

## Practice Makes Perfect (Almost): Solitude

Mike Hagan

Ruth Haley Barton says, "Solitude is a place. It is a place in time that is set apart for God and God alone, a time when we unplug and withdraw from the noise of interpersonal interactions . . ." (2006, 32).

Teresa of Avila wrote, "Settle yourself in solitude and you will come upon Him in yourself."

It is an inward and an outward discipline. As Barton labels her chapter on this subject, it is creating space for God. Lots of religious activity is very noisy. Most of the time it is not an intimate space where the soul can come out of its shy place to meet God. On top of that we are inundated with cell phones, ipads, computers, music, noise. How can we hear the still, small voice of God?

### Examples from the life of Jesus

- 40 days alone in the wilderness, Matt 4:1-11
- Upon the death of John the Baptizer, Matt 14:13
- After ministering, Matt 14:23
- Mt of Transfiguration, Matt 17:1-9; Luke 9:28-36
- Garden of Gethsemane, Matt 26:36-46; Luke 22:39ff
- Morning, Mark 1:35
- Instructed to come away, Mark 6:31
- After many healings, Luke 4:42
- Healing of leper, Luke 5:16
- Before choosing the 12, Luke 6:12-13
- Before question on who he is, Luke 9:18
- Praying, Luke 11:1

### Purpose?

It is not an accident that in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Life Together* (1954) the chapter on "The Day Together" (ch. 2) is followed by "The Day Alone" (ch. 3). He says, "Let him who cannot be alone beware of community. Let him who is not in community beware of being alone" (78).

What is the purpose of solitude? Bonhoeffer says the mark of solitude "is silence, as speech is the mark of community" (78). He adds, "Silence does not mean dumbness, as speech does not mean chatter." "There is a time to keep silence, and a time to speak"

(Eccles. 3:7). He would go on to say that there is silence under the Word and silence that comes out of the Word (79).

- To see and hear, Eccles 5:1-2
- “Dark night of the soul” – St. John of the Cross, while in prison for his work in Catholic Reform movement in late 1500s, wrote his treatise called, *The Dark Night of the Soul*. In it he said God could grow us deeper through sorrow and darkness rather than joy and light. [“Songs of the Soul” poem, 23-25.]
- Cf. Isaiah 50:10

### Steps

- Take advantage of “little solitudes” in your life
- Find or develop a “quiet place.”
  - Room
  - Chair
  - Spot in a park or backyard
  - Chapel or church sanctuary
  - Retreat center
  - Closet
  - Coffee shop? Library?
- Discipline yourself with few words and lots of listening
- Retreat
  - 4X/year retreat for 3-4 hours
  - “Journal” – it may allow better listening.
  - 1X/year retreat at a Benedictine monastery
- Develop a “Rule of Life” that includes retreat and solitude time
- Find a “spiritual director.”

Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* 1953, 261: It is in deep solitude that I find the gentleness with which I can truly love my brothers. The more solitary I am the more affection I have for them. It is pure affection and filled with reverence for the solitude of others. Solitude and silence teach me to love my brothers for what they are, not for what they say.

## **Practice Makes Perfect: Solitude Handout**

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***Read Teresa of Avila's reference to solitude and react to it.***

"Settle yourself in solitude and you will come upon Him in yourself."

***Go through these gospel references where Jesus sought solitude and reflect on your commitment to be like Jesus (including this area).***

- Matt 4:1-11
- Matt 14:13
- Matt 14:23
- Matt 17:1-9; Luke 9:28-36
- Matt 26:36-46; Luke 22:39ff
- Mark 1:35
- Mark 6:31
- Luke 4:42
- Luke 5:16
- Luke 6:12-13
- Luke 9:18
- Luke 11:1

### ***Steps***

Answer the following with a sense of rejoicing in what you do or a commitment to begin:

1. Identify times when you could find "little solitudes"?
2. What place and time could you be alone with God?
3. Do you struggle with silence and solitude? If so, why? If not, are you finding such time or not?
4. Could you ever "retreat" for 3-4 hours in solitude and silence with the Lord? When?