

February 25, 2018
Mark 1:32-39
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“Leave Me Alone”

Good morning. I'd like you to do something in just a moment. I hope you'll participate to the best of your ability. I'll describe it, and then we'll try it at the same time, OK? I'll ask you to take a deep breath and hold it -- I'll do this too -- and when 30 seconds is up, I'll give a sign to exhale and breathe again. OK? Deep breathe . . . Exhale.

Thank you. Let me reflect a little on what we just did. The first thing to note is that my experience was probably not exactly the same as yours, but there are likely some similarities. If you couldn't hold your breath for the entire 30 seconds, you probably still got a sense of what it feels like. Thirty seconds is not an amazingly long time to hold your breath, but for most of us, it's enough to notice, and maybe even long enough to get a little anxious about breathing, and to start wondering what we're going to do with ourselves, and how soon the time is going to be up. Maybe it's different for you sitting in the congregation, but for me to stand up here on the chancel for 30 seconds without speaking or singing or *anything* feels like a long time.

That is the best way I could think of to illustrate the idea of solitude here in a group of people. The concept of solitude is not difficult to grasp, the purpose of it is not complicated, but if you're anything like me, it's difficult to do. This morning I want to talk about solitude, some of the biblical illustrations of why it might be important, and encourage you to try this as a practice through Lent. What we won't be able to do during worship this morning is give you an opportunity to share your own experience of solitude, but I hope you'll have a chance to do that when you meet with your deacon group in the next week or so.

Our text from Mark 1 is one of the places where the gospels note that Jesus went off to a deserted place to pray. As we said last week, Mark is the shortest of the four gospels, so the narrative clicks along pretty quickly, but this is still Mark Chapter 1 -- just a few paragraphs away from last week's text where Jesus was baptized and immediately driven in to the wilderness by the Spirit for forty days. Mark doesn't specifically mention that Jesus prayed and fasted during those forty days, but Matthew and Luke's gospels give that detail, and tell us that Jesus was alone. Jesus is busy in the first chapter of Mark: he's baptized, tempted, begins his ministry, calls disciples, casts out an unclean spirit, heals the sick of an entire city, heals a leper, and makes the religious leaders mad -- all in the first chapter. And $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way through that chapter, in the middle of all this activity -- teaching, preaching, healing, all that *really* important stuff -- verse 35 says "In the morning, while it was still very dark, Jesus got up and went out to a deserted place where he prayed."

An interesting thing for Jesus to do when there was so much to do and so many people needed him. He'd been up late the night before, because when Sabbath ended at sundown, the whole city gathered at his door --that's how Mark says it -- and brought all those who were sick or possessed by demons. Can you imagine looking out your front door at sundown and seeing *that*? When the disciples hunt Jesus down at daybreak the next morning, they say, "Everyone is searching for you." I bet.

If you have ever been in a position of being responsible for taking care of another person or people day in and day out, you have a little sense of the weight which was on Jesus' shoulders. Caring for young children, aging parents, a spouse who is ill, patients, clients, emergency situations where people are mentally or physically ill -- all of this is exhausting work. Exhausting ministry. People needed Jesus all the time.

We know that at other times in his ministry, notably after his last meal with his disciples and just before his arrest and crucifixion, Jesus withdrew to pray by himself. Solitude and prayer at times of intense stress and pressure are the bookends of the beginning and end of Jesus' ministry. That fact all by itself would make it worth paying attention to, and perhaps trying for ourselves.

I am making a distinction between solitude and simply being alone. Many of us are alone -- by ourselves at home, in the car, or even where we work -- on a regular basis. This is not always our choice. If you are single because of death or divorce, there is probably grief in that time alone. Folks who are introverts may enjoy time alone, but few choose to be alone all the time. That is different than what I'm calling solitude: a time of intentional stillness to be in the presence of God. Solitude is a much rarer commodity than being alone. It's rare for several reasons. First, solitude takes intention on our part. It's increasingly easy to be plugged in all the time -- even multiple ways at the same time. We have the TV on the radio on and our cell phones close at hand. Often when Tim and I are watching the news at home on TV, he's reading different news on his phone. Of course, we need to keep up with what our children are doing, what our parents are doing what our relatives are doing and what our friends are doing and what people we don't know at all are doing, right?

Solitude means unplugging from those things for a set amount of time. Last week I talked about Celtic Christian practices, and that they came from a culture which engaged God in the world, rather than withdrawing from the world to find God. What I'm encouraging us to do with solitude is not to withdraw from the world, but to include God as one of those places where we connect; to make God important enough that we set the other connections aside for a time. Although I would call solitude a kind of prayer, it isn't the kind of prayer which we may be the most familiar with. Solitude is not primarily about talking to God--expressing concern for people who are ill or in trouble, praying for ourselves or even praying for the world -- solitude is about being in the presence of God. It may be about listening for God, but fundamentally it is about simply being. It's a way of acknowledging in the midst of our busy lives or our empty lives or our grieving lives or our joyous lives or our lives that are a complicated mix of all of those things-- that there is more to our lives than our lives. Solitude is a way to acknowledge that God is important enough for us to pause and simply be in God's presence.

I'm not going to tell you how you have to do this. I recognize that everyone's commitments and schedule and temperament are different. There are some specific suggestions in the Lent booklet,

and I hope you can share more in your deacon groups. Again, spiritual practices are not competitive, the goal is to find something that works for you so you can deepen your relationship with God and be strengthened for your walk with Christ. If you find something which works for you, and can share it with someone else, that is how we support one another along the way.

So in that spirit, I want to share some things I have learned about myself along the way. I have shared some of these before: if you have paid close enough attention that you still remember, God bless you, but I'm going to repeat it, because it is still true for me. I did not begin a regular practice of solitude until I *had* to do it for a seminary assignment. I had to commit to a certain amount of time regularly and keep a log. I found this much more difficult than reading or writing a paper, because there are no shortcuts. I couldn't say, "The assignment is to sit in God's presence for 15 minutes, but I can power through and get it done in 10." Not only does it not work that way, I clearly don't have a natural aptitude for stillness. Hardly anyone does. When I try to sit still and clear my mind for any period of time, my mind -- which is pretty unruly -- starts making lists of what I need to start doing as soon as this quiet time is over. And as you have probably experienced, once you try not to think about something, that's all you can think about. I cannot keep myself from being a person who makes lists. That does not disqualify me from practicing solitude. What I have learned to do is make the list before I start, so it's outside of my head, and to put prayer on the list. It doesn't always work, but it helps. There are other things which help me which are external physical things, but I like stuff, so that works for me. I sit in the same chair in the same spot. I have an oil lamp which I light and a beautiful prayer shawl that I put around my shoulders. I also have a cat who thinks that any lap is an invitation for attention. This used to distract me, until I realized I could allow this cat's enthusiasm and desire to be loved to be an image of my relationship with God. This may sound silly to you -- that's fine. We all come to God in the context of who we are. What I'm suggesting is that if you haven't tried solitude, or haven't tried it recently, see what works for you, and be patient if you don't feel successful immediately. It takes effort. Investing time in doing "nothing" can take a lot of effort.

Solitude doesn't turn us into someone else. It won't turn you from an extrovert to an introvert, or a busy person into an idle one. No spiritual practice does that -- because that isn't the purpose of spiritual practices. Spiritual practices can help us see ourselves the way God sees us; they remind us why Jesus claims us as beloved. My conviction is that for each of us, no matter our personality, temperament, or experience, being comfortable alone with ourselves is a gift. It is not a gift which we give ourselves, but like any gift of the Spirit, it is something we are given by the grace of God. Grace is free, but we still have to accept it. Sometimes the most difficult person to tolerate and accept and forgive is ourselves. We may even keep ourselves busy doing in order to avoid the fear of being, and being ridiculed or rejected, or somehow less than who we try to appear to be to other people. God's grace means that we're allowed to be who we are. There is nothing we can do to make God love us more. There is nothing we can do to make God love us less. With grace, we can see ourselves the way God sees us, and hope for the same things that God wants for us. I pray that we will each know that promise and accept that grace. In Jesus Christ, Amen.