

It's good to be back in the pulpit, and a joy to hear Ned Steele speak last Sunday, taking time out of his busy schedule to be with us. You might not know this, but Ned is running for President and has asked me to be his running mate, which I agreed to do, but now, after further reflection, will not be doing, because of a secret I have, something I did a long time ago, that I don't want splashed on the front page of the newspaper. It's not something I'm proud of, but it happened a long time ago when I was young and reckless. When I was a junior in high school I kissed a woman who wasn't my wife, and that kind of thing can sink your political boat. I'm only telling you because I trust you won't repeat it. I'm telling everyone else that I'm leaving politics to spend more time with my family.

Of course, we all have our secrets, and want them to stay secret. King David had a secret. One day he was on his roof and noticed a beautiful woman, Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, bathing. He was overcome with desire and sent a messenger to bring her to him. He forced himself upon her—that's exactly what it was, because in those days you didn't say *no* to the king—and she became pregnant. Bathsheba sent a note to David, saying, "I'm pregnant and it's your baby." She knew it was David's child, because her husband Uriah was at war, fighting in David's army against the Ammonites.

David ordered Uriah to return to Jerusalem so Uriah would have the opportunity to sleep with his wife, but Uriah got drunk and didn't go home. Bathsheba could really pick them. David panicked, fearing when the baby was born that Uriah would do the math, so told Uriah to return to war, and ordered his general to place Uriah on the front lines, in the fiercest fighting, then pull back, leaving Uriah alone, which the general did, and Uriah was killed. When he was buried, so was the possibility of David's secret being known, and David and Bathsheba were married and David rested easy.

I like that about the Bible. David was one of its greatest heroes, but the writers of 2Samuel saw no need to preserve David's reputation. For all of the Bible's patriarchy and tribalism, it is also brutally honest about its heroes.

God knew what David had done, and told Nathan the prophet what David had done. Apparently God can't keep a secret. So Nathan went to David's house and said, "There was a man who had many sheep and he butchered the sheep of a man who had only one sheep, a pet sheep, loved by the man's children."

David was furious. "Who is this man? Bring him to me."

Nathan said, "You are that man."

And David wept with grief and shame.

Bathsheba bore a son, who died. They conceived another child, who would grow up to be the king. His name was Solomon.

But, oh, these secrets. The Apostle Paul had a secret. He doesn't call it that. He referred to it simply as "the thorn in his flesh." Paul never described it, keeping the details to himself. Some have said Paul's thorn in the flesh was a persisting physical ailment. I don't think so. There would have been no shame in that, no embarrassment. In other places, Paul talks openly about his physical challenges and limitations, almost to the point of irritation. I suspect Paul's thorn in the flesh was a secret so shameful he wanted no one to know. Perhaps a great and recurring temptation. Paul wrote about it in his second letter to the church at Corinth. How, despite his many prayers, God never removed the thorn from Paul's flesh. "In order to keep me from being too full of myself." (my translation of 2Corinthians 12:7)

The Episcopal scholar, John Shelby Spong, believes Paul might have been gay and offers some compelling reasons. I'm not sure. Whatever it was, Paul wouldn't say. Paul had a secret.

I have secrets. There are things I've done I wouldn't want anyone else to know, things that would cause me great embarrassment if they were known. Not a lot of things. Don't let your imaginations run wild. But a few things I've done that I wish hadn't done. Perhaps you have a secret like that, too.

I think about my secret whenever I feel superior to someone who has been unable to keep their secret a secret.

I wonder if it would be a good thing or a bad thing if for one day our deepest secret was known to everyone. We'd call it National Secret Day. We would write our secret on a cardboard sign and hang it around our necks, so while I was reading your secret, you could read mine. Then we would look at one another and say, "How dare you!" at the exact same moment. Or we might look at one another more sympathetically.

I remember once feeling bad toward a promiscuous woman, then she told me her secret, that she had been sexually abused as a child. And of course sometimes when someone is sexually abused, it has the potential to distort their sexuality. So all those years I thought poorly of her, until I learned her secret.

Sometimes, I wish the Apostle Paul had been more transparent. It would have been interesting to know the nature of his thorn in the flesh, the details of his secret. But other times, I'm glad we don't know, because not knowing permits us to imagine that Paul's thorn in the flesh might have been very much like our own. Knowing that Paul struggled with unspoken difficulties reminds us that we will struggle with unspoken difficulties, too. King David never had that good fortune. The worst thing about him became known, though even after it became known, God still said of him, "He's a person after my own heart."

It's not that some of us have embarrassing secrets and some of us don't. It's that some people have to go through life with their worst secret written on cardboard signs hanging around their necks, and the rest of us somehow avoid that embarrassment.

This I know: the saints aren't the ones whose cardboard signs are blank. The saints are the ones who read the cardboard signs and love and forgive just the same.