D. BENSON
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Summer Sermon Series: Spiritual Disciplines
Silence and Solitude
1 Kings 19:1-18

I confess that I have a rather sensitive ear to noise. This sensitivity to noise has become even more apparent since having kids. There is always noise. Kid chatter, TV noise, or an audiobook being played. And then add to that the other noises that are part of our household: Randy playing the fiddle or guitar while the kids are watching TV (which means they turn it up and Randy plays louder), the dog wandering around or barking to go out, the dishes being put away, something dropping on the floor, the telltale noises that come from rooting through a LEGO bin over and over again. Our home is a loud one. All these noises add up and clutter up my brain so that I, quite literally, cannot think or process properly. If anyone ever wanted to give me a gift that would make my year it would be to let me spend some significant time in my completely empty house. Practicing the discipline of silence and solitude is practically very difficult for me.

One of the spiritual practices that I used to do on a regular basis, many years ago, was to take a 24-hour retreat to one of my two quiet retreat places. While I would have preferred to go canoeing, that wasn't always possible or practical. One of the places I went to was to the Sisters of St. John the Divine, an Anglican convent in Toronto. The convent observed the general rule that one only spoke when necessary or during prayer and worship times. Meal times were always kept in strict silence. As I spent time in the chapel there, or in my room just 'being', and listening to whatever God wanted to say, I found myself becoming refreshed and my brain and spirit being re-set, back to a calmer more deliberate, aware, and attentive existence.

The other place I liked to go was to L'Arche Daybreak in north Toronto. L'Arche is a community (first established by Henri Nouwen) for adults with developmental or mental disabilities. They had a separate retreat house where silence was observed but retreat goers would join the community every day for prayers and worship – and that certainly wasn't a quiet affair. Out at the retreat house there was space for walking and thinking and praying and napping in silence. We ate our meals in silence and didn't really socialize with anyone else who happened to be using the house for their own retreats. This was another place for spiritual refreshment where I found myself able to weed out some of the clutter in my soul and carve out some space to pay attention to what God was doing in me and what he was calling me to be and do.

You will notice that I just used the phrase, 'carve out some space' for silence, solitude and reflection – to get reconnected to who God is and what God is doing. Unfortunately, in the world we live in, it really does amount to carving out the time and space: actually taking a knife and cutting parts of our daily lives away in order to make more room and set apart time for quiet and reflection. We live in a pretty noisy world. There are the concrete noises that surround us all of the time: the TV

or radio on in our homes much of the time, or the constant chatter of people or machinery in our workplaces. But there is also psychological, emotional, and spiritual noise in our lives: the conversations we have going on in our heads all the time, the things that we are overwhelmed with and can't stop thinking about, the hurt we have from broken relationships or the anxiety we feel about the unknown looming ahead of us. And when you add that internal noise to the external noise, and on top of that pile up all the things that just need to be done in a day, who has time for silence and solitude? And really, do we really need to slow down and experience silence and solitude if our lives are going along just fine the way they are?

There are a couple of reasons to make time and space for periods of intentional silence and solitude in our lives. First of all, the biblical witness recognizes the importance of silence and solitude for fostering a strong relationship with God. It is in silence and solitude that we learn to listen to God and where we can become profoundly aware of God's presence with us.

Jesus set time apart for silence and solitude in order to pray, to be refreshed, and to discern the will of the Father. If the point of discipleship and the Christian life is to become more like Jesus, then following Jesus' example is probably a good place to start. We are told often in the gospels that after Jesus had spent time teaching or healing or re-building community, he went off to a place by himself to pray and to rest (Matt 4:1; 14:23; Mk 1:35, Lk 4:42). Jesus knew that the kind of work he was called to do was exhausting and draining. He knew that in order to do it well and to fulfill the purpose for which he had been sent, he needed to ensure that he remained close to the Father. That closeness and intimacy was strengthened through the times that Jesus devoted to listening to God and resting in his presence.

Another biblical example of the spiritual benefits of the practice of silence and solitude is in the life of Elijah. Elijah was a prophet who worked hard to speak the Word of God into the culture he lived in. His message wasn't always popular, and it made his life very difficult at various times. On one occasion, after he had purged the land of false prophets and called the king to listen only to Yahweh, the God of Israel, his life was in grave danger. Overwhelmed and afraid, he ran off into the wilderness, to a solitary place, and sat down to rest. There in the quiet of the place, with no one else around and with no one else to talk to, Elijah found himself comforted and cared for by God. God provided rest and refreshment. God provided shade and nourishment.

Then, in obedience to the voice of God, Elijah went up to the mountain to meet God and there God reaffirmed Elijah's purpose and strengthened him to continue in the ministry he had been called to. He had been so concerned for his own life, feeling sorry for himself because people wouldn't listen to him, and feeling isolated and alone and unsupported in his work, that he had lost his God-perspective. In silence and in solitude God gave Elijah the space he needed to get some perspective – to get his God-perspective back.

As we practice silence and solitude as a spiritual discipline, *for the purpose of deepening our relationship to God and conforming more to Christ Jesus,* there are some helpful things to keep in mind. Although the majority of the biblical witness affirms the importance of human community and activity, there are times when voluntary and temporary abstention from speaking or from human company can lead to meeting certain spiritual goals. We are called to set our minds on the things that are above (Col 3:2). It's hard to do that when our minds are occupied all the time by the various noises and duties that claim our attention.

There are a number of other spiritual benefits to this practice, many of which compliment the other disciplines we have already talked about on previous weeks.

Seeking out quiet places to be alone can help minimize our distractions in prayer and in reading scripture. Sometimes worship of God consists only of a God-focused stillness and quiet. A common phrase among the Old Testament prophets often sounded like this: "The Lord is in his holy temple, let all earth keep silence before him" (Habb 2:20; Zeph 1:7; Zech 2:13). There is such a thing as a worshipful silence.

Being silent before God can also express faith and trust in God. Psalm 62:1-6 reflects David's absolute trust in God as his 'soul waits for God in silence'. To be free of the compulsion to convince yourself and others or God of your devotion and trust, and to be confident in silence that God is there is a profound act of faith.

As we have seen already from our biblical examples, moments of silence and solitude are often the contexts in which God provides physical and spiritual restoration. And as I have mentioned earlier, silence and solitude with the intent of listening to God can help us regain a spiritual perspective, and can help us seek the will of God.

Another benefit of practicing the spiritual discipline of silence and solitude is to learn control of the tongue. The apostle James says that 'the religion of the person with no tongue control is worthless" (James 1:26). That's a pretty harsh judgment. But in other places throughout scripture, the benefits of learning to control our tongues is also mentioned (Prov 17:27-28; Eccl. 3:7; James 1:19). Sometimes by keeping silence for a period of time, we become more aware of what we don't really need to say, and sometimes we realize that sometimes things work out just fine without the input from us that we had thought vitally important.

I have listed a number of reasons why developing the habit of silence and solitude can be beneficial. But most of all, they provide time and space to pay attention to God. But the key to all of this is that the silence and solitude are intentional and are practice with a specific purpose in mind. Many of us spend time throughout our day not talking to anyone else, or time by ourselves. That doesn't necessarily make us good at the spiritual discipline of silence and solitude. Silence and solitude as a spiritual practice involves the specific intent of focusing on God, listening to God,

attending to God, for the purpose of growing closer to God and conforming more thoroughly to Christ our Lord.

So, some practical things to help get you started in this important spiritual discipline (or to deepen your practice if you are already doing it).

1. Take 'mini' retreats. These can happen while you are sitting at a traffic light, waiting for the eggs to boil, gardening in your yard, or watching the birds. Consecrate (set apart) these little mini times for silence and solitude with the express intention of seeking God, listening to God, and paying attention to what God is doing. This little mini practice can help turn the routines of our lives into holy encounters with God. Seize those unexpected moments where you have nothing to do but wait as a gift from God to focus on him and the life of his Spirit within you.
2. Carve out daily time to be alone with God. Devote yourself to quiet reading of scripture and prayer. The missionary to China, Jim Elliot, once said, "I think the devil has made it his business to monopolize on three elements: noise, hurry, crowds… Satan is quite aware of the power of silence." And the devil uses all kinds of tactics to keep us busy and unfocused on God. If we don't plan for this, it won't happen.
3. Go out or away for silence and solitude. And if you are worried about how you will spend all that time alone, make a list of what you'd like to do and how you want to spend that time so that you can grow closer to God.
4. Find special places to be alone with God. These might be in your home, out in the community, at a park, in the wilderness. There is a story about Susanna Wesley (John and Charles' mother and often called the 'mother of Methodism'), who, while raising 10 children couldn't find any space to read her bible and pray. So she would bring her apron up over her head to 'hide' herself while she read and prayed. It certainly didn't block out the noise of a busy household, but all the children knew not to bother her while she was under her apron! Find a place and space that works for you!

As you explore more deeply your relationship with God this summer, I invite you to develop the practice of silence and solitude that you would grow closer to God and mature into the full stature of Christ Jesus, our Lord.