

# Pat Conover: The Secret of Seekers

## The Secret of Seekers

Luke 10:21-22 (follow 7/4 lectionary passage)

*At that moment Jesus exulted in the Holy Spirit and said, I thank you Father, Lord of Heaven and Earth, for hiding these things from the learned and wise, and revealing them to the simple. Yes, Father, such was your choice. Everything is entrusted to me by my Father; no one knows who the Son is but the Father, or who the Father is but the Son, and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.*

There are several mysterious passages like this one in the four gospels that made it into the Bible most of know. The lectionary tends to skip by them. When I was a young seminary student, these passages were talked about as the “messianic secret.” The main question asked was, “Did Jesus claim to be the Messiah while he was alive?” That is an interesting and important question, but this sermon diverges from that standard path.

Luke 10:21-22, and several other passages refer to something vague, in this case translated as “these things.” Just what things might “these things” be? Luke gives us some clues. These things are hidden from the wise but revealed to the simple. This suggests a direct and personal knowing rather than an intellectual “knowing about.” It is the kind of thing you can testify to, but you cannot really argue about. The testimony invites you to an experience rather than a

discussion.

Luke 10:21-22 also tells us that Jesus spoke while “exulting in the Holy Spirit.” This also suggests a speaking out of experience, an ecstatic speaking, an inspired speaking. Moreover, Luke tells us that Jesus is claiming a special relationship with God, a close personal relationship with God as Father or as Abba “Daddy.”

When I was a young seminarian the Christian Gnostic texts discovered in 1945 were not yet available to scholars. We did not know anything directly about the Christian Gnostics other than that they were a significant group in the early church. We knew about them only from the patriarchs of the early church, the same patriarchs of the third century that murdered the Gnostic leaders and burned their books. I was taught to distrust the Gnostics as heretics who believed in some magical mumbo-jumbo version of life-after-death or after the end of the world, people who formed a secret society, had code words, etcetera.

One of the major centers of Christian Gnosis was in Alexandria Egypt, at that time a cultural center of Judaism and Islam. Some Christian Gnostic monk buried a jar full of Gnostic writings that stayed hidden until a farmer discovered them in 1945. These 60 documents are pretty much the sole source of extant Gnostic writing. They include the Gospel of Mary, which I will read from shortly, and the Gospel of Philip, which also informs this sermon. The Gospel of Philip is complete, about 20 pages long and we have only a fragment of the Gospel of Mary, about 6 pages. It has taken scholars quite a while to sort out these works, including the precious Gospel of Thomas.

Here is a sample from the Gospel of Mary 4:33-5:4.

*The Blessed One greeted them saying. "Peace be with you. Receive my peace into yourselves. Beware that no one lead you astray saying Lo here or Lo there! For the Son of Man is within you. Follow after Him! Those who seek him will find him. Go then and preach the gospel of the Empire of God.*

*Do not lay down any rules beyond what I appointed you, and do not give a law like the lawgiver lest you be constrained by it."*

*When he had finished speaking, he left.*

*But the disciples were grieved. They wept greatly, saying, "How shall we go to the Gentiles and preach the gospel of the Empire of the Son of Man? If they did not spare Him, how will they spare us?"*

*Then Mary stood up, greeted them all, and said to her brothers, "Do not weep and do not grieve nor be irresolute, for God's grace will fully be with you and will protect you. Instead, let us praise the greatness of God, for preparing us and making us fully human."*

*When Mary said this, she turned their hearts to the Good and they began to discuss the words of the Savior.*

*Transliteration by Pat Conover based on a translation from the Gnostic Society Library ([www.gnosis.org](http://www.gnosis.org))*

Mary was probably written in the late second or third century, significantly later than the gospels in the Canon. Still, like the other gospels, it should be regarded as an expression of one line of interpretation of the memories of Jesus and the earliest church, a very prominent line in that day, if suppressed in our own.

The novel, "The Da Vinci Code," by Dan Brown, gets a big story line out of this discovery of Gnostic texts. Brown writes as if the Gospel of Mary and the Gospel of Philip are attacks on patriarchal Christianity in favor of an imaginary sect focused on the worship of the integration of male and female, an earth goddess or pagan sect. Brown is right that the Gospel of Mary lifts up Mary Magdalene as a consort of Jesus, who is closer to him than the disciples are and who is more prized by Jesus than the disciples are. Nevertheless, the God that is worshiped is the God of Jesus. Let us try to listen together again to the gospel in the Gospel of Mary.

*Take courage. Do not be afraid. The fullness of God's grace is with you and will protect you. Thank God for preparing us and making us fully human.*

That is a good statement of the gospel. The early church did find its courage in the midst of severe oppression, and though the church, in its turn, became an oppressor, the living truth has not been crushed. Praise God!

Our Seeds of Hope Mission Group has been wrestling with how to share what is precious about Seekers with other congregations. We hope to help other congregations to transform themselves, to draw closer to God both individually and collectively, to take on callings and ministry to the wider world, to find the joys and meaning in being a do-it-yourself community and to

learn that everyone is precious because everyone is needed for the work we have undertaken, for expanding the richness of the life we share.

How shall we share the precious things of Seekers? Seeds of Hope has competent people in terms of creating programs and resources, workshops and guidebooks, classes and retreats. We are full of courage and excitement about the task before us. However, if we put what is precious in a pretty box, a delicious recipe, an engaging metaphor, and think we have done the job then we have made two big mistakes and we are trying hard not to make those mistakes.

The first mistake would be to entice another congregation into finding Seeker's "Angel." We have a beautiful "Angel" but they need to find their own "Angel." To put it differently, we want to help other congregations discover and to become excited about what God is doing among them, both in judgment and in grace. They cannot find that by looking in our cookbook.

The second mistake is that they need to accept the invitation to become a do-it-yourself church. This is about leadership. Maybe we can help a little bit with some understanding, but leadership is first about courage.

*Take courage. Do not be afraid. The fullness of God's grace is with you. Thank God for preparing us and making us fully human.*

We have talked many a time about how challenging it is for new people who come into Seekers to understand what makes us so special. Part of this is because so much of what we do is counter-cultural to white middle class expectations, counter

to bureaucracy and counter to typical voluntary organization culture. We have information to share so you can know about Seekers, but for you to know us well then you have to know us from the inside out. Like carnal knowing, to know us is to love us, to know us is to change, to know us is to become an expanded us.

Richard has been particularly helpful in our mission group because he is newer and right in the middle of little epiphanies. "Oh that's what **they** mean," is becoming "That's what **we** mean."

Seekers makes a lot of use of First Corinthians 12, about being part of one body, about finding our gifts and callings so that we can do our distinct but integrated things. I love the part about learning to appreciate each other as we discover how much we need each other. For example, Linda Strand is helping us with silent retreats. I go on silent retreat about once a year and I need Linda to her job with grace and joy so I can do that. More importantly, I need Linda because I want to live in a community where silent retreat is available to everyone. Silent retreat is one of our little mysteries. You cannot make "it" happen but when it does, it is beautiful.

The Seekers Secret is the Christian Secret and, I believe, it is the same secret that the Christian Gnostics found so precious. I am going to tell you the secret now. If you know the secret, you can nod and say to yourself, "Oh yes." If you do not know it, I hope you can receive it as a Holy Lure, a Tease, a Promise, a Hope, a testimony. Maybe you have been messing around with the secret, prodding it, tasting it, closing your eyes and bumping into it, giving in and hugging – and then pulling back. Maybe you want to believe it but do not

quite dare. Are you ready?

[moment of silence]

As I was saying, it is a joy to live in the truth of God's love, to experience it, to share it with each other and to trade in "freedom from" for "freedom for." It is a joy to give thanks for the moments of grace – for those moments of ecstasy when it all feels so clear and so total, and for the moments of judgment when we get what we need for the gardening we need to do.

The rest of this sermon is about the spiritual challenges of sharing our precious secret at Carroll Street. It is about filling this space with our prayers, soaking our prayers into the walls, noticing the prayers. It is about holiness that is not to be confused with being proper and neat. It requires readiness and attentiveness. It requires memory and hope. It requires staying close to your hunger and your generosity. How can we best be living truth in our new space?

- The first thing to notice is that this is our building. We own it. We can change it. People will look at our building to get their first clues about what we are like as a community. This was not true at 2025. Can our space be transparent without being "posed?" To work this out, one requires a changing consciousness. It requires cleaning up behind you, maybe leaving a bathroom in better shape than you found it. We have to take care of this space and I hope we can come to think of all the little tasks as ways we now have to love each other, ways we have to love the world, ways we have to be preparing our space for wonderful things to happen. It

is a secret. Truly wonderful things can happen here. God is here.

- In the second place, I love the courage, the effort and the caring that has brought this building into being. I love the fact that this building does not tempt us to grandiosity. It is just a brick box with an old house tacked on the back. But I'm proud of this building just the same, proud of how pretty it is, how functional it is, how flexible it is, how environmentally sound it is. I love to show it off to visitors. Moreover, I know my pride can be a problem, a spiritual problem. My pride makes it my building; it has to be your building, and the building of all who join us, and the people who visit us, and it has to be God's building. It is a beautiful building to me and all we can do with it is give it away, give it to each other, give it to the world.
- In the third place, our building is in a specific space. We chose this space after considering many alternatives. Those of you who live farther away honor this space with your generosity and I thank you. For better and worse – we are here. We are not at this point a neighborhood church and it is not clear to me we ever will be. We gathered from the entire Metropolitan area when we were at 2025 and I think of our front door as the internet, the webs of relationships we bring, the reputation we have in books and articles, etc. Nevertheless, we are in one place and this place is on the boundary between two neighborhoods. If we do not pay attention to both neighborhoods we will be turning away from what God is providing to us, and we will suffer God's judgment.
- In the fourth place, we are visible, highly visible. We move here from invisibility. This is a big deal. It is symbolized for me by the big windows on the sidewalk. People can just look into our space. People walk by, a lot. People drive up to and drive by – a lot. People will see our tile mosaic and our name from the Metro



platform, from red line trains. Are we ready to be seen? What is it that we want people to see? Will they see our secret?

- In the fifth place, we are spending 1 million, six hundred thousand dollars for this place, not counting interest on our loans to ourselves. That is a lot of money, a huge achievement for a congregation our size, a major mark of our courage and commitment. Thankfully, the building does not look ostentatious. We can enjoy a quiet pride.

I feel that the process we had for raising the money was Spirit led. There was lots of prayer. There were never any pressure tactics. If anything, our concern was about the opposite of pressure tactics. I named it to myself as Mollie's question. Mollie was not able to give a lot of money for Carroll Street and she was worried that she might not be welcomed because she did not give more. Our answer to Molly was, "Give enough so that you feel you are participating. We are interested in an equality of caring, not an equality of dollars."

The financial stewardship of this building is ongoing. I hope all of you will participate in the financial stewardship of this building in ways that make you feel on the inside of owning this place. We stepped out in trust on this project and we have gained some trust as a spiritual legacy. Trust is a real good thing for courage. The secret is that we can trust God and do more than we have ever imagined. Let us not forget this secret as we turn from the long process of getting here to the wonderful opportunities we will find here, including all the opportunities that are going to be showing up with new people who will inherit this legacy, build on it, transform it. It is a whole lot of money and we have to hold it lightly,

give it away, make this building a gift to God, a gift to the world.

The best definition I ever had of good poetry is that good poetry happens when it is the reader who has the "Aha." I would like to be a good poet, so it is all up to you. I am going to read my poem, "The Rug You Can't Spill Anything On," from *Creation and Other Things*, the collected poetry of Seekers Church.

## ***What is it waiting for?***

### ***The Rug You Can't Spill Anything On.***

*Was it waiting for my Birthday Party?*

*With pink ice cream and chocolate cake.*

*The rug might have thought they tasted good too.*

*No. We had to have the ice cream and cake on the patio.*

*Was it waiting for me to come home from a show ball fight?*

*I was so wet and dirty and tired.*

*It would have been so nice to collapse for a minute...*

*It was so warm and dry and pretty.*

*I had to hurry to the bathroom and undress, standing on the tile.*

*Was it waiting for Aunt Hellen to come visit?*

*We had cheese and pickles and olives and sardines  
and so many good things.*

*We sat around the dining room table and used forks and napkins.*

*Was it waiting for my dog Puny?*

*He cut his paw on a rock and wanted a nice place to lick it.*

*But she had to stay in the kitchen.*

*I've got to go away now, rug.*

*Hope something happens to you sometime, beside vacuuming.*

