

In Praise of Solitude

Mark 1:35-39; Matthew 14:22-27

June 8, 2008

One can have studied Jesus' teachings, be well acquainted with the stories he told and analogies he used, know well the content of his personal encounters with people, and still be oblivious to how often he deliberately interrupted all of that to create islands of solitude for himself. He wasn't always successful in doing so, but there is no question but that quiet interludes were very important to him. To offer only a few samples, several of which I read to you earlier: "And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray." "In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed." "He entered a house hoping that no one would know that he was there..." (Mark 7:24.) "He went off alone where he was praying." (Luke 9:18). Then Jesus departed again to a mountain, to be alone." (John 6:15) "He withdrew from them all, about a stone's throw, and there he was alone..." (Luke 22:41)

There were plenty of others, including those where he attempted to be alone but people followed him. At least on one occasion he is described as getting into a boat and sailing off, leaving the crowd at the water's edge with the water lapping over their sneakers. Doesn't that sound just a little un-Jesus-like? Shouldn't he have felt some duty to put all of those needs that swirled around him first?

Years ago I copied off a quotation from one of the books of Anne Morrow Lindbergh where she wrote, "If one sets aside time for a business appointment, a trip to the beauty shop, a social engagement, or a shopping expedition, that time is generally accepted as inviolable. But if one says, "I cannot join you because that is my hour to be alone" one is considered to be rude, egotistical, self-absorbed or strange.

And she goes on to say, "What an odd commentary on our culture when being alone is considered suspect; when one has to apologize for it, make excuses, hide the fact that one practices it, as if it were a secret vice!"

It's an interesting, intriguing point, isn't it? Taking it back again to Jesus, picturing him very much engaged in the demands and concerns immersing him, with one person saying, "Jesus, this'll only take a minute or two..." and another pleading, "Jesus, I've got this friend who has this terrible problem and I desperately need your advice..." and yet another calling out to him that if he'll only "accompany her home (just a couple of blocks from here) and talk to her husband, it's bound to straighten him out..." and still a bunch of others imploring him to hang around just long enough to repeat one more time what it was that he

said in his sermon on the mount the other day” ...to all those needs, problems, concerns and more, he feels free, and in fact feels impelled, to go off to be alone.

Wouldn't it be thought that that was just a little selfish, maybe a bit strange, possibly even insensitive? But he repeatedly does just that.

Even so, the reaction of many to that may well be something like: “Fine, Anne Lindbergh; fine, Jesus. Go seek some solitude if that is good for you. As for me, I don't want to be alone. And I know a lot of people who are alone and are really miserable – just plain lonely. I'm the kind who needs to be kept busy. I need people around me; need to have a lot of activity and stimulation, need to have things going on.”

That can sometimes smack of high motivation, strong interests, noble instincts. But that's NOT what it always is; not by a long shot.

An old Peanuts cartoon strip shows Charlie Brown and Linus talking. Linus says, “Someday I'd like to own an Old English Sheep Dog. They are so noble and brave. I really admire the way they faithfully stick so close to the sheep and constantly keep track of their every move.” Snoopy, who is listening in on these comments, is shown in the last frame thinking: “Actually, Sheep Dogs are just afraid to be alone.”

Interesting point. That may not be true of Sheep Dogs, but many of us seem to have a back of the mind sense that solitude is to be avoided, that solitude is synonymous with loneliness, that at the very least seeking time alone is to be anti-social or may be a bit neurotic, that a meaning-filled life is, by definition, one crammed with activity.

The book, The Screwtape Letters by the late C.S. Lewis, purports to be a collection of letters from a senior devil written to the junior, apprentice devils, advising them on how to be effective in their undermining and corrupting of life on earth. One of the letters touches upon an aspect of this. He says: “No moment of time should be surrendered to “quiet.” Noise must occupy every moment -- NOISE, the grand dynamism, the audible expression of all that is ruthless, exultant and virile; NOISE which alone defends us against thoughtful scruples, silly qualms, and lofty dreams. We will make the whole universe noise in the end. We have already made great strides in that direction with the people of earth. Yes, the melodies and silences of Heaven will be shouted down in the end.”

That's a piece of it. That's why silence often feels uncomfortable. It's because it is experienced as one of the symptoms of isolation. The absence of a general, noisy din is seen as a symptom of aloneness and that is unnerving and bad because it could mean that he or she is irrelevant or he is unloved or has been left out.

That is why, for some, it can seem best and safest to keep cramming one's life full of activities, distractions and obligations as a way of never ending up stuck with being alone with themselves, and/or worse yet, having what C.S. Lewis called "thoughtful scruples," or impelling dreams, or difficult questions creeping in upon you in the quietness.

A portrayal of orchestrating one's life that way was described in a short poem which said: "On Monday she lunched with the Housing Committee. With statistics and stew she was filled. Then she dashed to a tea about 'Crime in Our City' and then met with the Church Women's Guild. On Tuesday she went to a Babies' Week lunch and a tea on 'Good Citizenship.' At dinner she spoke at the Trade Union Hall. There wasn't a date she dared skip. On Wednesday she managed two annual dinners, one at noon and the other at night; on Thursday a luncheon for YW winners and a dinner on 'War, Is It Right?' 'World Problems We Face' was her Friday noon date; a luncheon address as you've guessed. And she wielded a fork while a man from New York spoke that evening on social unrest. On Saturday noon she fell into a swoon – missed a talk on the 'Youth of Our Land.' Poor thing! She was through! She never came to. And she died with a spoon in her hand."

Let me hasten to admit that there is an extent to which I know the poem much too well. I keep running into him whenever I look in the mirror.

Even so, though, it has dawned on me over the years, how fortunate I am, having ended up as a clergyperson. I am fortunate insofar as built right into my vocation is not only quite a lot of solitude, but it is solitude that, because it has lead to sermons, mandates my doing serious and orderly reflection upon life, upon life's meaning, upon the human adventure, about growth versus deterioration, about being loving versus being self-absorbed, and a whole lot more internal searching pushing me to grow spiritually whether I wanted to or not.

How many professions have that kind of time and that requirement built right into them. So it's hard for me to determine how many hours it takes to turn out a sermon, because I cogitate at various times and on various issues. But I look at that time as a gift – a gift even when it doesn't go well, which it sometimes doesn't.

So regardless of whether it sounds on the surface as an inefficient waste of time, this discipline of carving out some soul-restoring interludes is to be seen as a vital piece of yours and my living effectively and wisely in a noisy, distracting, crowded, disorienting, technopolitan world.

It is to understand that solitude is something much more than the chanced absence of people or the absence of anything else, for that matter.

Solitude is, instead, the PRESENCE of some very vital things: things like clarity, perspective, at-homeness, calm, self-possession, reorientation, and still more that puts a person back together from all that there is that fragments us.

Yes, it is in solitude that we are most likely intelligently to sort through and regain perspective on the random conglomeration of stuff that we had to push from our minds in order to keep moving: the incidents, shocks, mistakes, disappointments and bruising that impinge upon the lives of each one of us in the course of a day or a week.

Intentionally taking time alone and apart is sometimes the only way we ever take the journey inward to where we deal candidly with our own self-defenses, our habitual rationalizations and the repressed guilt that causes so much trouble and distortion in us. It is easy to postpone or deflect, but that solitary inward journey is absolutely necessary in order to really forgive ourselves.

More positively, for most of us, in solitude is where we are most likely to give full rein to our capacities to imagine, to transcend, to explore the spiritual dimension of ourselves, that is, to be in touch with what is the most exciting and unexplored side of us human beings.

Most of the time, reconnecting with our own aliveness happens most readily in solitude. Just renewing one's sense of his own body as the miraculous universe that each of us is, getting quiet enough to feel the simple miracle of being alive, sensing and knowing, requires some kind of a solitary "breather" for most of us.

And particularly in the tumult, turmoil and muddle of modern urban life, this deliberately disconnecting ourselves from the turbulence, the churning, the flurry, is the only way that most of us ever get around to being reconnected with, and nourished by the beauty and the intricacy of the larger world and creation around us.

We could go on and on in this vein, but you get the principle, don't you?

And I hope you know that this isn't to prescribe a program of monk-like withdrawal into navel-gazing or into other-worldly contemplations. That sort of thing may work well for some, but it is only one limited way of being intentional about the restoring, calming and nurturing of one's spirit. How renewal happens to us is a very individual thing. Only you can determine whether it is sunset watching, patio sitting, walking, praying, immersing yourself in music, journaling, poetry reading, some form of meditation, or any of a dozen other possibilities. But count on it, when you identify the right one, it has the power to restore your soul.

Given half a chance, our minds and spirits do a remarkable job of maintaining themselves. They do so even in the midst of enervating, nerve-jangling, frustrating periods

of our lives. The art of it is the “giving them half a chance,” and that is completely within the power of each of us.

So if you haven’t already done so, build some healing, re-spiriting times into your living, whatever that means for you in particular.

It occurs to me that if, to maintain balance in his life, Jesus Christ needed to do so, it’s quite likely that you and I need it too.