

Title: Solitude and Service
Text: Mark 1:35-39
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Immanuel Baptist Church
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Thomas Merton says that when we are constantly in movement, always busy meeting the demands of our social obligations and fulfilling our social role we are able to escape from our deeper self and the questions it poses. Merton says that no matter how honest and open we tend to be in our social relations with others it is always to some extent a mask.

I think what Merton is saying is that our social self, the self that is shaped as a result of all our social relations and activities, can be a mask that hides our true self from our conscious awareness. It prevents us from seeing and knowing who we really are. This is why mystics like Merton emphasize the need for silence and solitude. Only in silence and solitude can we get in touch with who we really are.

In our text we see how important times of solitude, prayer, and reflection were for Jesus. Jesus withdrew to a “solitary place” People were pressing around him wanting him to heal their loved ones. But Jesus was a human being, not a superman; Jesus could only do so much. He needed to be emotionally and spiritually replenished. If Jesus needed this in a time before automobiles, business deadlines, and email, how much more do we need it now, when busyness and hurry are part of everyday life?

We need solitary space to evaluate the course and direction of our lives, because there are so many things that can misdirect us. Writing over a half-century ago the German theologian Paul Tillich, who was a keen observer of American Christian culture, was struck by the tendency of American Christians to speak so casually about God without much thought. His observation was that most of this God-talk by American evangelicals was nothing more than self-flattery. He thought American Christians should put a moratorium on all their religious talk so that something new might arise.

Another German theologian and pastor who had quite a lot to say about this was Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He was imprisoned and martyred by the Nazis for his leadership in the Confessing Church of Germany in its resistance to Hitler. He watched the vast majority of Christians in Germany recast their Christian faith in terms that were compatible with the racist ideals of Hitler’s National Socialism. In the midst of so much complicity in evil and to pressure to conform Bonhoeffer saw the need to be still as a means of finding the center, of coming to be aligned with the will of Jesus Christ. In his book, “Life Together” he writes,

“Silence is the simple stillness of the individual under the Word of God. [Not the Bible, Jesus Christ, the living Word] We are silent at the beginning of the day because God should have the first word, and we are silent before going to sleep because the last word also belongs to God. We keep silence solely for the sake of the Word, and therefore not in order to show disregard for the Word but rather to honor and receive it.”

For Bonhoeffer the time of renewal, the time of silence and solitude was a time to bring one’s life under the living Word, Jesus Christ and to make one’s life align with his purpose and will. If we spent more time in silence, listening to the living Word, studying and reflecting on the teachings of Jesus, reflecting on his life and actions, the way he approached his death, perhaps we would not be so inclined to adopt the values and attitudes and goals of our world.

Too often in contemporary Christianity there is no distinguishable difference between the way Christians live and the way the world at large lives. In fact, the only difference in many cases has to do with what we believe, not how we actually live. As far as lifestyle there is little difference.

But if we take the time to reflect on the life of Christ and our own life in light of Christ we are able to see our shortcomings, and we gain a clearer vision of what we are called to be and do. As we abide in Christ, as we sink down in study, thought, reflection, and prayer, as we dwell upon and in Christ, we will be conformed to Christ, we will bear the fruit of Christ, the fruit of simplicity and love.

The more we dwell in Christ the more we realize that Christianity is not about power, not about political clout, not about bigness and greatness and making a name for ourselves, not about how many people we can convert to our way of thinking and believing; and yet how often do these very things dominate the Christian landscape and determine the decisions that we make as churches and individual Christians.

When I was right out of seminary I secured a position with a very conservative Southern Baptist Church that operated a Christian school. I taught at their school and pastored a small congregation that they were supporting. I was responsible to the Pastor and deacons of the sponsoring church. I discovered fairly soon that they mainly were interested in one thing. Nothing else mattered much. What they were concerned about was the number of baptisms I reported. They didn’t care how I did it—the techniques I used, how young a child was, or the pressure I put on people. They were out to get a certain quota. The church functioned, of course, on what Brian McLaren has called a hell-evasion theology, so professions of faith were very important. I understand that theology. Occasionally I will receive an advertisement for some evangelist that will headline: 53 saved in Revival. Those numbers are important if you have a hell-evasion theology.

What I later come to realize, however, that the bottom line wasn't really so much about saving people from hell. That, of course, was a part of it, but what really mattered was boosting their baptism numbers so that they could be one of the top churches in the Kentucky Baptist Convention in baptisms. It was mainly about making a name for the church.

What is it that separates the church from the world? Is it what we believe? Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. By your love people will know that you are my disciples. By your fruit, by your good works your light will shine and God will be glorified. Bonhoeffer called the church of his day to make radical reforms. In light of the church's acquiescence and complicity in evil Bonhoeffer said that the church should give away all its assets and serve the world anonymously, refusing to call attention to itself. He said that "all Christian thinking, speaking and organizing" should be limited to "prayer and righteous action," that is, it should pursue peace and justice and the good of others. He said: "The time of words is over." I wonder what kind of reformation would happen in the church if just 25 percent of all Christians in our land put that into practice.

The reason we withdraw, the reason for stillness, silence, study, and solitude, the reason for sacred time with the living Christ is so we can align our lives according to his will, so we can serve his cause in the world, so we can know his compassion and love, and be instruments of his mercy to the suffering and agents of his justice to the oppressed.

In our Gospel text after the disciples found Jesus, who had withdrawn from everyone, he said to the disciples: "Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come." And Mark tells us that he traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons. Jesus emerged from his solitary place empowered, knowing what he was about and knowing what he was called to do.

Times of spiritual renewal are vital to our mission, but we must guard against using sacred time as an excuse. Dr. Charles Marsh, Professor of Religion at the University of Virginia issues this warning, "In my southern childhood, most of us in the white churches were quite content to remain still and silent in response to the urgencies of racism and civil rights. Faced with the moral imperatives of our time—social justice for the disenfranchised, the reform of a complacent and acquiescent church—we opted for country clubs, for summer cotillions, and for the secure spaces of segregated schools, churches and neighborhoods. We took refuge in serene detachment." Marsh concludes: "Stillness can be a polite form of indifference or self-indulgence." The purpose of our stillness is not to detach ourselves from involvement in the great injustices of the world; it is rather, to gain strength for the journey and courage for the battle.

After Jesus was baptized by John in the desert the Spirit led Jesus into the desert wilderness where he was tempted by Satan. Mark says: “he was with the wild animals/beasts, and angels attended to him.” That’s Mark’s way of saying that he lived amidst great danger and conflict, but he was right where he was suppose to be, and God was with him.

Jesus, when he called disciples, told them to count the cost, to die to their ego and self-centeredness, and to be prepared for trouble and hardship, for he knew they would face opposition and various kinds of trials. If we never encounter opposition then we are probably not doing the will of Christ. Our commitment to Christ will involve struggles and challenges.

John Woolman was a successful Quaker merchant who lived a comfortable life until God convicted him of the offense of slavery. Woolman gave up his prosperous business, used his money to purchase the freedom of slaves, wore undyed suites to avoid using dye produced by slave labor, and traveled on foot in solidarity with slaves who were not permitted to ride in carriages. Largely through the efforts of this “quiet revolutionary” by 1787 not a single American Quaker owned a slave.

Quaker philosopher Elton Trueblood writes: “Occasionally we talk of our Christianity as something that solves problems, there is a sense in which it does. Long before it does so, however, it increases both the number and the intensity of our problems. Even intellectual questions are increased by the acceptance of a strong religious faith.”

Sisters and brothers, time with God in solitude empowers us and gives us the courage to face the challenges we encounter in service of the kingdom of God.

For some of us being still, setting aside time in study, prayer, and reflection will not be easy because we crave noise and activity. We live in flight and movement. We micro-manage, we multi-task, we network. We are addicted to a fast pace. When I see my son on the couch with his computer, school book opened, working on homework, television on, music coming out of the computer speakers, cell phone ringing and responding to text messages, I know something is not getting his full attention. Until we see the need for the discipline we will probably not make it a priority.

There was a swimmer who had a cabin by the lake. He liked to take an early swim in the mornings. One morning he was a fair distance from the shore when a sudden fog rolled in and he lost his bearing. In a panic he thrashed about in the water, starting first this way and then in a different direction. Finally, he decided to be as still as he could to regain his composure. In the silence, he heard his wife calling from shore. He was able to discern the direction of the voice and it guided him home.

How many of us are just beating the water, thrashing about, starting first this way and then that way, unsure of our direction. We need to listen to the voice of the living Christ who invites us to be his friends and partners in the kingdom of God.

That voice speaks to us now, calling us to take up our cross, to die our ego, and to let go of our agenda. The voice beckons us to a life of simplicity and love and service, to pursue peace and justice, and to engage in the hard work of listening and caring for others.

As we remember the sacrifice our Lord made for us in behalf of God's cause in the world, let us renew our commitment to take up the cross and follow Jesus wherever that may lead.

Gracious God, as we eat this bread and drink this cup help us to discern the love that compelled Christ to give his life over to you and your cause, even unto death at the hand of his enemies. Grant us the faith to participate in Christ's death and to walk in Christ's Spirit as we face the challenges of God's kingdom in the world. In Christ's name we pray.
Amen.