

Solitude & Silence

by Rev. Mark Muckler

The Purpose

As with any spiritual discipline in the Christian life, silence and solitude invite us to draw near to the heart of God, longing to know God as we are fully known by God. As Christians, we believe that we “were included in Christ when we heard the message of truth, the gospel of our salvation. And that when we believed, we were marked in Him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit.” **Ephesians 1:13**. The practice of silence and solitude gently invites us to be reminded of this great truth, that the promised Holy Spirit, God, Emmanuel is with us. It’s a means of “practicing the presence of God,” as Brother Lawrence describes it.

Years ago, I met Martin Laird, an Augustinian Priest, who was taking a sabbatical at the Mepkin Abbey in Moncks Corner, SC [i]. And I remember him sharing with me that the “fundamental assumption that union with God is not something we are trying to acquire; God is already the ground of our being. It is a question of realizing this in our lives.” [ii] Ruth Haley Barton, writes in her book *Sacred Rhythms* that, “when we engage in the disciplines of solitude and silence, we let go of our usual distractions, so that we can be present to the One who is always present with us. We are willing to be with God just as we are – awake, alert, and receptive to whatever God wants to say to us.” [iii] I can remember learning this practice while on sabbatical myself many years ago, experiencing God as “close as my next breath.” St Augustine described the presence of God, saying that God is “closer to me than I am to myself”. [iv]

The purpose of solitude and silence is to break away from the things of this world to better hear and experience the love of God “whooping” us by name. As we know, prayer is sharing in holy conversation with God, us talking to God and God listening to us. Lest we not forget that prayer is also God speaking to us, and us engaged in holy listening. Most often, we tend to do all the talking and rarely position ourselves to engage in the discipline of actively listening to what God might have to share with us. So, may we turn off the outside noise of this world in an intentional way to better position ourselves to hear God reveal Himself to us.

The spiritual discipline of solitude and silence, again, invites us to recognize the very presence of God among us. The problem is, we often fail to pause for moments of intentional solitude and silence to realize it.



Discovering Solitude

I've read that, "Solitude is that time when we pull away from the activities of our life to give our full and undivided attention to God, letting go of our 'outer' distractions." [v] As an Eagle Scout today, I can remember my Scoutmasters training us at a young age to detach from the distractions of home and enjoy the escape of getting out in nature by camping, hiking, and just being still in the beauty of God's wondrous creation.

Today it seems to have gotten harder and harder to 'escape' ... to 'retreat' from the "things of this world," (see **Romans 12**), with the intentional purpose of "creating space in our schedules, hearts, and minds, for God to reveal Himself to us." [vi] We have cell phones, iPods, iPads, e-mail, tv, digital technology, satellite radio to pick up any station in just about any location, work stresses, fighting traffic, children hollering for our undivided attention, parents saying, "do this" and "don't do that." The list goes on.

And if you do find a get-away spot where you've discovered those beautiful and serene places to escape to, be encouraged to have the discipline to cut-off the technology: don't check your e-mail while away, turn off your cell phone, and leave your watch at home for that matter. Allow yourself to fully engage in the present moment trusting, believing, and embracing the truth that God is ever-present with you.

Ruth Hayley Barton writes that, "most of us are more tired than we know at the soul level. We are teetering on the brink of dangerous exhaustion, and we really cannot do anything else until we have gotten some rest... Before it can be anything else, solitude needs to be a place of rest in God." [vii]

Practicing solitude invites us to leave our roles at the feet of Jesus; the role of attorney or financial advisor, teacher or physician, student or professor, boss or employee, parent or grandparent even, to simply position ourselves before God waiting in the silence to hear the voice of God saying, "**you are my beloved child.**" [viii] Parker Palmer says that, "Solitude eventually offers a quiet gift of grace, a gift that comes whenever we are able to face ourselves honestly: the gift of acceptance, of compassion, for who we are as we are. As we allow ourselves to be known in solitude, we discover we are known by love." [ix] That is, God's great love for us. As we literally withdrawal to be alone by ourselves and to be alone with God, we position ourselves before God our Father to be reminded once again that we are His, "**fearfully and wonderfully made.**" Ps 139:14.



Discovering Silence

Silence makes way for attentive holy listening. “In silence we withdraw not only from ‘outer’ noise but also from the ‘inner’ noise of our thoughts, human strivings, intellectual work, and inner compulsions in order that we can listen to God.” [x] And so, if solitude is letting go of those ‘outer’ distractions, let us then consider silence as letting go of our ‘inner’ distractions. Mother Teresa once said, “God speaks in the silence of the heart. Listening is the beginning of prayer.”

With the help of God, we can simplify our lives and silence the voices constantly telling us we need to DO more, rather than STOP all the DOING and simply BE with THE ONE who is calling us, ‘whooping’ us by name in an intimate loving relationship with God. As the hymn says, “Just as I am, thou wilt receive, wilt welcome, pardon, cleanse, receive; because they promise I believe, O Lamb of God, I come, I come.” [Hymn: Just as I am, Without One Plea: by Charlotte Elliott 1836]

Sometimes in the midst of the craziness of life, we must “be still”, and slow down the pace at which we are so frantically running. Stop looking for God in all the wrong places, in all the chaos, ... and rather ... consider that ... “gentle ... quiet ... whisper” ... as we are reminded in the story of Elijah in 1 Kings 19. O, how often, when we do show up in prayer before God, we tend to rattle off a bunch of words, “mumble, mumble, mumble, yadda, yadda, yadda.” And the Lord is gently saying to us,

“Shhhhhh... wait ... wait wait
Listen for just a moment

Be Still And Know That I Am God. - Psalm 46:10.

**STOP all the DOING...
And simply embrace the power of BEING**

Embrace the blessing of intentionally acknowledging and BEING with THE ONE who is ever present with you, “the promised Holy Spirit”.

Did you know that the word *SILENT* and the word *LISTEN* are actually spelled using the same letters? There is direct correlation to our being silent to actively listening to what God would say to us in the silence. We must simply and intentionally engage in such a discipline.



The Practice of Solitude & Silence

Knowing **how** to practice silence and solitude in our everyday lives is just as important as knowing **when** to literally break away, and **where** to go from time to time for our own rest and spiritual renewal.

WHEN: Knowing when to engage in the practice of silence and solitude ought to be considered in the same way as with any sacred rhythm for our personal spiritual transformation; daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly, annually.

WHERE: Consider the following places to go for solitude and silence.

- ❖ Bedroom/guest room in your home with the door closed. [See Matthew 6:6](#)
- ❖ Designate a prayer closet or prayer room in your home as a place to retreat to.
- ❖ Find a spot outside at home, set up a chair or a blanket and sit for awhile.
- ❖ Go for a quiet walk on a nature trail or at a nearby park, and sit for awhile.
- ❖ Visit a church nearby and ask to sit in the quiet sanctuary for prayer for an hour or two.
- ❖ If you work during the day, use your lunch break to sit in your car where it is quiet, or drive to a nearby park.
- ❖ Plan ahead and break away for a day or even a weekend retreat with nothing on the agenda other than to be still. See our website for retreat locations.
- ❖ Visit a local monastery for the day, or plan ahead and go for a weeklong silent retreat.

The Practice of Solitude & Silence (continued)

HOW: to Engage in the Practice of Solitude & Silence:

Once you have found a time and place to break away to, simply pause for your predetermined amount of time and simply “BE STILL” without feeling like you have to DO anything, accomplish anything, decide upon anything, etc... Just simply BE with THE ONE who has already met you there in the quiet, stillness of the moment.

It is worth mentioning, that for some people, the spiritual discipline of solitude and silence can be very **unnerving** and **uncomfortable**. It may be difficult to turn off your racing mind, the whirlwind of all the thoughts going on in your head, making it hard to be attentive to the voice of God and to experience the blessing of the Holy Spirit that is ever-present with you. Perhaps you can relate to having ‘monkey-mind’ thinking of a thousand things to DO, all coming at you at once, especially when you’re trying to pause and “BE STILL” long enough to hear the voice of God. As you engage in this practice, be intentional about laying all of those thoughts, images, worries, doubts, fears, emotions, ALL of it ... at the feet of Jesus, and ask the Lord of all creation to hold you there. You may consider praying a “breath prayer” or “centering prayer”. As Dallas Willard once said, “we can only survive the solitude if we cling to Christ there. And yet what we find of him in that solitude enables us to return to society as free persons.” *Spirit of the Disciplines* p161. There are some ways in which to pray completely surrendering everything to Christ. If you find yourself wrestling with unwanted thoughts, images, feelings, or emotions, I invite you to consider a few things:

- ❖ Imagine placing your thoughts, worries, concerns, etc., at the foot of the cross, or into the loving arms of Jesus. Better yet, imagine yourself being held and embraced by your Loving Heavenly Father.
- ❖ You may also consider praying a “**Centering Prayer**” or a “**Breath Prayer**” to gently bring your thoughts back to the reality of God’s presence with you
- ❖ Remember to disconnect from all electronic devices and any other distraction for a designated period of time. It may be for half an hour or hour while on a lunch break, or even on your day off, or for the weekend, or while on vacation or on retreat.
- ❖ Most of all, remember that the purpose of Silence & Solitude is to intentionally be with THE ONE who is already present with you, being open, alert, and receptive to whatever the Lord may have to share with you. Give God your undivided attention and trust in His abiding Presence with you.



From Solitude & Silence ... to ... Community

Engaging in the spiritual disciplines of solitude and silence in the life of the early church was huge. Early Christians, Desert Fathers, monks, etc., would find solace in solitude, literally breaking away from a busy community or town, and traveling far away, even a day's journey, to seek the Lord, longing to discover God's will, direction, and perspective, longing to know of God's everlasting peace, love, mercy, grace, healing, and so-on. For most of us today, as we practice solitude and silence, whether for a day apart or a weekend retreat for spiritual renewal, we know that we must enter back into the world as we know it.

Our time in silence and solitude is not only a blessing for us but also intended to be a blessing for others. As we experience the power and presence of God in those quiet and blessed moments, we re-enter into the world being transformed, sanctified, bearing the light of Christ as our Christian witness.

For example, in the silence, we may learn the value of our words. Knowing when to speak and when to be silent can be a real gift to others. Speaking words of encouragement, support, and blessing can be very up-lifting. Whereas too, often times NOT speaking, and remaining silent and simply 'being present as Christ is present' can be more than enough. (see [Ephesians 4:29](#), and [James 1:22-25](#))

And so, as with every spiritual discipline we engage in and practice, we are invited to be transformed into the likeness of Christ bearing witness to who God is.



For Biblical Reflection & Study

Prayer For Illumination

Lord, open our hearts and minds
by the power of your Holy Spirit,
that, as the Scriptures are read
and your Word proclaimed,
we may hear with joy
what you say to us today.
- Amen.

- ❖ **Exodus 3:1-4** - Moses & The Burning Bush
- ❖ **1 Kings 19:1-18** - The Lord Appears to Elijah
- ❖ **Zephaniah 3:17** - He will take great delight in you
- ❖ **Jeremiah 29:11-13** - Come and pray to me ...
- ❖ **Psalms 62:1-2** - My soul finds rest in God ...
- ❖ **Psalms 139:7-8, 13-14** - The All-Knowing Presence of God
- ❖ **Matthew 14:23** - Jesus went up on a mountainside by himself to pray
- ❖ **Matthew 17:1-2** - The Transfiguration
- ❖ **Mark 6:31-32** - Jesus Invites His disciples to a Solitary Place
- ❖ **Mark 1:1-8** - John the Baptist, A Voice of One Calling in the Wilderness
- ❖ **Mark 1:35** - Very early in the morning, while it was still dark outside...
- ❖ **Luke 6:12** - Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray...
- ❖ **Romans 12:1-2** - Do not conform to the pattern of this world ...

Psalm 46:10

Be Still and Know that I Am God

Be Still and Know That I Am

Be Still and Know

Be Still

Be



For Further Reflection on Solitude & Silence

“The father spoke one Word, which was his Son, and this Word he always speaks in eternal silence, and in silence must it be heard by the soul.” – John of the Cross

“The trouble with nearly everybody who prays is that he says 'Amen' and runs away before God has a chance to reply. Listening to God is far more important than giving Him our ideas.” - Frank Laubach

“God speaks to those who take time to listen, and He listens to those who take time to pray. Amen.” - unknown

“Let the remembrance of Jesus be with your every breath. Then indeed you will appreciate the value of stillness.” - John Climacus, a seventh century monk on Mount Sinai

“A person who is under the discipline of silence is a person who can say what needs to be said when it needs to be said... If we are silent when we should speak, we are not living in the discipline of silence. If we speak when we should be silent, we again miss the mark” – Richard Foster: Celebration of Discipline, p. 87

“Solitude is not a private therapeutic place. Rather, it is the place of conversion, the place where the old self dies and the new self is born.” - Henri Nouwen: The Way of the Heart p27.

“The wisdom of the desert [silence & solitude] is that the confrontation with our own frightening nothingness forces us to surrender ourselves totally and unconditionally to the Lord Jesus Christ. - Henri Nouwen: The Way of the Heart p28.

Quotes

[i] *Home for Trappist monks living according to the Rule of St. Benedict*

[ii] *Into the Silent Land: a Guide to the Christian Practice of Contemplation, written by Martin Laird*

[iii] *Barton, Ruth, Sacred Rhythms, p27.*

[iv] *Ibid, Laird, p8.*

[v] *Ibid, Barton, p23.*

[vi] *Ibid.*

[vii] *Ibid.*

[viii] *John 1:12*

[ix] *Palmer, Parker. Quoting Parker Palmer from Sacred Rhythms, p29.*

[x] *Ibid, Barton, p23.*

Books for Further Reading and Study:

The Way of the Heart by Henri Nouwen

Celebration of Discipline by Richard Foster

Sacred Rhythms by Ruth Hayley Barton

Into the Silent Land by Martin Laird

Spirit of the Disciplines by Dallas Willard

Solitude & Silence: The Cloister of the Heart by Thomas A Kempis

Invitation to Solitude & Silence by Ruth H. Barton & Dallas Willard

The Power of Silence by Cardinal Robert Sarah & Nicholas Diat

Whisper: How to Hear the Voice of God by Mark Batterson

Out of Solitude by Henri Nouwen

Hearing God by Dallas Willard & James B. Smith

