the human spirit and its efforts, is something we get, as it were, from “elsewhere.”

Our hope, then, comes from beyond us. It is from God; it is in God, it is God. We hope, then, for triumph. Not our triumph. God's triumph in Christ.

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hope for triumph*

And finally, we describe the forms of the incarnation.

Ah, here it is, the heart of ministry in this metaphor. Describe the forms of the incarnation. Where is God showing up in the world today? What is the Spirit up to? What is the call of God in this place and time?

Describe the forms of the incarnation. Here's why we **pray**: so we see with our own eyes, and experience with our own heart. Here's why we gather together for worship: so that we bear witness to and give praise for the Incarnation. Here's why we study the Scriptures: so that we uncover signs of how God has worked with our ancestors, and how God will work today. Here's why we read and ponder theology: to think deeply about what we have discovered, and to practice speaking more clearly. Here's why we follow the news carefully: to be alert to where God's least ones are. Here's why we visit the neighbors and those in our church: to hang out where God hangs out, with "the folks." Here's why we sit in endless meetings: to discover the word of God together, gleaning it as it is dispersed among the body. Here's why we do works of justice: to back our descriptions with our actions. Here's why we meet with colleagues and spiritual directors: to hold ourselves accountable for how we describe the forms and live the forms

of the incarnation. Every day, with every word and every action, we are invited to describe the forms of the incarnation.

On the plane to Pasadena a couple weeks ago, I had one of those “omigosh, I never noticed that before!” moments. I was reading the dissertation proposal of one of the Doctoral Students in Christian Spirituality. He’s working on the thirteenth century German mystic Meister Eckhart. In his proposal, the student mentioned Eckhart’s concept of *incarnatio continua*—continuing incarnation. Briefly put, because of the Incarnation of Christ, all humankind is participating in the dynamic, on-going process of becoming like God; God is continually becoming incarnate in each of us, drawing us Godward. The scholar of mysticism Bernard McGinn speaks of “the homnification of the divine and the deification of the human” (McGinn 2005). The connection that hit me like a ton of bricks is this: Not only, then, do we describe the forms of the incarnation, we express the God’s continuing incarnation through our very lives as we become more and more like God, and we invite others to do likewise.

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In the Colossians (2:1-5). reading, we hear Paul doing the work of ministry, consoling, encouraging, describing the form of the incarnation of Christ with the Colossian and Laodicean communities from which he is absent. Our faith, he points out, does not rely on plausible arguments (though of course we should make plausible

arguments), but upon the experience and grace of Christ himself. Listen to Paul speak his words of consolation directly to us: “I want [your] faith to be encouraged and united in love, so that [you] may have all the riches of assured understanding and have the knowledge of God’s mystery, that is Christ himself.”

In our Gospel reading from Luke 9:18-21), we hear the disciples articulate for the first time, who Jesus really is, the “Messiah of God.” But even though Peter can say these words, he doesn’t yet really understand the contents of the words he is using. But he is close enough. Jesus continues to teach them, give them example, and pray for them as they deepen their understanding. I do not think it an accident that Jesus immediately begins to prepare them for his death, when their optimism will be dashed, but to be followed by his ultimate triumph, in which their hope will be born. And ours.

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Amen.