On Silence and Solitude

Let him who cannot be alone beware of community… Let him who is not in community beware of being alone… 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. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Life Together

The need for solitude and quietness of soul has never been greater than it is today. The complexity of modern life wears us down with multiplying distractions and diminishes us by invading and destroying our personal space. Technology multiplies both our convenience and the intrusions into our souls. The harsh bedlam of commercialized noise that engulfs us must have a counterweight in our living. How we need to rediscover the blessed reality of spiritual aloneness with the Lover of our souls.

Solitude is abstaining for a time from interaction with other people. It frees us from ingrained behaviors that hinders us in getting into God's stride and God's pace. In solitude, we find mental distance from created things that trap, worry, and oppress us. In aloneness, it is possible to be truly silent, to be still, and to know that Yahweh is God (Ps. 46:10).

There can be no solitude without silence. Silence and solitude go together. Silence is vital to making solitude real and solitude is needed to make silence purposeful. Silence's purpose is to allow us life-transforming concentration on God. Silence is more than the absence of speech. It is closing ourselves off from the relentless noise of life. It is essential in developing and cultivating the ability to truly listen to God and to others.

Jesus lived in inward heart solitude. He began his ministry by spending an extended time in the wilderness (Mt. 4:1-11). He was alone in prayer before choosing the Twelve (Lk. 6:12). He withdrew at various times in his ministry—

- After John the Baptist's death (Mt. 14:13);
- After feeding the five thousand (Mt. 14:23);
- After a long night of ministry and healing (Mk. 1:35);
- With the Twelve after their return from ministry (Mk. 6:31);
- After healing a leper (Lk. 5:16);
- To a lonely mountain for self-revelation in the Transfiguration (Mt. 17:1ff);
- Seeking solitude in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mt:26:36ff).

So, in following our Lord Jesus, what steps can we take into solitude?

- Take advantage of the little silences and solitudes of our days. This may be over a cup of coffee in the morning, replacing frustration with prayer during rush hour traffic, or walks between destinations for workplace meetings or just to get away for a time.
- You can add your daily way-stops to this list. For years during my career with the Government, one highlight of my workday was a lunch hour spent at the United States Botanic Garden across from the Capitol. The venue featured lush vegetation surrounding a fountain or water exhibit with plenty of benches on which to sit and take in the scene. I confess that many of these alone times morphed into naps. Nevertheless, when conscious, they were precious times that I grew to cherish.
- Replace your daydreaming or wool-gathering moments with purposeful prayer.
- Find a quiet place in your home for silence and solitude. Let your family know that you mean to be alone. Suzanne Wesley, mother of John and Charles Wesley, was a mother of nineteen

children. I must confess I cannot begin to fathom that. However, when her apron was over her head, the lively brood knew to leave her be. She was with her Lord.

- Stop vindicating and justifying yourself when alone. Leave whatever it is rest with the Lord. Commune with Him as best you can.
- Try to schedule an extended time periodically to assess your life and your life goals. I used to practice this quarterly and gave it up because I thought it was a waste of time. So often my mind wandered and I daydreamed the time away. Then I ran into a remark by Brother Lawrence, famous for his thoughts about practicing the presence of God. He experienced brief periods of prayer interspersed with wandering thoughts and came to believe that he was a failure at prayer. Then he realized that he would always be a failure at prayer and once he realized that he got along with praying much better. If brief periods of focused prayer interspersed with wandering thoughts is all that we're capable of now, then let's run with that. Allow the Lord to call home your roving thoughts. Pray for spiritual concentration. Gaze on the Lord Jesus with the eyes of your soul.

As Bonhoeffer expresses in the quote that begins this piece, we must go away from people to be truly present to them when with them. Thomas Merton is in accord with that thought: "It is in deep solitude that I find the gentleness with which I can truly love [others]. The more solitary I am the more affection I have … Solitude and silence teach me to love [others]."