

Silence and Solitude – The Unusual Gift

See: Isaiah 30:15; Psalm 46: 10; Luke 22:39-46

Have you ever received a strange gift you were unsure what to do with – but which, in the end, proved to be of great value to you?

One such gift was a tool given to me by my grandmother. Grandma gave Lissa a kitchen fork she still has and uses. She gave me her Cape Cod Cultivator. Two places I associate with Grandma Herman are her kitchen and her garden. Grandma made the most incredible pies and had the most incredible garden out back of their home. She was a card-carrying member of the Sewickley Garden Club – and had the flowers to prove it.

So when she gave me her Cape Cod Cultivator – a tool for cultivating soil around plants in a garden, although I never saw one before, I figured if she used it in her garden, it was something special: and it was! In the end, I wore it out—and had to replace it with this “newer model”.



So, here’s a special gift that you, like so many, may have little idea how to handle but which, in the end, is of inestimable worth. Here it is: *Shhhhhh!*



It’s a gift of silence; and with its sister—solitude, it’s a gift of great value.

Like me and Grandma’s Cape Cod Cultivator most of us are unsure what to do with silence and solitude. We know what to do with a TV, radio, I-pod, tablet and stereo system. We know what to do with a Google Calendar on our cellphone, Daytimer or a Franklin Planner. Most of us are familiar with noise, crowds and action—but silence and solitude leave us fumbling with what’s unfamiliar or frightening.

Frankly, as human beings we’ve *always* been afraid of silence and solitude, trusting hustle and hurry, hiding behind loud noises and bright lights. God tells ancient Israel in Isa. 30:15 ~ *“In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength, but (and here’s the kicker) **you would have none of it.**”* Silence and solitude have always been counter-cultural – just like the kingdom of God is counter-cultural.

For us to appreciate how special are the gifts silence and solitude, we must ***recognize their value*** and ***understand their use***. But, before I go on, let’s define some terms. *What do we mean by silence and solitude?* It’s like asking, “What’s a Cape Cod Cultivator?” when you’ve not had much experience with one.

More than just an absence of sound, silence is the stillness in the presence of something or Someone else. It’s listening—bring actively attuned to the other who is with you. Richard Foster says in *Celebration of Discipline* that “though silence sometimes involves the absence of speech, it always involves the act of listening (p. 98). In other words, ***silence is being able to listen to the One you love.*** It’s the silence of Jesus alone in Gethsemane praying,

listening to His Father's heart in order to find courage to do what He has to do. It's silence in the wilderness of 1 Kings 19 where Elijah's off in a cave,

And behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind tore the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. After the fire the sound of a low whisper [a still small voice, the sound of silence]. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. And behold, there came a voice to him and said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" (1 Kings 19:11-13)

Silence is getting still enough to be able to listen to the one you love—and the One who loves you. It's being able to hear "the soft sound of sandaled feet," as Steve Brown says. It's an interior stillness that enables us to distinguish the Voice of our Shepherd—even in spite the cacophony of other voices that call to us.

Likewise, solitude isn't just the absence of people. After all, aloneness or loneliness isn't solitude. Aloneness is inner emptiness; solitude is inner fullness; aloneness depletes, solitude fills us up. Aloneness is cold, harsh and uninviting; solitude is gracious, warm and welcoming. Solitude is a life-giving, aloneness is death-dealing.

That's why the gospel writers notice Jesus in solitude. Mark 1:35 says, "Very early, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed." Luke says although the crowds came to hear him and be healed, "Jesus *often* withdrew to lonely places and prayed" (5:16—*NIV*).

So, while silence is listening to one you love, ***genuine solitude is being with the One you love*** both of which are gifts that we learn to appreciate, first, ***by recognizing their value***.

No one lives in the fast lane too long before starting to fray at the edges, unravel, overheat, dry up or crash-and-burn. We all need times to unstring the bow of regular stress and find peace for body and soul. That was true of Christ's first followers; and it's true for us. And, if you try to tell me that you don't have time for that—tell me it to me again from a cardiac-care unit after a heart attack; speak about it from the darkness of a deep depression or the numbness of exhaustion. Friend—you and I don't have the time *not* to receive life-giving gifts of silence and solitude!

In Mark 6, Jesus runs into conflict in his hometown, He sends the disciples out in six two-man ministry teams to preach, exorcise demons and heal the sick, and they all grieve the death of Jesus' cousin John. Wanting to recover from exhaustion in the wake of conflict, work and grief, Jesus says, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest" (6:32). But the crowds get there first so Jesus spends the whole rest of the day teaching them and meeting *their* needs. However, He won't be denied a break. So Mark notes that after feeding the multitude, Jesus "immediately" sends the disciples away in a boat to Bethsaida, while He dismisses the crowd and goes off by himself on a mountain to pray (6:45f). Sometimes we just need get away by ourselves to take a break from life's sound and speed to physically recharge our batteries.

However, according to the Scripture, there's more; for silence and solitude can also help us learn self-control by reining in compulsive acting and compulsive talking.

A big problem for us is tongue-control! James says, “if anyone considers himself religious and yet doesn’t keep tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless” (1:26); and Proverbs adds that, “a man of knowledge uses words *with restraint*, Even a fool is thought wise if he’s silent, and discerning if he holds his tongue” (17:27f). We’re reminded that, “there’s a time to speak and a time to remain silent” in Ecclesiastes 3:7.

Author Donald Whitney sees silence as *fasting for the tongue*. As a fast can show us how much of the food we normally eat is unnecessary (especially in the USA), silence reveals that we really don’t need to say much of what we think we must say. Silence teaches us to rely on God’s control when we normally feel compelled to talk or to talk too much. We discover that *He* can manage where we once thought our input indispensable.

Similarly, in solitude we find out that He can handle things without us; *and* that the Body of Christ is bigger than just us. While you’re off alone the sun still rises, work still gets done, and the kingdom of God does not fail, fall or even falter. In that way, our silence and solitude declare a belief *that God is God and we’re not!*

I think that’s why so many of us struggle with Sabbath—a day of rest. Sabbath means we have to release our hold on the world for a day and trust God to hold it and carry it without us. However, to ignore Sabbath, to think that we can’t rest and play is idolatry.

In the movie *Rudy*, there is a wonderful scene in which Rudy – a young man whose life-long dream has been to get in to Notre Dame and play football for “The Fighting Irish,” has an encounter with an old priest. Rudy has been working hard at Holy Cross Junior College to get good enough grades to get into Notre Dame in spite of the accumulating rejection letters to his application for admission. He says to Father Cavanaugh, “Father, maybe I need to pray more” – to which the priest, knowing him, says, “I don’t think that’s the problem.”



“Have I done everything I can? Is there anything you can do, Father?” asks the desperate young man.

“Son,” says the priest, “in 35 years of religious education, I have learned two incontrovertible facts. First, God exists. Second, I am not him.”

Do you ever wonder why little children play and adults don’t? A little child plays in a back yard or family room because dad or mom worry about paying bills, making dinner, fixing things, washing clothes or cleaning house, so he or she doesn’t have to! To worry about such things means the child doesn’t trust his/her parents’ care, to feel instead that it’s up to them and they’re in charge.

Friends, our overuse of words and hyperactivity is idolatry! It’s saying with our worry and our frenetic speed: “I’m god, and you aren’t, Lord.”

With silence and solitude come physical and emotion restoration, lessons of self-control and our declaration of faith that we believe God IS God and we’re not. However, silence and solitude

also allow us to get to know our Lord and our God, to *really* get to know Him. They enable us get to know the One we love and the One who loves us intimately.

When I do a cardio workout at the gym, I know I'm going at it *too* hard when I can't talk to a friend because my heart rate's too high and my breathing's too labored. It's also hard to talk to someone while your running a race. To get to know someone intimately, you must slow down and walk together, maybe even hand-in-hand. If you want to get to know someone, there are restaurants you don't go to – the music's too loud, the tables are too close together, the wait-staff is too pushy and it all gives you a headache.

We need to get away from earthly noise, frenetic activity and clamoring crowds to hear our Shepherd's voice. One of the greatest treasures that Jesus our Good Shepherd gives us is in John 10, which is His voice calling us each by name, leading us through dangerous passages into good pasture. But most of us never hear it—because we allow other voices and noise to drown it out. How tragic!

Now, once we recognize the value of silence and solitude to renew us emotionally and physically, to teach us self-control, to declare our faith and enable us to get to know our Lord and our God more intimately: what's next? Once we recognize their value, how do we receive the gifts of silence and solitude for ourselves? ***How do we understand their use in our lives?***

In his book *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, calls us to set aside a definite time of silence and solitude each day for three things: (1) to meditate on Scripture, (2) to pray and (3) to intercede for other believers. In fact, he's so bold as to say, silence and solitude are to be *devoted to* just Scripture, personal prayer and intercession.

(1) Daily time in the Bible was important to Bonhoeffer who calls us to ponder Scripture daily trusting "it has something utterly personal to say to us for this day and for our Christian life [as] ... God's Word for us individually" (p. 82). What he says, reminds me of an ancient Christian practice called *Lectio Divina* or "Holy Reading" which trusts God's Holy Spirit to speak to us through His Word as we read and reflect on a particular brief text three or four times asking different questions to attune us to the Spirit's voice in each reading. For instance, after reading the text to familiarize ourselves with it ...

- We read it a second time we asking: *what words or phrases in the text attract our attention as if God ran a highlight through them? What 'shimmers for us', raises questions, seems pivotal or is new in the reading?*
- With a third reading, we *notice our emotional response* to the text, especially to the word or phrase we encountered at first. We ask: what do we *feel* – thankfulness, joy, puzzlement, surprise, anger, fear, disappointment, delight, amazement, or some other feeling?
- In a final reading, we *notice what God says that's just for us*. It may be an invitation to be or do something (i.e., What's God's invitation to you?); or a challenge (i.e., How's God confronting in you?); or confirmation of a direction to take (i.e. Where is God nudging you to go or what is He impressing upon you to do?). This is when, *the Bible becomes God's personal "word" to you or me*.

(2) But we don't stop there for, as Bonhoeffer notes, secondly, "Scripture leads to prayer" guided by Scripture in which God speaks to the heart, mind and will. After all, in prayer we listen to and answer God's Voice in the Word. When God speaks, He prompts us to pray, applying His Word to our lives and to His Church.

(3) Even more specifically, time alone with our God lead us to intercede on behalf of others in the fellowship or church. For, as Bonhoeffer says: "A Christian fellowship lives and exists by the intercession of its members for one another or it collapses. I can no longer condemn or hate a brother (or sister) for whom I pray, no matter how much trouble he (or she) causes me" (p. 86).

However, intercession, isn't simply reciting a list of names, ailments and anxieties to God; which (I confess) I find hard to do. Instead, intercession is bringing our brothers and sisters into the presence of Jesus—it's seeing them at the foot of His Cross as sinners, just like me, in need of His grace, just like me. Furthermore, when we intercede, says Bible teacher Stephen Seamands, "we aren't so much called to pray *to* Jesus on their behalf as we are called to pray *with* Jesus for them" for, as Paul says in Romans 8:34 and the writer of Hebrews teaches in Hebrews 7:25, Christ, alive forever, now intercedes with God for us. (Seamands, *Ministry in the Image of God*, p. 153).

In quiet, when I don't know how to pray for you or you for me, we ask Jesus – who knows us perfectly and knows the Father's perfect will for us – to pray for the other. You can bet, His prayers are heard and that they're powerful in heaven! We simply join with Jesus in praying for one another when we intercede.

When we really don't know how to pray for another person, that's where we begin. We tell our heavenly Father that we don't know how to pray, admitting that we aren't omniscient (that's His department). That's when I have to simply pray, "Jesus: work Your best will on behalf of my friend or loved one," rather than being presumptuous enough to tell God what to do. What I really want for them anyway is His best which is always good and right, wise and loving in the end. In the stillness, I let go of my words and ways and surrender those I care about to Him.

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Finally, here's some good counsel from Richard Foster's *Celebration of Discipline* for real steps to take in order to receive the gifts of silence and solitude. *First*, Foster says, take advantage of "little solitudes" that fill the day like early moments in bed before rising, or with our first cup of coffee before starting the work day, when we're alone in the car stuck in traffic coming home from work or just before we slip into bed. *Second*, he recommends we find or develop a "quiet place" designed for silence and solitude—in our home or elsewhere: maybe a study or reading room, or even just a chair in a living room corner where family knows not to bother us when we're there with our Bibles. *Third*, Foster says, why not try a whole day without words (or at least an evening or afternoon) for which you'll need the cooperation of others. *Fourth*, he suggests a time, once a quarter, to withdraw for a half-day with the Lord to re-examine and re-orient life goals – like a quarterly mid-course correction. And, *fifth*, he suggests, like Jesus, we get away on retreat where there is no purpose but solitude – not planning, not working ahead on a project or goal and deadline, not even to catch up on reading. We are there just so we can meet God as He chooses to reveal Himself to us (pp. 105-108). One good resource for such retreat days is a short essay called *How To Spend a Day in Prayer* by Lorne Sanny, formerly president of The Navigators [https://www.hcfglobal.org/sites/default/files/how_to_spend_a_day_in_prayer.pdf].

For us to appreciate God's unusual and special gifts of silence and solitude, we need to ***recognize their value*** for physical restoration, personal self-control, spiritual discernment, and of faithful witness to what we believe; and we must ***understand their use***: to meditate on Scripture, pray and intercede for other believers in our quiet times alone with the Lord. When we do, we'll affirm that every good and perfect gift, including silence and solitude, comes down to us from the Father of our souls for our good.

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