

Holy Solitude

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher in the Lenten series
“Listen: Hearing that Still, Small Voice and Finding Your Own”
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
April 14, 2019—Palm Sunday

- Luke 19:28-38 (Good News Translation) ²⁸ After Jesus said this, he went on in front of them toward Jerusalem. ²⁹ As he came near Bethphage and Bethany at the Mount of Olives, he sent two disciples ahead ³⁰ with these instructions: “Go to the village there ahead of you; as you go in, you will find a colt tied up that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. ³¹ If someone asks you why you are untying it, tell him that the Master needs it.” ³² They went on their way and found everything just as Jesus had told them. ³³ As they were untying the colt, its owners said to them, “Why are you untying it?” ³⁴ “The Master needs it,” they answered, ³⁵ and they took the colt to Jesus. Then they threw their cloaks over the animal and helped Jesus get on. ³⁶ As he rode on, people spread their cloaks on the road. ³⁷ When he came near Jerusalem, at the place where the road went down the Mount of Olives, the large crowd of his disciples began to thank God and praise him in loud voices for all the great things that they had seen: ³⁸ “God bless the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory to God!”
- Matthew 6:5-13 (Good News Translation) ⁵ “When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites! They love to stand up and pray in the houses of worship and on the street corners, so that everyone will see them. I assure you, they have already been paid in full. ⁶ But when you pray, go to your room, close the door, and pray to your Father, who is unseen. And your Father, who sees what you do in private, will reward you....
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: God gifts us with the ability to create even brief moments of holy solitude so that in our prayers we might become aware of that “still, small voice” offering God’s guidance and blessed assurance.

Think back to wintertime – when we begin the four-Sunday season of Advent, doesn’t Christmas Eve seem so far away? Well, the season of Lent is even longer! It began not on the First Sunday of Lent on March 10, but four days earlier on Ash Wednesday. Now here we are on the Sixth Sunday of Lent, and Lent still has one week to go. Whether you decided to observe Lent by “giving up” some practice or item, or by adding a special discipline to your life, at first Lent may have seemed like it would never end, but now, looking back, maybe it doesn’t seem like it’s been all that long.

My worship series for Lent has been called simply “Listen.” The series has challenged us to be attentive to God’s gentle nudging, inspiration, caution, guidance – though not always audible, what is sometimes referred to as a “still, small voice.” Let’s take a moment to remember where we have been on this year’s Lenten journey.

- We began this series of messages by hearing the story of Elijah seeking refuge in a cave for protection from earthquake, storm and fire. It was after all that that Elijah sensed the presence of God as a “still, small voice” – for him it seemed to be the sound of sheer silence. From that we concluded that inspiration from God is often found in the ordinary events of life rather than in majestic places or spectacular experiences.
- The next week we heard the story of the resurrected Jesus appearing on the evening of that very first Easter. He breathed upon his disciples and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” From that we considered how becoming more aware of our breathing can be a way to use our bodies to help us listen for the Holy Spirit – the “breath of God” – seeking to work in us.

- Two weeks ago we had an experience of a spiritual approach to engaging with Holy Scripture—listening and noticing what words or phrases or images stick out in the passage, and pondering why that might be.
- Last week we recalled the story of the woman who strained to reach out and touch even the hem of Jesus' garment, absolutely certain that even that brushing encounter with the Christ would bring her the healing that had eluded her for twelve years. From her experience we realized that sometimes prayer takes the form of actions rather than words.

Today we're going to consider how solitude is another way we can shape our lives so that we have a better chance of becoming aware of God's "still, small voice" guiding and comforting and encouraging us. And I'll admit that there certainly is some irony that we're considering solitude on Palm Sunday. I mean, on this day we remember Jesus in the midst of a noisy, exuberant, expectant crowd parading down the Mount of Olives and up into the city of Jerusalem.

Of course, throughout his ministry Jesus devoted so much of his time and energy to the public dimension of his life: addressing crowds as he walked from place to place, preaching in synagogues, teaching on hillsides, healing illnesses of mind and body, responding to questions from members of the religious establishment. We even refer to those three years of preaching and teaching as his "public ministry." So yes, much of his time and energy was spent "in public," interacting with individuals and groups, with crowds large and small, in public spaces and in private homes.

But remember that Jesus frequently retreated from the crowds, and even from his disciples. He regularly sought periods of seclusion in order to pray. He made sure his life included experiences of solitude. A quick survey of the gospels gives many examples of Jesus seeking time alone for prayer:

- ...[Jesus] left there in a boat and went to a lonely place by himself. (Mt. 14:13)
- After he had sent the crowds away, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray.... (Mt. 14:23)
- ...Jesus himself would often slip away to the wilderness and pray. (Lk. 5:16)
- He went off to the mountain to pray, and spent the whole night in prayer to God. (Lk. 6:12)
- In the early morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house, and went away to a secluded place, and was praying there. (Mk. 1:35)

And in a story that we will remember this Thursday night, after the Last Supper Jesus and the disciples walked down Mt. Zion past the temple grounds, down to the bottom of the Kidron Valley between Jerusalem and the Mount of Olives. He knew he could have some solitude, some quiet away from the busyness of the city, there in the Garden of Gethsemane. Instructing his disciples to stay and wait, the gospels tell us that "...he went a little beyond them, and fell on his face and prayed...." There in the solitude of that wooded park, he prayed one of the most gut-wrenching prayers we read in the entire Bible: "My Father, if it's possible, take this cup of suffering away from me. However—not what I want but what you want."¹

This morning we heard a familiar saying of Jesus. It's familiar because it's part of The Sermon on the Mount. In Chapter 6, Matthew's gospel presents Jesus offering a thought about prayer. Jesus says, "When you pray, go to your room, close the door, and pray to your Father, who is unseen. And your Father, who sees what you do in private, will reward you."²

That instruction also might seem a bit ironic given that we're gathered here in what we often refer to as "public worship," sitting together, offering prayers not in private behind closed doors, but side by side in one big room. Are we doing it wrong? Is Jesus criticizing us for coming together to offer praise and prayer? That doesn't seem to be the case, since Jesus himself participated in Jewish worship, both in the Jerusalem Temple and in local synagogues where the faithful would gather to pray in public. In fact, the very word synagogue comes from a Greek word that means "to bring together."³ So it wouldn't seem that Jesus is saying, "Public prayer: bad! Private prayer: good!"

¹ Matthew 26:39 Common English Bible

² Matthew 6:6 Good News Translation

³ Webster's New World College Dictionary, Fourth Edition. Cleveland, Ohio: Wiley Publishing, Inc., 2007, p. 1451

Jesus' concern is not so much about *how* we pray or *who* we pray with. Jesus is more concerned about *why* we're praying. What did he say? Why would he say that you should go into your room to pray and close the door behind you? Because he knew that people can find it tempting to be concerned about *appearing* to be pious and devout in living one's faith. Jesus called such people hypocrites. He said, "They love to stand up and pray in the houses of worship and on the street corners, *so that everyone will see them.*"⁴ And they are noticed, which, Jesus says, is the payoff they desire more than what they're praying about. So as his way to encourage us to seek and connect with the "still, small voice" of God rather than try to garner approval of others, Jesus uses the hyperbole of closing oneself off in a room in order to pray. He encourages us to seek solitude to focus on *what we pray for* rather than focusing on ourselves.

But our challenge is figuring out how to find solitude in our lives. Most of the time most of us can't simply go into seclusion for thirty seconds or thirty minutes. We've got kids to watch, parents to take care of, a boss who likes it when we stay focused on our work, teachers who prefer that we remain in the classroom.

But we can, in effect, "close the door" for a moment. We can seek times – brief moments even – to quiet our spirits, to create an oasis, a refuge. In that moment we can embrace a "holy solitude," a time to quiet our spirit, a "secret place" where we can focus our thoughts and intentions and prayers on God's presence, God's activity, God's attentiveness. Our goal is not to let people see how good we are at being prayerful. Our goal is to achieve a moment of peace, of focus, of connection with God.

To imagine what it might be like to create even a moment of "holy solitude," in a moment I'll invite you to close your eyes for a minute or two (I promise I'll also tell you when you can open them again). Rearrange yourself if you need to get in a more comfortable position. Close your eyes....

Imagine that as Jesus went out to pray by himself, he quietly invited you to join him in his secret place. Try to picture Jesus at prayer. Where would his attention be? What would be the expression on his face? What would his posture be? Quietly remain with him.

Then, when he finishes, imagine yourself in a conversation with Jesus about your own prayer life. Speak to him about the way in which you presently pray. Then ask him what he would look for from you. What is his goal for your private prayer? What more would he desire from you in this area of your life? How do you respond to him?⁵

[You can open your eyes again.] Even in this cavernous room, in the midst of all these people, we've been able to do what Jesus suggested. We were able to go into our own space and "close the door" so we could attune to and attend to the "still, small voice" of God. We closed our eyes, but that isn't essential.

Just imagine all the places and times you could do this – you could create a moment of holy solitude:

- while sitting in a waiting room;
- waiting for the plane to take off;
- riding the elevator;
- between innings;
- at the check-out counter;
- waiting for the bell to ring;
- during a commercial;
- stuck in traffic;
- waiting for the microwave to ding;
- walking in the Metropark....

God gifts us with the ability to create even brief moments of holy solitude so that in our prayers we might become aware of God's presence – that "still, small voice" offering God's trustworthy guidance and blessed assurance.

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⁴ Matthew 6:5 Good News Translation (emphasis added)

⁵ Fr. Mitch Pacwa, SJ, "Jesus Sets Out Alone to Pray."

https://wau.org/resources/article/re_jesus_sets_out_alone_to_pray/ accessed 4/10/2019