Suttons Bay Congregational Church September 24, 2006
Mark 9:30-37 Rev. Robin Long Sanderson

30They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, 31because he was teaching his disciples. He said to them, "The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise." 32But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it.
Who is Greatest?
33They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the road?" 34But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.
35Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all."
36He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms, he said to them, 37"Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me."

Dick Grout, our church treasurer, and I have little in common. He is one of our seasoned retirees, I will be thirty-two at the end of November. He is, well, a he and I am a she. He lives in Suttons Bay, my address is Maple City. And the differences don't end with demographics. During a group building assignment at a recent meeting, we all completed the Myers Briggs personality inventories—Dick and I are opposites. Whereas I'm a feeling type and make decisions based on how something makes me feel, Dick makes decisions based on facts and data—which I do admit is a very good characteristic to have in a treasurer. Whereas I am rash and quick to make a decision, Dick searches out the options and makes a carefully thought out decision. And the differences go on and on from there. But, besides our membership in this fine faith family, Dick and I do have one very important thing in common—we have both kissed his lovely wife Marion—on the lips.

That's right, Marion and I planted one on each other—right on the ol' smackeroo. It happened last weekend when we were at a memorial service at which we were instructed to hug in a new way. Instead of the traditional right shoulder to right shoulder kind of a hug, it was suggested that we hug left shoulder to left shoulder, thus placing our heart closer to the heart of the one we were hugging. Well, I admit that I am not always at the ready when it comes to distinguishing my right from my left. And Marion, well I'm not quite sure what her excuse was. But somehow, and neither one of us can explain how, instead of hugging, which we fully intended to do, we ended up kissing on the lips. And I think Marion was as mortified as I was entertained.

And it is because I'm so entertained by what happened between us that I decided to kiss and tell this morning. And it's the telling part that is perhaps the more telling part when it comes to me telling you what this sermon is really about. This sermon is about telling, or more importantly, not telling. Have you ever noticed how many times Jesus tells his disciples some wonderfully profound thing, or he performs a miracle, and then he tells everyone not to tell what they have heard or seen? How frustrating. After all, if you were on your way to church this morning and witnessed someone breaking into the ATM at Northwestern Bank downtown, wouldn't you want to tell someone about it when you got here? If you were the Graves and just spent precious moments with your new granddaughter, wouldn't you just be dying to tell everyone about her? If you got an "A" on a big test at school, wouldn't you want to run home and tell your mom and

dad? After all, isn't our need to tell our story, to report what we have seen, or to—as we call it "vent"—isn't that a need most of us feel? It is after all how we communicate, how we teach, and how we transmit not just facts and information but the very nature of our being and our faith. And here's Jesus, the one on whom our faith depends, telling the disciples to resist that very core part of being human. Indeed in this morning's passage we find him passing through Galilee and not wanting anyone to know he was around. All this sneaking around and secret keeping must have been difficult and stressful for his disciples. Not only that but surely they wondered why—why doesn't he want people to know we're here and to know this amazing information? Why doesn't he want people to know who and what he is? Now, if you're trying to gather a group of followers, if you're trying to persuade folks to try a new way of being—as Jesus was—wouldn't you want the help of the grapevine? After all, studies show that word of mouth is the best way to get the word out about a new product or service.

So why, if Jesus was trying to spread the news of God's love and mercy—why if Jesus was truly God incarnate on Earth—why wouldn't Jesus want people to know where, who, and what he was? It seems to me that there are plenty of people who think they ARE God and they certainly let us all know it so why wouldn't the actual God do the same?

As there are with any serious questions posed of scripture, there are theories about why Jesus kept telling folks to stop telling others about him. These questions and theories fall under the general theological, meaning having to do the study of God, they fall under the general theological category of the *messianic secret*. There are tomes written on the messianic secret and there are as many opinions about why Jesus was so secretive as there are fruit flies on a glass of wine in September. One of the most famous writers on the topic was a German theologian of the twentieth century, William Wrede. A summary of his study by New Testament professor David White who teaches at Southern Methodist University reads as follows:

> According to Wrede, Mark conceives of Jesus' messiahship as being secret during his lifetime and being revealed in the resurrection. Wrede did not regard the messianic secret as historical; rather, he thought that it came from Mark's community. As Christianity developed, the idea that Jesus was the Messiah developed along with it. Wrede claimed that the oldest view of Jesus' messiahship was that he became the Messiah after his death. However, because messianic significance was later attached to the events of his life, a conflict of ideas arose: either Jesus was or he was not the Messiah before the resurrection. In [Mark's] community, this tension was resolved by the adoption of the idea that although Jesus was the Messiah during his life, he kept his messianic identity a secret so that it could be revealed after the resurrection.

Okay, his is a fine explanation. Wrede tells us that Jesus never really did say all those things about keeping secrets, but rather that the author of the Gospel of Mark included them later, long after Jesus was purported to have said them, to support his view that Jesus was the Messiah throughout his lifetime instead of an alternative view, indeed a quite popular view at the time of Mark's writing, that Jesus was just a man until he was resurrected on that first Easter morning.

Other authors disagree with Wrede saying that Jesus was always the Messiah and actually did say the things as they are written in Mark's Gospel. These folks believe that the reason Jesus wanted to keep his identity a secret was so that he wouldn't be found out too soon by the authorities and would have more time to do his ministry before his impending arrest and death—which, because he was the messiah and therefore clairvoyant—he would have known was going to happen.

Still others say Jesus was making those commands that people keep his miraculous healings and amazing acts a secret as a way to test people's faith. They say Jesus wanted people to believe that he was the Messiah based on faith, not by witnessing or hearing about amazing deeds. Jesus wanted people to believe he was who he said he was because they believed in him—not because they had seen him do something that no ordinary human being could possibly do.

So what do you think? Do you prefer one of these theories above the others; do you disagree with them all? Because no matter what you think of the messianic secret and all of Jesus' secret keeping, I don't really care because I don't think it's really of any great importance what any one of us thinks about the theories of the Messianic Secret.

Now having said this, I'm glad William Wrede is now at rest in some heavenly library where hopefully he's found out if his life's work was at all accurate. And for an academic Biblical scholar, I believe his life's work is of great importance because it helps all of us to think through these complex questions about Jesus. However, I don't really think that this kind of concentrated thought about such esoteric subjects really needs to be anything but a hobby for any of us. And here's why. The more answers we think we've found, the more theories to which we adhere, the more knowledge of God we garner—the less we embrace mystery, the less we're open to new ideas and feelings, the less we allow ourselves to be vulnerable and admit our unknowing. And I am, probably more than any of you here, guilty of forgetting or even trying to deny the mystery of faith. Every week when I sit down with my Bible and begin to study for the sermon I try to formulate a question based on the scripture passages and then I research to find "the answer." If mystery in this church is a lovely, shiny, purple balloon, I am a big, sharp, silver needle set on deflating it. And I'm growing to realize that I'm not doing any of us any favors by neglecting to talk about the mystery of our faith. After all, when it comes to faith—and life in general--it's best not to set up the expectation that there will be answers because then we'll just find ourselves disappointed over and over again. Why did my brother have to die? Why did I get the promotion and he didn't? Why can't I have a child? Why was I born into a comfortable and secure family in America while some other innocent was born to a starving and oppressed family in the Sudan? Why do the other kids at school pick on me? Why am I here? Why, why, why? And the truth is—none of us *really* knows. We want to pretend that we know because then we feel like we have more control over our lives and our minds—but really, we don't. And until we acknowledge that, we won't be able to fully embrace the Holy Mystery that is life and faith and God and all that is, and was, and ever shall be.

And so Marion and I kissed—neither one of us knows exactly how it happened, it's a mystery to us both—and, I'm sure also a mystery to Dick and Corey. But we kissed at a memorial service, we kissed at a time when we were both feeling the joy and complexities of life, we kissed in front of hundreds of people, we shared a moment of Holy Mystery and trust me when I tell you

it's a moment I'll never forget. And so I embrace that mystery and even thank God for it for that mystery reminded me of the Greater Mystery that we come here to ponder, accept, celebrate, praise, and share each Sunday. Thanks be to God—our Great Mystery.