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**Making the Most of Solitude****Matthew 4.1-11**

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So far in our series Tools to Build Your Spiritual Life we've talked about Christian practices that are relatively new to some of you like fasting and meditating on scripture and some you may be a little more familiar with such as prayer, study, and simplicity. The spiritual discipline we're discussing today is one some of us have probably had more of in the last year than at any other time in our life and that's **solitude**! The pandemic has given some of us more solitude than we ever wanted. Our tool for today is **noise canceling headphones** which are symbolic of our need to shut out the noise and take some time in silence by ourselves. Today's Gospel passage **Matthew 4.1-11** is about an extended time of solitude that Jesus took in the wilderness.

"Then Jesus was **led up by the Spirit** into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. 2 He **fasted forty days and forty nights**, and afterwards he was famished. 3 The tempter came and said to him, "***If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.***" 4 But he answered, "***It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'***"

5 Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, 6 saying to him, "***If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'***"

7 Jesus said to him, "***Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'***"

8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; 9 and he said to him, "***All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.***" 10 Jesus said to him, "***Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'***"

11 Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

The gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke all agree Jesus began his ministry by spending forty days of solitude in the wilderness. **Solitude is, "being out of human**

**contact, being alone, and being so for lengthy periods of time.”<sup>1</sup>** Solitude, like fasting, is a discipline of abstinence, of giving up something. Disciplines of abstinence are designed to weaken or break the power of habits or attitudes that prevent us from following Jesus more fully and experiencing love, joy, meaning, and contentment. Disciplines of abstinence help break the power of our usual, immediate responses to do the opposite of what Jesus teaches, (for example, instead of forgiving, we hold onto bitterness and resentment, instead of loving and praying for our enemies, we tend to strike back in anger or try to get even). **Solitude** and its natural partner, **Silence**, help us to develop a “pause” button between something that happens to us and the response we choose. Solitude and silence provide a place for us to begin changing, a space to reform our attitude toward ourselves, other people, and events.

Tom Hanks is one of my favorite actors and one of his many Academy Award nominations for Best Actor was for his role in the 2000 film *Cast Away*. In the movie he portrays Chuck Noland, an executive with the delivery company FedEx who is obsessed with time, deadlines and what he must get done. He lives by the clock. The only survivor of a plane crash, he finds himself completely alone on a deserted island in the Pacific Ocean. Through his four years of solitude, his sense of time is changed, it is marked by months and seasons, not seconds, and minutes. Even without his obsession with work, the world goes on, the tide comes in and goes out. Days come and go. He comes to recognize the value of other people and is ashamed when he learns he had called the crew member who helped him survive the crash by the wrong name because he was simply too self-absorbed to take the time to know him. Too much solitude isn't healthy, however, and he needs someone to talk to and someone to care about, so he ends up making a Wilson volleyball his friend.

**Solitude is something we may have too much of or too little of, depending on our life situation.** For the woman or man whose spouse has died, finding time alone may not be as difficult as coping with waves of loneliness and grief that may sometimes threaten to overwhelm us. For some single individuals unable to get out and to interact with other people during the last eleven months the isolation has been very

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<sup>1</sup> Dallas Willard, *Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God*, (Harper and Row, San Francisco), 357.

hard. For the single parent or any parent at home with young children, solitude may seem like an elusive almost unattainable goal. There are always challenges to growing spiritually although our tests and temptations may vary depending on our life situation. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in his book *Life Together*, “*Let him who cannot be alone beware of community...Let him who is not in community beware of being alone... Each by itself has profound pitfalls and perils. 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.*”

One of the things we're missing in the pandemic is the community and connection that our church friendships and relationships provide. We're designed to be engaged in meaningful relationships with other people who can help us follow Jesus more faithfully and who share our life journey and make it more fun and enjoyable. We also need to learn how to be alone fruitfully and effectively. The truth is many people are terrified of the silence of solitude. We'll put on the television or music so there's noise in our home. When we get in the car, we immediately turn on the radio so that we're not alone with our thoughts, feelings, hopes, or fears.

We don't know what Jesus was thinking or feeling as he began his time of solitude in the wilderness. We don't know if he knew how long he'd be there. What we know is that Jesus was led into the wilderness by the Spirit of God to be tempted and tested. **There are some difficult lessons to be learned in solitude and silence that can't be learned in other ways.** During Jesus' prolonged time of solitude, he faced issues around his identity and whether he would use his power and gifts to serve himself or to serve God and others. There are several important things in today's Gospel. **First**, that the adversary will often attack us at the point of our identity and try to get us to question whether we're really a child of God. **Second**, the adversary can quote the Bible which is reminder that just because someone can quote scripture that doesn't mean he or she is faithful, obedient, or a genuine disciple of Christ. **Third**, just because the Adversary claims to have the power to do something or to give something, doesn't mean it's true because the Adversary is a liar and can't be trusted. These are all issues Jesus dealt with during his extended time of solitude and they may come up for us too.

Sometimes we may think of solitude as getting away from it all, a fun time “for me.” But, as Jesus’ experience demonstrates, that isn’t necessarily true. It may be refreshing and renewing on some occasions, and other times it’s a spiritual battle or what John of the Cross called, “a dark night of the soul.” The truth is, **wherever you go, there you are**. Some people can be all alone and yet be so distracted by wandering thoughts and a preoccupation with other people or other things that they aren’t truly alone at all. Other people can be in a crowd, but have a calm, quiet inner peace and they’re not distracted and can be fully present to themselves and others.

Jesus used the discipline of solitude as part of the rhythm of his life to gain wisdom, clarity, strength, and insight so that even amid his incredible schedule and all the demands placed on him, he made time to be alone with God. (**Luke 6:12**) Before he chose the twelve for his leadership team, he spent the night **alone** in prayer. (**Matthew 14:13**) When he was told of the death of John the Baptist, “*he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself.*” Crowds came to Jesus and he fed a large multitude then sent the disciples ahead, dismissed the crowd and, “*he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came he was there alone”* (**Matthew 14:23**). Throughout his ministry Jesus regularly took times of solitude to be alone with God.

Such moments of solitude for Jesus, including the 40 days in the wilderness, were clearly life-altering and life-shaping, and they can be for us as well. Sister Maria Jose Hobday died on Palm Sunday, April 5, 2009. She was born in Texas to a Seneca-Iroquois mother and a Southern Baptist father, and she shared the following story from her youth. “One summer Saturday morning when I was twelve, I was waiting for my friend Juanita to come over. We had planned a morning together, and she was quite late. I was fretting and complaining and generally making a nuisance of myself. In fact, I was becoming rather obnoxious to everyone else in the house. Finally, my father said to me, “*Get a book, a blanket, and an apple, and get into the car!*” I wanted to know why, but he only repeated the order. So I obeyed.

My father drove me about eight miles from home to a canyon area, and said, “*Now get out. We cannot stand you any longer at home! You aren’t fit to live with. Just*

*stay out here by yourself today until you understand how to act. I'll come back for you this evening."*

I got out, angry, frustrated, and defiant. The nerve of him! I thought immediately of walking home; eight miles was no distance at all for me. Then the thought of meeting my father when I got there took hold, and I changed my mind. I cried and threw the book, apple, and blanket over the canyon ledge. I had been dumped and I was furious. But it is hard to keep up a good rebellious cry with no audience, so finally there was nothing to do but face up to the day alone.

I sat on the rim, kicking the dirt and trying to get control of myself. After a couple hours, as noon approached, I began to get hungry. I located the apple and climbed down to retrieve it – as well as the book and the blanket. I climbed back up, and as I came over the top I noticed the pinon tree. It was lovely and full. I spread the blanket in the shade, put the book under my head, and began to eat the apple.

I was aware of a change of attitude. As I looked through the branches into the sky, a great sense of peace and beauty came to me. The clouds sat in still puffs, the blue was endless, and I began to take in their spaciousness. I thought about the way I had acted and why Daddy had treated me so harshly. Understanding began to come, and I became more objective about my behavior. I found myself getting in touch with my feelings and the world around me. Nature was my mother, holding me for comfort and healing. I became aware of being a part of it all, and I found myself thinking of God. I wanted harmony. I wanted to hold the feeling of mystery. I wanted to be a better person. **It was a prayer time, a time of deep silence.** I felt in communion with much that I could not know, but to which I was drawn. I had a great sense of discovering myself as great, of seeing the world as great, of touching the holy. This sense lasted a long time, perhaps a couple of hours. I found I liked being alone, enjoyed the rich emptiness, held the stillness. It was as if I had met another person – me – who was not so bad after all.

By the time my father came to get me, I was restored. Daddy did not press me about the day. He asked no questions, and I gave him no answers. But I was different, and we both knew it. **My father had dumped me into solitude and had challenged me to grow.** Before I got out of the car, I thanked him. And from then on, especially

during the summers, I would take a day to go off alone. **I loved those times of solitude, of contemplation, of prayer. I loved the person, the world, the God I had met that day. This habit of seeking solitude has stayed with me all these years.**<sup>2</sup>

Sister Maria Jose Hobday became a great spiritual teacher. She was both a Seneca elder and a Franciscan nun for more than 50 years. She used her insights about love of the earth, family, community, and the simple life to inspire others to live a more authentic life of prayer, simplicity, poverty, peace, and wonder. A writer and a sought-after lecturer, she traveled the world speaking about spirituality and prayer for decades. It wasn't unusual for her to log 75,000 miles a year and it all began with a day of solitude.

God may not dump us into solitude and challenge us to grow like her dad did, but what Jesus and Sister Maria Jose found useful and beneficial, we may also. Jesus was led by God's Spirit into the wilderness so that he could gain clarity about his identity, who he was, and his purpose in life. If Jesus needed 40 days of solitude in the wilderness to prepare for his public life as well as other regular days of solitude throughout his life and ministry, perhaps we could use one, or even three or four every now and then.

I want to encourage you to take some time in solitude this week. Perhaps you can intentionally take an hour, or a morning, afternoon, or evening. If you need help in how to spend the time, feel free to email me. If you take time in solitude, send me an email, text, or note about what you did and how it went. It's beneficial for every person to have regular periods in life when she or he has nothing to do. God says in the Ten Commandments that 1/7<sup>th</sup> of our time should be devoted, in a sense, to doing nothing – no work, no agenda, only Sabbath rest, renewal, relationships, worship.

What do you do in solitude? You don't go in with an agenda or a "to do" list, or with expectations about what solitude and silence are going to accomplish. The cure for busyness and too many demands is not more busyness and demands, but Solitude and Silence because it's in those times we find we're more than what we do. The cure for

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in *Storytelling: Imagination and Faith*, by William J. Bausch, Twenty-Third Publications, 1984, 174-175.

loneliness is Solitude and Silence because we discover in how many ways we're not truly alone.

Through times of solitude, we gain an increased sense of who we are, we find our soul, and we find God. Muddy water becomes clearer if you let it be still for a while. As we heard in **Psalm 62:1, 5**, ***“For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation.” “For God alone my soul waits in silence; for my hope is from him.”***

In *Fruits of Solitude*, William Penn observed that solitude is ***“a school few care to learn in, tho' none instructs us better.”*** May we be among the few that care to enroll in the school of solitude and to learn and grow and mature through this merciful means of God's grace.

### **Questions for Discussion or Reflection**

1. How would you describe the difference between loneliness and solitude?
2. What is your experience with solitude? For example, is it something you look forward to, something you dread, something you can't imagine being able to have?
3. Henri Nouwen noted that “without solitude it is virtually impossible to lead a spiritual life.” Why do you think he said that? Do you think he is correct? Why or why not?
4. Why do we need both solitude and community in order to grow and thrive spiritually?
5. Why do you think solitude and silence are so closely connected?
6. What keeps you from solitude?
7. What practical re-ordering of your life could be done in order to create more space for God?