

The Third Sunday in Lent
March 11, 2018
Matt. 14:13

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Outward Practice: Solitude

Grace to you and peace from our loving God, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

The spiritual practice under consideration today is solitude. As a reminder, we have now considered the four inward practices: meditation, prayer, fasting, and study. Last week, we started looking at the outward practices with silence. Solitude is the second of four outward practices. In the coming week, we will also reflect on the other two—submission and service.

As an introvert, the spiritual practice of solitude is perhaps my favorite. I love being quiet and alone. Whether it's walking in a forest or park, or sitting on our deck or screened porch, or simply being in a quiet place, I am renewed by solitude.

Not everyone, of course, feels this way. Indeed, it seems that most folks fear being alone and do all sorts of things to avoid it. Many surround themselves with noise and crowds. Many seem to need to fill the spaces of conversation with many words, when only a few are needed. And these days, folks seem to keep a near-constant watch on their cell phones, hoping that someone is seeking to connect with them through a text or social media or even a phone call (They are called "phones" aren't they?).

T.S. Eliot wrote of our odd culture in his poem "Ash Wednesday": "Where shall the world be found, where will the word resound? Not here, there is not enough silence."

Solitude is not the same as aloneness. And loneliness and solitude are hard put to dwell at the same time in one heart. As I reflect on this, I realize that I almost never feel lonely. I don't know whether that is a particular blessing of being introverted or not. But as I experience it, solitude is born out of an abiding relationship with God. It seems to me that it is because of the powerful sense that God is always with me that I don't feel lonely when I am alone. It may actually be a bit of a contradiction, then, to speak of solitude in this context. Because I don't really feel alone, quiet time for me that is separate from the company of other human beings, isn't really solitude. It is a different experience of being accompanied. Alone, yet not alone. It's what I know as solitude.

I remember a conversation that included my father, another pastor, and me. As I recall the encounter, I was about to set off on a retreat during which I would be mostly alone for an entire week. It may have been prior to a week at St. Meinrad, a monastery in southern Indiana, for time of silent retreat. My father asked, "Well, what will you do all of that time." Before I could answer, the other pastor, interrupting and speaking in an assertive way that took me somewhat aback, said, "If you have to ask, you'll never know."

I don't remember any more about that conversation. But it does make me wonder whether some people are more disposed towards solitude than others. And it may take some practice for solitude to become meaningful. In a course with Henri Nouwen at Yale Divinity School, a well-known spiritual author and sensitive professor, seminary students were required to spend half an hour each day in silent prayer. It was then that I discovered the cave-like undercroft of Marquand Chapel as well as the blessings of solitude. It takes time to fully appreciate solitude, and there were many times when I found those half-hours more burden than blessing, especially when there was so much to do, with a young family and studies and work in those days. If you decide to enter into the practice of solitude, please be patient with yourself. Nouwen used to say, "If you fall asleep, that's okay. Prayer in solitude is also about being aware of our body's needs. It's about paying attention."

Solitude is more a state of mind and heart than it is a place, or even silence. There is a solitude of the heart that can be maintained at all times. Crowds, or the lack of them, have little to do with the inward attentiveness that may arise in solitude. Even in the midst of noise and confusion, we may settle into a deep inner peace. This is the same insight we came to when in discussing prayer we spoke of a portable sanctuary of the heart.

And while solitude might seem to be another inward practice, it has outward manifestations. It offers the freedom to be alone, not in order to be away from people but to better commune with God. Jesus, we recall, practiced this pattern of living. He inaugurated his ministry by spending forty days alone (Matt. 4:1-11). He spent a night by himself before choosing the disciples (Luke 6:12). Upon hearing of John the Baptist's death, he "withdrew from there in a boat to a lonely place apart" (Matt. 14:13). After the feeding of the five thousand Jesus "went up into the hills by himself..." (Matt. 14:23). There are many such passages, culminating on the Mount of Olives in the Garden of Gethsemane on a final fateful night.

In his book "Life Together" Dietrich Bonhoeffer titles two consecutive chapters "The Day With Others" and "The Day Alone." Both are important to the spirit. He writes, "Let the one who cannot be alone beware of community...Let the one who is not in community beware of being alone...Each by itself has profound pitfalls and perils. One who wants fellowship without solitude plunges into the void of words and feelings, and one who seeks solitude without fellowship perishes in the abyss of vanity, self-infatuation, and despair." (pp. 77f.).

And so, we seek out the recreating stillness of solitude in order to be with others meaningfully. And we look to the fellowship and accountability of others if we want to alone fruitfully. Cultivating both is important.

Silence is an important part of the practice of solitude. While one can be at peace even in the midst of turmoil, nurturing solitude benefits from time—for me, extended time—in silence. On a sabbatical many years ago, I remember going to the abbey made famous by Thomas Merton—Gethsemani Abbey in Trappist, Kentucky. It is one of the most memorable retreats I have taken, perhaps especially because the monks take vows of silence. And visitors are encouraged to honor the silence of the place by never speaking. There are some reserved areas for speaking as folks feel the need. Even meals are spent in silence, with those who are present sitting on only one side of long tables. Everyone faces the windows in the refectory, which look out upon the beautiful grounds of the abbey.

By the way, anyone is welcome at Gethsemani. They take hospitality exceedingly seriously. One pays what one may. And, also by the way, the food prepared by the monks is marvelous. As is participation with them in the Liturgy of the Hours. There are eight such liturgies each day, each with its own name and time: Matins at midnight or near that time, Lauds at 3 a.m., Prime at 6 a.m., Terce at 9 a.m., Sext at noon, None at 3 p.m., Vespers at about 6 p.m., and Compline at 9 p.m. And no, I did not participate in all of them. And I often give thanks that Lutherans have tended to stick with fewer options for liturgy. Even so, being present with those who observe such disciplined routine was inspiring. And the silence, including for me the foregoing of what I often view as required small talk at retreats or conferences I attend with folks I don't know, was refreshing.

Have you noticed the words of the confession? It is, by the way, intentionally placed in a different location in our liturgies during Lent in order to highlight it. It also emphasizes the ritual reconciliation with God that precedes our ritual reconciliation with one another at the Passing of the Peace. Being reconciled with God and one another, we may be better prepared to receive Holy Communion. Here are the words that strike me as relevant to silence and solitude:

We have spoken when we should have kept quiet.
We were silent when we should have said something.

These are problems common among us humans that would benefit from solitude. We tend to talk too much about what matters little. And we tend to speak nearly not at all about what matters much. Time in quiet alone might sharpen our spirits on these scores. The practice of solitude is intended in part to help us learn when to speak and when to refrain from speaking, as Ecclesiastes counsels (3:7).

Bonhoeffer writes, "Real silence, real stillness, really holding one's tongue comes only as the sober consequence of spiritual stillness." (p. 79) St. Dominic is reported to have visited St. Francis, and throughout the entire meeting neither spoke a single word. Only when we learn to be truly silent may we learn to speak the word that is needed when it is needed.

When commenting on fasting a couple of weeks ago, I noted what I perceive as the tyranny of food—that it is everywhere for those of us who live in the abundance of middle class America. The practice of solitude, we might say, is about the tyranny of words and the tyranny of noise. It is about getting all of that out of the way so that we might listen for the still, small voice of God.

May your times of solitude refresh your spirit in the all-embracing presence of God and help you to enter more fully into the peace that passes all understanding. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord, unto abundant life. Amen.

[Based on Richard J. Foster's "Celebration of Discipline"]