
Spiritual Surveillance

John 4:5-18, 28-30, 39-42

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on March 23, 2014 by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

The National Security Agency (NSA) of the US government has been in some serious hot and deep waters in recent years because of their surveillance program. This program allows for the tracking and recording of phone calls, emails and other Internet traffic, text messaging, and any other form of communication between parties. There are tensions about: when and why to obtain search warrants; the freedom of the privacy of citizens and the perceived overreach of the government in light of terror threats; matters of overall legality of such a security tactic as surveillance. Whistleblowers of the program have escaped from the US to find refuge. Some see them as heroes. Others see them as traitors. The issue of governmental surveillance, internationally or nationally, will not be solved this morning in the liturgical court of Duke Chapel. That I can guarantee. But if NSA were to search our computers, read our minds, and scan our hearts, what might they find? As far as we can tell, no surveillance system has been able to find a Malaysian Airlines jet. Perhaps, there are some things, some secrets that will never be known or discovered by human or electronic surveillance. There are some things that NSA will never know like what's in our hearts. They track bodies but are not seers of the soul. So why does surveillance make some of us afraid? Do we have something to hide? If so, what are we hiding?

I want to let you in on a secret this morning. At the beginning of spring break, I went to Mercer University to give some lectures on preaching. I liked Mercer. Then Mercer played Duke in Men's basketball. Even though we lost, I still liked Mercer. But then when I returned to my car in the parking lot, there was a poster someone made sitting on my front windshield. It was obviously put there by a Mercer fan. It read "Our team. Our state. Our year." It had a picture of the state of Georgia in Mercer colors. I have to tell you the truth. I don't think I like Mercer anymore! I feel so much better letting that secret out.

The Samaritan woman is not the only one with secrets. Maybe we have our own. There is a website called postsecret.com in which people mail in anonymous postcards with one secret written on it that has never been shared with anyone else. These postcards are decorated on one side, which is why Post Secret is known as a community art project. The leader of this project chooses several of these cards to post on his blog every week. Just this past Sunday, we learned of some secrets: "I'm going into psychology to diagnose my own problems," "I stole that dog you kept chained up outside 24/7 and found the creature a home," "Sometimes when I'm driving I pretend a famous person is sitting in the passenger seat having a great time with me," "I'm embarrassed that my 40 year old friend orders milk when we go out to eat," "I did not graduate last summer. I dropped out. Sorry Mom."

The irony is that these secrets are shared in secret thus the secret remains a secret or at least whose secret it is. But I'm not so sure that deep down we want to keep our secrets. I say this because secrets enslave our souls.

The woman at the well was thirsty, but not for what you think. She was thirsty for more than water. She was thirsty for a new life and thirsty for the truth to be revealed. She had held her secrets long enough and she was about to implode. What she discovers at the well is the wellspring of eternal life. NSA couldn't read her life, but Jesus did. Jesus sees us and sees through us. We are under the spiritual surveillance of Christ. He keeps vigil over our lives. He watches us and watches over us.

We may not want nor take the time to watch ourselves in this rapid fire, internet-driven, texting, tweeting, sound byte society. Perhaps, we don't believe as one writer says, that it is "good...to center down! To sit quietly and see one's self pass by!" (Howard Thurman) We may not want to watch ourselves pass by or sit in silence because we may not like what we see or hear when we slow down. We move so

quickly in life and fill our agendas with activities as an escape from spiritual self-inventory. We may not view centering down as good for us because of our secrets within and fear of what we may discover if we truly see ourselves once and for all. The truth is that we may not be able to handle the truth. Our fears may scream at us like Colonel Nathan Jessep from the movie, “A Few Good Men”—“you can’t handle the truth!” The truth that our lives may be in HDTD—high definition trauma drama. The trauma of secrets gnawing away at our spiritual core.

But nothing is hidden in the illuminating presence of Jesus. There are no secrets under his watch. He tells the truth and is the truth. His encounter with the woman is risqué for his day. But sometimes you have to risk something for the truth. It is Jesus’ longest-recorded conversation with anyone and it’s with a Samaritan woman. A man and a woman in public daylight; a Jew and a Samaritan at that, whose people hated each other historically; one looking for water, the other who is living water. Asking a woman for water could be considered flirting and in the Old Testament, men, like Isaac and Jacob, meet their wives at wells, so it could look as if Jesus and the woman might be heading for an interracial marriage. Can you imagine what the local tabloids were saying about Jesus and this woman?

The woman is thirsty and Jesus quenches her thirst when he speaks. “Go call your husband, and come back.” She answers that she has no husband and then Jesus tells her that she’s right “for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you said is true!” Her well-kept secret was revealed at the well. His word unveils her secrets because we can’t encounter the Word of God, the living Christ, and not have our lives be naked before him. We know she had been with six men at some point. Five of them, husbands. But my wife can tell you that one husband is really enough! We don’t know if she was widowed, divorced, or just abandoned. We don’t have all the 411, the information, on her life though many interpreters would still happily assert that she was a loose woman; there’s no indication that she wore a scarlet letter on her heart. What we know is that Jesus doesn’t command the woman to repent or change her behavior. There is no sinner prayer or altar call from Bill Graham.

There is the revelation of the truth of her life. It is not always “*their* eyes are watching God.” It may be that God’s eyes are watching us. Jesus keeping vigil. For this woman, this becomes good news and the heart of her open and honest testimony. “He told me everything I have ever done.” Finally, someone knew the truth about her, other than herself. It was disclosed in the open—an open secret. I hear the release and relief in her voice. “He told me everything I have ever done.” This may be scary to some but revelation is salvific. This woman’s thirst for truth and transparency, her thirst to be known, fully known, her thirst to be freed, were quenched by Jesus. Under his salvific surveillance, he sees her for who she really is and there’s no judgment.

Finally, someone to know me for who I really am and still love me and not leave me. Jesus tells the truth about our lives so that we can see the truth about ourselves but not in a judgmental way, but rather for honesty. He moves us in the direction of a transparent Christian faith. He knows everything we have ever done but does not leave nor forsake us nor lord it over us. He loves us in fact and knows what we are really thirsty for. Our society would purport that full disclosure and acceptance cannot both happen thus we have the secular liturgy of a Post Secret website flooded with thirsty souls. Souls yearning for truth and the truth to be known about their lives. Yet they are too afraid.

Jesus demonstrates that, despite knowing our secrets, he offers the living water of love. He reads her life like a book from cover to cover, scanning every detail as a gesture of love. He learns every page of her history in order to shape the future of her ending. He knows us for who we are and not as we pretend to be and that’s what we really want deep inside—not secrets but a savior who loves us despite our past and present. This woman’s past was “brushed by the love of God” (Lischer) and it changes her because Jesus loves her, converses with her, take times with her as a human being, even while he told her everything she had ever done.

And that becomes her rallying cry and evangelistic sermonic strategy. “He told me everything I have ever done.” Regardless of her actions, culture, gender, religious practice, or faulty theology, Jesus calls her to go. And she goes courageously just as she is, knowing that he knows everything she has ever done. His spiritual surveillance is her salvation. The truth had been revealed and he still loved her. She received the life she longed for on that day, a life that someone loves “unconditionally, irrevocably, and absolutely.” This love is what also leads to her liberation and testimony.

She no longer was bound by secrets and heard the truth that she had always known but never shared. But now that it was out in the open, she was free to be who she was and not what others wanted her to be. Even as a Samaritan woman, who may have been deemed illegitimate, Christ reveals that she is legitimate enough to be one of his messengers. The transparency she desired she received and made it the truth of her word—“He told me everything I have ever done.” The transparency about the truth of her own life in the eyes of God allows her to speak the truth and to testify to the truth she understands at that point. Her truth is subversive because society would prefer to post secrets in hiding. But truth-telling is a homiletical virtue. Truth-telling is a Christian witness in a world of facades.

She doesn’t go into the gossipy details of what she had done but focuses on the one who told her everything. What’s interesting is that she doesn’t understand everything nor does she pretend to do so. She doesn’t speak about who Jesus was but what he did for her. Not that he was the Messiah because it’s clear that she’s not even sure about that, as she declares “He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” She shares what she knows up to that point and because of her, “many Samaritans from that city believed in him.” They believed because she was brutally honest in her faith. They believed because someone finally told the truth.

And she doesn’t go with answers but really with a question. Yet many still believed. A truthful spiritual inventory reveals that we don’t have all the answers nor do we have to have all the answers. We are seeking answers, faith seeking understanding. What we possess so often are questions. This woman met the embodiment of truth and it allows her to then share a truthful witness though perhaps an unlikely witness and not even a thorough systematic theological one. She speaks the truth of what she knows. This is not exactly a bold recitation of the Apostle’s Creed or Martin Luther’s 95 theses posted in Wittenberg in 1517. But her testimony is true for her and is enough for others to come to Christ. It’s an invitation to “come and see”(v.29). It’s truthful and honest “with its own uncertainty”(Craddock). She may not have been the most eloquent or deep or profound but she was faithful and those were the truest words she knew—“he told me everything I have ever done.”

One commentator reminds us that her witness is “refreshing” because it “avoids triumphalism, hawking someone else’s conclusions, packaged answers to unasked questions, thinly veiled ultimatums and threats of hell, and assumptions of certainty on theological matters.” She is free now that her secrets are out in the open. Her freedom allows others the freedom to arrive at their own conclusions about Jesus and they surely do: "This is truly the Savior of the world."

We might as well call her, as some do, “the other good Samaritan,” so good she knows how to tell the truth because goodness reveals and sin conceals. Here she is a cracked human cistern, the Samaritan woman, with deep wells of living water to share with those who are willing to listen—even when we think our wells have run dry and we too are thirsty. This is because Jesus provides a spring of life eternal to share. It’s the miracle of the gospel—that our feeble testimony can lead others to the well of life.

The woman received the spirit and truth on this day. She was thirsty for more than water. She received the liberating truth because there are no more secrets in the dark when Jesus holds his vigil for us. The truth was her testimony and that’s why it was so powerful. She told the truth and nothing but the truth. She even met the truth in Jesus but some of you may think you can’t handle the truth. So let me “post” a secret in the open right now—the truth will set you free. May you be free indeed.