



Round Hill Community Church

Sermon: July 19, 2009

The Sweetness of Solitude, Shannon A. White

Mark 6: 30-34, 53-56

I don't know about you, but I have soaked up the sunshine and warmer temperatures over the last week and a half! It seems summer is now in full swing...a time when many of us take some additional time with family and friends either at home or on vacation...slowing down our schedules, spending lazy afternoons reading, cooking outside on the grill or taking a walk and enjoying beautiful sunsets.

For me, even if I'm at home, this time of year is more relaxing for the mere fact that there are fewer people around on the roadways. The quieter pace of summer invites us to consider the sweetness of solitude.

Perhaps no one has written more on the topic of solitude than Thomas Merton, the American Trappist monk who died in the 1960's. Merton wrote on the topic for some 20 years and is perhaps best known for his book, *Seven Storey Mountain*, an autobiographical book explaining his own experience with solitude.

At first, Merton believed only Monks were called to a contemplative life, but later, he changed and urged the laity to consider the benefits of a time spent alone with God.

In fact Merton says that time is the only way to find one's true self:

"Not all men are called to be hermits, but all men need enough silence and solitude in their lives to enable the deep inner voice of their own true self to be heard at least occasionally. ... For he cannot go on happily for long, unless he is in contact with the springs of spiritual life which are hidden in the depths of this own true soul." (Merton from his website, no textual reference given)

I was talking with Banks Adams at coffee hour last Sunday. He recalled a story that he said was as vivid to him today as it was back when he was six years old...(a few short years ago!) Banks told me it was the first time his parents had ever taken him to the beach. He was living in South Carolina at the time and this was a trip to Pawley's Island. He said...with the look of a little boy twinkling in his eye....As they drove up to the beach, he says there was just a small area of water and then a huge dune, over which you couldn't see. Banks described climbing up the dune, and when he reached the top, he was astounded to seenothing but endless water and the horizon...at once the feeling that this was a world that now lay open overwhelmed him. I love that remembrance

You all know...when you take time in solitude...it's as if a whole new world opens to you. That's been my experience. For over a decade, back before my daughter came into my life, I used to go on silent retreat

twice a year. I had heard about the Jesuit Center for Spiritual Growth in Wernersville, Pennsylvania through one of the ministers at my church. And it became for me a haven for spiritual exploration and healing. Sometimes I would go for a long weekend and sometimes longer...the longest time being, 7 days. During the time there, most of the day would be spent in silence, including meals. Only an hour out of the day was spent talking with a priest or a nun who provided spiritual direction. That means, they would listen to me talk about what was happening in my life and offer guidance as to what they discerned to be God's movement in my life at that time. Then they would give me scripture readings upon which to meditate over the next 24 hours based on what issues came up in our conversation.

For example, I remember struggling with some self esteem issues during one visit. I was assigned to meditate over several days on...Isaiah 43:1 and following...which reads "But thus now says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel; Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine...Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you... The assignment over the next 24 hours until we met again, was to meditate on those verses during 4 or 5 sessions of prayer.. 30-45 minutes each... to see what inner movement happened and then journal about it. Over and over, those words washed through me going deeper and deeper as a sort of mantra...until something deep within responded and I released some deeply held fear or belief.

It always amazed me during and after those times taken away in solitude, the amount of guidance and direction I was given in my spiritual life. A whole new dimension of life was opened up to me.

Our scripture reading this morning speaks to the need for solitude in our lives. The disciples have been out with Jesus on a mission..they have performed exorcisms, anointed and healed the sick. Jesus then calls them to come away with him to rest for a while. They hadn't eaten in a while and they were exhausted. So they head out in a boat to get away from the crowds....People whom Jesus sees as needing a great deal of love and compassion. He says they are "sheep without a shepherd."

Then the lectionary reading skips a few stories and picks back up later as they cross over to the other side of the water and resume their ministry. What's interesting to me is what is skipped...the hole in the doughnut of the text...it's the story of the feeding of the 5000...you remember where the hungry crowd gathers and Jesus has compassion and somehow makes the five loaves and two fish stretch to feed everyone.

After that...the scripture says in verse 45, ...Immediately Jesus makes his disciples get into the boat and go on to the other side to get some rest, while he stays to dismiss the crowd...Jesus, then, goes up to the mountain by himself to pray in solitude....when he meets back up with the disciples...he walks out to them on the sea which is rough from high winds. Not recognizing them, the disciples are terrified, thinking they are seeing a ghost. But Jesus calms not only the disciples down, but the sea too. Our story then picks up as they reach the shore and the needs of the crowds resume for healing.

This passage gives us some very interesting information about the need for solitude.

First of all...our spirits crave it. Beyond our need for rest from activity that is draining in our lives, we need spiritual centering to be of any use at all to those around us as well as to maintain some sense of balance and sanity in our lives.

We all know, nothing in this life is certain, yet we do everything we can think of to make ourselves feel as if we are in control. Taking time away in solitude helps us to get a right perspective and plug into the source that can bring stability amid the stormy waves we face in our lives.

Without time in solitude, we can get all out of whack. One Episcopal colleague says in a blog entry that even well-intentioned activity can go awry, if we're not centered. "We come to think we're loved because we are a devoted partner or parent. We feel we can stand tall because we've made a difference in our school, town or church. We even start thinking that God loves us because we so busy doing the right things.

We set ourselves up in a terrible way when we derive our feelings of worth from our usefulness, for no human being has the power to continue and always succeed in such driving, active pursuit."

In the end, there are absolute limits to our usefulness. But rather than face that fact we deny it, and get busier and busier trying to escape the truth staring us so plainly in the face: if we stake our self worth on how we perform in life, we are going to work ourselves to death in our constant scrambling for validation by others."

Quoting another author, Henri Nouwen, who has also written much on solitude, the colleague writes, "In solitude we become aware that our worth is not the same as our usefulness." (The Running Priest Blog)

In fact another anonymous author says those of us on this spiritual journey have a unique task in this world: "Leadership is a profoundly spiritual vocation. Margaret Wheatley writes that no one can create sufficient stability and equilibrium for people to feel secure and safe. Instead, "as leaders we must help people move into a relationship with uncertainty and chaos." (www.nextreformation.com blog)

Secondly, the text reminds us what we all know...that there will always be something worthy that vies for our attention to keep us from getting moments alone in solitude...Every day we are bombarded with news, with needs and with causes. Loved ones or strangers might interrupt us, which in themselves may be God-appointed moments. But we must also take time alone.

Not only that, but when we do find time alone, just quieting our minds down from all we need to do can be a challenge. Let me tell you, during my time on silent retreat, the wind down in the first 24 hours was always excruciating...I would almost literally climb the walls of the grand old monastery due to all of the silence I suddenly faced. Then, finally, when my inner spirit understood I was going to pay attention and listen to all of the things I had successfully blocked out during the busyness of my life on the outside...things could start to happen.

Thirdly, maintaining a practice of solitude...to recharge and recenter... must be a priority, not only if we are not to burn out over time, but to even find the power to do the ministry to which we have been called.

Here's Henri Nouwen again in his fabulous book: *Out of Solitude* :

"...we hear restful breathing. Surrounded by hours of moving, we find a moment of stillness. In the heart of much involvement there are words of withdrawal. In the midst of action there is contemplation. After much togetherness there is solitude.

The more I read this nearly silent sentence locked in between the loud words of action, the more I have the sense that the secret of Jesus' ministry is hidden in that lonely place where he went to pray, early in the morning, long before dawn."

On the website The Next Reformation, the blogger makes a case for a formula in Jesus' ministry that fits here with what we read in Mark. So often in ministry, I have wanted to do it by myself. If it didn't work, I went to others and said, "Please!" searching for a community to help me. If that didn't work, maybe I'd start praying.

But the order that Jesus teaches us is the reverse. It begins by being with God in solitude; then it creates a fellowship, a community of people with whom the mission is being lived; and finally this community goes out

together to heal and to proclaim good news.”

Surrounded by this shroud of support and love...somehow...then, the chaos and uncertainty in life seems bearable, doesn't it?

May you find many moments of sweet solitude in these days ahead...

I'll close with Merton's Prayer from "Thoughts in Solitude"

MY LORD GOD, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.