

Renewed with Grandeur

Will you close your eyes and imagine yourself inside Mark's passage? It is evening. You are tired after a long day. The sun is setting, but the people keep coming. People are bringing friends who are sick or wrestling with inner demons to see you. The whole town crowds around the makeshift clinic's door. You heal many who are sick. You finally see the last patient. You chat for a few minutes with Peter before turning in for the night.

Very early the next morning, before sunrise, you wake up. You leave the crowded house and look for a deserted place to be alone. You long to be alone in prayer. Alone in prayer, you watch the sun's first rays break over the distant mountains. The sunlight fills the clouds with pinks, blues, and golds. The reflections dance gently on still waters of the Sea of Galilee below. A raven leaves her perch gliding across the horizon. You think of Psalm 147.

*Praise the Lord! It is good to sing praises to God!
God heals the brokenhearted. God bandages our wounds.
The Lord lifts up the poor... The Lord rebuilds
God sees the stars. God fills the skies with clouds.
God sends the rain. The mountains bloom again with green grass
God sends food for the animals. God feeds even the baby ravens who cry out.
God doesn't prize the strength of a war horse or swift soldiers;
The Lord treasures all who wait for God's faithful love. (Psalm 147)*

Alone in prayer, we wait for God's faithful love. Alone in prayer, did Jesus remember his baptism: "You are my beloved, my child, with you I am well pleased."? Alone in prayer, did Jesus recall the faces of the hurting people who waited for hours for healthcare? Alone in prayer, did God heal Jesus' breaking heart? Too soon, Peter and the other helpers track you down. There is work to do. Finding you they smile asking, "Did you turn your phone off? Everyone's looking for you!"

Do we know how to be alone in prayer? Do we know our need to set aside even the holiest of tasks so that we might reconnect with God and ourselves? Do we understand that fun get-aways, entertaining devices, and pleasing diversions may offer temporary escape but cannot replace time alone in prayer? Do we know how to be alone in prayer? Do not be embarrassed if you do not! The disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray! (Luke 11)

Learning to sit with God is not an easy process. Our world peddles lovely distractions. Sanctification (holiness of heart and life) does not come overnight. After defining solitude as "spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being... a vivid realization that our life and being proceed from an Invisible Transcendent and Infinitely Abundant Source," the Trappist Monk Thomas Merton unfortunately cautions that "Contemplation cannot be taught or even clearly explained. It can only be hinted at, suggested, pointed to, symbolized."

So let me offer a few handles, tools, or hints to help us learn how to be alone in prayer. You might share a word or phrase that helps you be alone with God and yourself.

1. Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness.
2. Jesus had a habit of withdrawing to deserted spaces to be alone in prayer.
3. When facing troubles, Jesus sought the comfort of friends' prayers.
4. Jesus practiced the discipline of weekly worship and seasonal pilgrimages.
5. Jesus sang hymns, not only in church but with friends at home. Paul admonishes us to sing and make melody to God in our hearts, writing new songs. Wesley advises to not be afraid of the voice God made for you! I am renewed by all kinds of music from the Avett Brothers' "No Hard Feelings" to Mavis Staples' "We Shall Not Be Moved"!
6. Jesus, a carpenter, read the scriptures. Paul (college guy) knew some pagan poets, too.
7. Jesus wept over Jerusalem's systemic injustice and at a friend's grave.
8. Jesus prayed while healing, feeding, and listening to folks. Holy work is prayer!
9. Jesus loved parties and people- often leading to spiritual conversations.

10. Jesus took walks, noticing the sparrows, seeds, and fig trees.

11. Jesus stayed aware of others- the widow's contribution or the children's laughter.

These are 11 practices that may point to, hint at, or help us find ways to be alone in prayer. We will only find ourselves when we learn to be alone in prayer. Or maybe when we are alone in prayer, God finds us and being found in God we find our true life! In New Seeds of Contemplation, Thomas Merton gives us a few cautions about what being alone with God is not! Much of this sermon comes from this wise monk's insights.

1. Solitude is not an escape from life. Alone in prayer, we ponder the warhorse, the cross, the climate, patients lined up outside the clinic door. We weep over Jerusalem. We choose to forgive, to love, to shake the dust of hateful people from our lives, to uplift, to build, to heal. Prayer is the deepest possible engagement with life.
2. Solitude is not a rejection of things, people or pleasures. (Colossians 2) "What God has made, let no one call unclean!" (Acts 10) How can we sit close to God while judging God's beloved children or disdaining the things God created and loves?
3. You will not find solitude by repeating catch-phrases or cliches. Rehearsing slogans only holds God at arm's length. To be alone with God, we must find our own words. We will not find God by pretending to be someone else, no matter how holy they may be.
4. Solitude is not loneliness or a personal preference to be alone. Introverts and extroverts alike can avoid deep honest conversations with God and themselves. God lovingly made us with a beautiful diversity of gifts and personalities. (1 Corinthians 12-13)
5. Solitude is difficult when we hold onto bitterness, anger, or unforgiveness. How can we linger very long with God if we hope that any of God's other children might suffer? How can we dwell in love and cling to hatred? Oh, we may be furious for a season, but given enough time alone with God, love washes away everything that does harm. Love draws us deeper into God's love for all people. Maybe that sort of healing will stretch into eternity? Perhaps, this is why we must forgive in order to taste the deepest fruits of forgiveness? (Luke 6:37)
6. Time alone with God is not some happy sauce that botoxes our souls into a perpetual smile. Solitude opens our eyes to suffering, alienation, and injustice within the world God loves. Jesus weeps over systemic injustice and individual suffering. (Matthew 12; John 11) Prayer stirs in us a hunger and thirst to bring peace, feed the hungry, lift the poor, break the cycle, welcome the stranger, and die to our privilege. (Matthew 5-7)
7. Solitude does not seek anything from God but God's presence. The deepest prayer does not ask for blessings, peace, or any other prize from God; "God knows what we need before we ask." (Matthew 6) Prayer is a deep dying to self-importance so that we might find wholeness in love, justice, and humanity.
8. Solitude will elude us if we deeply fear God. "Perfect love casts out all fear; fear has to do with punishment. The person who is afraid has not yet experienced perfect love. We love because God first loved us." (1 John 4) Who can linger with a God who terrifies them? Who can trust a God whose love is fickle and limited to some children but not others? If fear keeps us from letting down our guard with God or ourselves, we will live a lie, seeking to be someone other than the beautiful person God created us to be. We will only find life when we learn to be ourselves, alone in prayer with God. We will only know God and ourselves when we truly believe that God first loved us.

As a fourth grader, I was taunted by classroom bullies who mocked my reading struggles. They laughed, "Paul can't read. You are stupid." I learned to throw up to miss school. I grew a fierce defensive anger, a nimble humor to chop down bullies, and an unhealthy sense of competition. Even these days, when I feel threatened I instinctively prefer the fight response over fleeing or freezing. My fight to prove my worth propelled me to excel. That fire kept me struggling for tear-filled hours trying to spell "pharmacy" without an "f". It burned long enough to push me into Phi Beta Kappa. Did I feel like I arrived when they taught me the secret academic excellence handshake? No, I felt a little dumb that I forgot it. I thank God for my fighting spirit but know those inner fires left me feeling vindicated, not joyful. I wanted to rub my academic victory in the faces of my childhood bullies, instead of enjoying our university president's warm smile. Merton tells us hatred always flows from a deep sense of unworthiness. I did not hate those other

inductees, but I did not love them as I loved myself, or maybe I did not love myself. Maybe I still wondered if I belonged.

But thanks be to God I always knew I belonged inside my mother's arms. She whispered over and over, "You are my beloved, with you I am well pleased." There I felt safe enough to release my rage and my tears. Nestled in love, I could face the demons and slowly make peace with my own dyslexic brain. It would take years to forgive the worst bullies, to stop competing so fiercely, and to work for more intrinsic rewards. One day when my children were small, my mother shared how deeply her heart broke for me during our nightly battle with homework. One day, I came home from a ball game deeply disappointed. Mother tried to console me saying, "Baby, you will win one day." Through tears I angrily blurted out, "I need a win right now." I did not remember this exchange. You see Mother's deep empathy ended the platitudes and simply whispered, "I know baby, I know." She gave me that hope-filled theology that always helps us find our way, "You are my beloved, my child, with you I am well pleased." Nothing, not height, nor depth, nor angels, nor demons, or anything else in all creation can separate us from the love of God given to us in Jesus Christ. (Romans 8) Oh, come let us sit alone in prayer with such a transforming love. Amen.