

A Sermon for DaySpring
by Eric Howell
In a 'Furnace of Transformation'
Genesis 32
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In today's Scripture readings of Jesus and Jacob, we encounter two stories of solitude. Jesus, as we see, withdrew from the crowds to a deserted place by himself. Jacob sends his family on ahead on his journey until he was left all alone. Both, Jesus and Jacob, chose to be alone, both, in different ways, experienced the trouble with seeking and finding solitude.

To nurture and express Christian life we need both community and times of solitude. In his handbook on Christian *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer has chapters called "The Day Alone" and "The Day Together." We need both. And if it were just that simple, most of us could fairly well check the box and move on. Most of us have time in the day when we are alone and time in the day when we are with others, even if we don't feel like we get enough of one or the other. Moreover, most of us are oriented to be energized by each experience, one more than the other. Few people are extreme, total extroverts or extreme, total introverts. No matter which end of the personality spectrum we tend to lean toward, most people on some level need both others and alone and are glad for some of both. We have time around other people and time by ourselves. Maybe not enough of either, but we have and feel grateful for each.

We have time alone, but is that solitude? We have time with others, but is that community? Thomas Merton observed back in the 1950's that "living in the midst of other people does not guarantee that we live in communion with them or even in communication with them" (*New Seeds*, 54). How much more now? Just as community is the high ideal of being with others, so solitude is the high ideal of being alone. Just as with community, solitude isn't guaranteed just by being alone. Those who feel alone know this very well, experiencing being alone not as holy solitude but as painful loneliness.

Solitude and loneliness may be two sides of the same coin. Loneliness is the searing condition of modern life in America. We are created for connection, but the experience of contemporary life for many people much of the time is utter disconnection from others and from God and even from themselves. Merton observed the irony that a person can be immersed in a huge crowd and feel totally isolated. I feel this experience the couple of times I've walked through the urban canyons of New York City, and I look up and see row upon row of apartment windows. I wonder, with all these people stacked on top of one another, how does anyone know anyone else? It fills me with a sense of sadness that may not be justified—maybe life in Manhattan is wonderful, but that's the question I leave with. How are you ever alone? How are you ever really with others?

Loneliness is hard, and an experience which the gift of community in church can and should help address. Church community is where people can move past being friendly and enter into friendship though it doesn't always happen automatically. Friendship is a sacred gift that is often hard-won. True friendship is rare, but it is possible. Christian community with its truth

telling, sacrifice for the other, compassion, joy, and the shared meal at the Table of our Lord and the tables of our homes, is the practice of friendship. May the church—may our church be a community in which loneliness encounters friendship. And also where times of aloneness can be experienced not as restlessness but as solitude.

Loneliness is hard, but at the same time, solitude, its baptized cousin, is good. That's what the spiritual masters say to us. We are not meant all the time to be with other people and to be working or actively engaging our minds around the things of this life, the pressures of these days, or let's be honest, bounced around by the endless distractions available to us all the time. Solitude—the ability to be alone with yourself and with God—this is good. It is complex and dangerous, but it is good. It is necessary for a spiritual life. Solitude is resistance to what Merton calls being a mass-man, which is his word to describe what happens when you become just a unit of the crowd, one who 'doesn't care, doesn't hear, doesn't think.' This person, he said, "does not act, he is pushed. He does not talk, he produces conventional sounds when stimulated by the appropriate noises. He does not think, he secretes clichés" (NS, 55). In other words, what the data mining companies of your social media feed think you are and want you to be.

Solitude is the womb of silence, the interior silence which is the necessary condition for prayer. We do not seek solitude to set ourselves apart as individuals, but so that we are more fully united—with God, with others, with ourselves.

Ironically, as prevalent as is loneliness in our experiences, solitude is actually pretty hard. Even Jesus experiences this. From time to time, he withdraws from others to pray up on a mountain or away on the water. And just about every time he is interrupted. The crowds find him. His few moments of solitude are interrupted by the people who want and need something from him. Parents? Amen, here? To Jesus' credit, he has compassion on them.

While I don't think he welcomed the interruption, he welcomed the people into his life and ministry. He always did. Interruptions will come. This is one reason why over the centuries, a few men and women retreat far into the wilderness to give themselves to a life of prayer. Some do it in monastic communities. Some go even further. The Bible word for wilderness is *eremos*, from which derives our word "hermit." There are, even to this day, men and women around the world who withdraw as completely as possible in devotion to prayer and communion with God.

Some days that sounds so great. There are some days when there's nothing I can imagine wanting more than a little hut or even cave somewhere out there on a quiet vista, where the only sound is the breeze gently blowing the pages of the Bible in my hands. I'd be so happy. And also, the breeze blowing the leaves of the trees, because of course, there would be beautiful trees there. And the trickle of a stream because I'd have to have a little stream flowing by, teeming with fish eager to rise to my line. If I had all those things, I'd be so happy. And some good food. I'd have to have that. And a comfortable bed to sleep in at night and a hammock by day. Now that's the hermit life I can dream of.

When I think of solitude, that is what I think of, dream of, imagine—quiet, peaceful, beautiful, restful repose, uninterrupted by you people. I think that’s what most people desire at one point or another. Spiritual retreats give a taste of this experience. We take groups to the Christ in the Desert monastery in New Mexico, to get a taste of it. On the Italy pilgrimage, we sit in silence before St. Francis’ San Damiano cross. Seminary students come here each spring and spread out all over these grounds in hammocks and chairs for hours in their annual silent retreat. At the end of it, they always say, “I was kind of dreading putting my phone away for a few hours and being silent, but when it was over I didn’t want it to end.” They got a taste of it. We all need some silence, some rest, some solitude in our lives, and we respond, our bodies respond physiologically when we have it, even if it’s just a taste.

No wonder Jesus said to his disciples, “Lo, tho who art thou...just give me a minute.” Or Jacob who sends his family—all those kids—so many kids—across the river and then goes back to the other side. There, Jacob was all alone. This is a good thing, right? This solitude. This moment of respite. This moment of rest by a trickling brook. Yes, it is. It is a good thing, but not always in the way we think it will be. The spiritual masters understand this, too.

In *The Way of the Heart*, Henri Nouwen says “Solitude is the furnace of transformation... Without solitude we remain victims of our society and continue to be entangled in the illusions of the false self” (15). In her *Spiritual Disciples Handbook*, Adele Calhoun goes a step beyond, “We need solitude if we intend to unmask the false self and its important-looking image. Alone, without distraction, we put ourselves in a place where God can reveal things to us that we might not notice in the normal preoccupations of life. Solitude opens a space where we can bring our empty and compulsive selves to God” (130).

Furnace of transformation? Exposing my false self? What happened to some alone-time as a place where I’m not bothered by other people and can do my thing whatever it is? What happened to just having a little privacy? What happened to solitude as a way to recharge my batteries, or as the corner of a boxing ring where I can get my wounds tended to? What happened to solitude as a place to gather new strength to continue the ongoing journey of life? Nouwen calls each of those “distortions” of the idea of solitude. I want to protest to Nouwen—“but I like those things, Henri, and I want those things and I need those things.” Like a 3-year-old stamping our feet, sometimes what we need the most is just a Sunday nap. But a Sunday nap, as good as it is, is not a furnace of transformation. So maybe if all we want is a Sunday nap, maybe we don’t want solitude.

It doesn’t take crowds of people to interrupt my alone time with God. My thoughts and anxieties, my to do lists and endless distractions scrolling across my screen and my mind are ample fuel for the fire of my banality. Yours, too, I’m guessing? If solitude is a furnace of transformation, I’m not at all sure that’s what I want, especially when I look at Jacob.

“Jacob was all alone.” That is not just a geographic description; it is relational and existential. He is all alone. He can’t go backwards because Laban is there, his father-in-law who he has tricked out of his daughters and flocks. That relationship is over. He can’t go forward because Esau is

coming, his brother who he tricked out of his inheritance. In Jacob, here's a picture of someone whose life has caught up to them.

Jacob, whose name means "trickster, cheater," has lived his name his whole life. And now, everything he had is gone; everyone he knew is separated from him. He is alone in the consequences of his actions and the person he has become. This is the person we need to see there sitting in the dirt by the river in the wilderness, a man whose life has come to this—alone. Nouwen says in what sounds like a kind of warning, 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, the place where the emergence of the new man and new woman occurs" (17). Jacob, as he soon discovers, was not alone that night. Mysteriously described, a man wrestled with him until daybreak.

The biblical story is ambiguous about who Jacob is wrestling with. A man? Who is this man? Is this a projection of himself? Or is it the psychological manifestation of his father who he tricked and from whom he fled? Or is it the heartbreak of Laban that won't leave him alone? Biblical writers have the ability to say clearly what they mean to say, so the ambiguity here invites an expansive reading in our imagination. However we imagine the man, whether as friend or enemy, divine or human or psychological, Jacob does the one thing, the only one thing necessary to solitude. He doesn't let go. And in not letting go, he experiences the man as God.

It's so easy to let go. It's so hard to hang on. The struggle is real because the danger is real. We might read this story and note that Jacob's opponent has power over him. But Jacob says, "I will not let go until you give me a blessing." Is it a blessing to face yourself? At daybreak, he is confronted by the man, by God with the question that has haunted him his whole life, "What is your name?" It's the question: who are you, who are you really? He'd been asked this question before. The last time he was asked was by his near blind, dying father ready to give his final blessing to his eldest son. "Who are you?" he asked the son who walked in the room. And he lied, "My name is Esau." Now, how will he answer? It's a wonderful and terrible question to be asked who you are.

Debbie Thomas is so right in saying, "What Jacob learns that night by the river is that the big, terrible, life-changing questions we dodge and skirt and evade and ignore return to us again and again and again until we find the courage to look them in the eye and answer them honestly. I'm pretty sure that if Jacob had lied to the stranger yet again, the battle would have continued for another day and night. Or for many days and nights. God would have challenged Jacob's destructive self-deceptions over and over again until he finally surrendered to the uncomfortable truth: 'I am Jacob. The heel grabber. The deceiver. The schemer. The trickster. I am the man who lied to my father, cheated my brother, manipulated my father-in-law, and abandoned every disaster I created. I am Jacob.'" (<https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2703-the-limp-and-the-blessing>).

This is a picture of the danger of solitude and the reason we might numb it with distractions, but it is the promise of solitude and the reason we need it. In it, I wrestle with my past, my

deeds, and my true self. At “I am Jacob,” the fight is over. He has both won and lost. He is both conqueror and defeated. He is both done and undone.

For the man Jacob is dead, but a new man is about to be born. “You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have contended with God and men and have prevailed.” He prevailed only because he refused to let go of God, no matter how long and painful the night would be.

That place in his life—and ours—is named Peniel: the place in your life you meet God face to face and are transformed in the furnace to live on. May we have the courage to go to Peniel and to hold on to God as we are being transformed into the one God is bringing to life in us. It may be a long night, or for many, we may walk away with a limp, but we are his and in it, discover the full meaning of being reborn. That in the life God has for us to live, God is not wrestling against us, but wrestling for us and within us as we walk through our life.

Amen.

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