

## **SOLITUDE**

Sermon Presented to St. Paul's Church

7 Pentecost, Mark 6:30-44, Year B

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Thack Dyson

The late Sister Jose Hobday was a Roman Catholic nun and an author of books on spirituality. I was fortunate to attend a retreat she facilitated while I was in seminary in the early 1990's. In one of her books she recalled the following incident from her childhood: "One summer Saturday morning about forty years ago, I was waiting for my friend Juanita to come over. I was about twelve at the time. I became agitated and started 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 better how to act. I'll come back for you this evening.' I got out, angry, frustrated, and defiant. I thought immediately of walking home; eight miles was not distance at all to me. Then the thought of meeting my father when I got home took hold, and I quickly changed my mind. I cried and threw the book, apple and blanket over the canyon edge. 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 of the canyon, kicking dirt and trying to get control of myself. After a couple of 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 blanket. Upon reaching the top of the rim, I saw a pinon tree nearby which offered some shade. I spread the blanket in the shade, put the book under my head, and began to eat the apple.

I eventually became 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 my father 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 with the world around me. Nature was my mother holding me for comfort and healing. I became aware of being 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 prayerful time, a time of deep silence. I felt in communion with much that I could not know, but to which I was drawn. This sense lasted a long time, perhaps a few hours. I found I liked being alone and enjoyed the rich emptiness. It was as if I had met another person—me—and concluded I was not so bad after all.

By the time my father came to get me, I was restored. My father 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 summer, I would take a day to go off alone. I loved those times of solitude, of contemplation, and of prayer. I loved the world, and the God I had met that day. This habit of seeking solitude has stayed with me all these years.”

This story by Sister Hobday illustrates a great truth—all of us need solitude in our lives. We need it to reconnect with ourselves and with God. In today's Gospel lesson from Mark, Jesus emphasizes this point. Jesus sends his disciples out on a preaching and healing mission, and after they return he says to them. "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest awhile." (Mark 6:31, NRSV). Jesus then attempts to lead them into a place of rest and renewal. Though his attempt to retreat from the crowds was frustrated by the throngs that followed him, we see in this reading Jesus' rhythm of life. The rhythm of moving back and forth between work and prayer, between doing and just being, between action and rest.

Jesus made it a regular habit to leave his responsibilities behind. Jesus purposely chose a rhythm of time with others and times alone, time spent getting things done and time spent accomplishing nothing.

If Jesus recognized the importance of developing a Sabbath rhythm in human life, then so should we. In fact, he invites us to come away to a lonely place with him all the time. Yet, do we hear the call?

As good Christians, we claim to believe that we are saved by grace through faith, but in reality, we live as if we expect to be saved by our hard work. As a consequence, we lose out on so much in life. And what are these things we stand to lose if we work all the time? For one thing, we lose our proper place in life. You and I are not God. The weight of the world is on God's shoulders, not ours. God can handle the affairs of life fine even if you and I take a day off.

If we live without regular intervals of rest we also lose our identity. Ask yourself this question: "Why do I exist?" If we are here solely to make money, to produce, to contribute to the

economy, then our value depends on how hard we work, how much we spend.

Further, if we work all the time, we also lose sight of the value of others. If we force ourselves to function like machines, we will expect that from others, too. If we live like robots, it's a small step before we are treating others like robots. Simply put, if we don't take care of ourselves, then why should we take care of our neighbors?

Without regular time set apart from the demands of life, we lose the opportunities to reflect on where we've been and to consider where we're going. Such single-mindedness also causes us to lose our sense of perspective and to miss out on life.

This reminds me of an incident from the life of the famous architect Frank Lloyd Wright. He once told of an experience he had when he was nine years old. That winter, he went walking across a snow-covered field with his reserved, no-nonsense uncle. As the two of them reached the far end of the field, his uncle stopped him. He pointed out his tracks in the snow, straight and unwavering, and then young Frank's tracks meandering all over the field. "Notice how your tracks wander over aimlessly from the fence to the cattle to the woods and back again," his uncle said. "And see how my tracks aim directly to my goal. There is an important lesson in that!"

Years later the world-famous architect liked to tell how this experience had greatly contributed to his philosophy of life. "I determined right then," he said, "not to be like my uncle and miss the important things in life."

Frank Lloyd Wright wisely saw the true lesson from his walk with his uncle. He realized that the journey of life, without occasional detours, is a misspent life. In fact, a life without rest, reflection and solitude is only half a life.

The importance of rest and reflection applies to our spiritual lives as well. Only through unhurried conversations with God, holy daydreaming, and playful imagining, will we ever get around to asking Him the important questions, “Am I happy? Is God pleased with my life’s direction?” If we do not even have time to think and pray about such fundamental questions, then how can we hope to find meaningful answers to those questions?

Thanks to smart phones, laptops, and the internet, we can be just about anywhere in the world and still working all the time. Or, we can be anywhere and our work can find us. But that’s not the way we were created, or the way God intended. That’s why God created the Sabbath so that we could take time to rest, regroup, retreat, and refocus. That’s why Jesus valued solitude.

So folks, if your life is a constant grind, then slow down. Listen to Jesus’ call to the disciples: “Come away to a deserted place all by yourself and rest a while.” Take the time to play and to pray. Take time to worship. Take time to unburden your soul. If you do, your life will truly be full, productive, and happy.

**AMEN**