

BE STILL

by Rev. Elaine Poproski

I used to make a regular habit of spending a few days in a little one-room cottage at the edge of a forest at a place dedicated to providing retreat space for groups and individuals. I generally didn't have an ambitious schedule, as the whole point was to stop for a bit and breathe deeply of God's goodness. It was a time to rest. I'd go for walks through the woods; I'd spend some time in the prayer labyrinth and in the lily garden, contemplating the beauty of God's creation. If I was ambitious I'd light a campfire in the evening and spend some time watching the flames dance in the dark. It sounds idyllic, doesn't it?

There were beautiful moments during these days of retreat. There were times of connection to God that filled pages of my journal. But it was also often a supremely uncomfortable and even painful time.

One of the times I went, the plan was to be there for three days. I figured I'd want to do some reading while I was there, so I looked at my stack of unread books and decided which one I'd like to read while away. I worried a little bit that one book might not be enough. So I packed another book. And then I wondered, "What if I didn't end up wanting to read either of those books when I got there?" So I packed another book. And another one. And another one. It wasn't long before I had an entire box of books going with me on my three-day retreat. And as if that wasn't ridiculous enough, after I arrived at the cottage and unpacked all my things, I decided I should have brought one or two novels in addition to the other books I'd packed, so I got back in my car and drove ½ an hour to the closest Chapters to browse their shelves and pick up a couple novels to add to my preposterous pile of books.

What on earth was going on?

As I reflected on my ludicrous behaviour, I had to own the discomfort the silence and the solitude of the cottage had revealed. It was more than just being nervous about being bored. There was something much deeper going on. I think, at the root of it, it was the idea of no one but me and God together for three whole days that threw me. Don't get me wrong, I'd spent time with God lots of times prior to this particular experience. I wanted opportunities to connect with God. I loved those times during a worship service or when visiting someone or when studying something, when God's presence was tangible, even when God had hard things to say to me. But there was something about the idea of three whole days alone with God that clearly caused me problems. I think what it was, was that I didn't believe it was possible to spend that much time in a row with God. I'd accepted that God sometimes visits, but also that his visits don't last. He visits and then he goes home so I can get on with life. (Which is really bad, theology, I'm aware. Of course, I know, at least intellectually, that God is always with us, but this is the best I can do at describing what I think was going on in me.) Something about the idea of three solid days with just me and God, threw me. So I brought more books than I could read in a month, never mind three days.

Does any of this resonate with you?

I think it's easy, when our lives are super busy, to imagine with delight what it would be to take a few days away in a one room cottage by the woods all by ourselves. But I wonder if we'd have the same feelings of delight if we weren't allowed to take anything with us to that cottage. What if it was just going to be us and God, all alone, with no books, video games, Netflix, computers...? What if the cottage were silent? How long does being that alone survive as a treat, before it makes us squirrely?

Have you ever visited with someone who left the television on the entire duration of your visit? It's frustrating, isn't it? Or maybe you've had lunch with someone who was checking their phone the whole time. I once had lunch with someone in a restaurant, and our table was positioned against a mirror so the other person could see themselves throughout our meal. It was really hard to carry on a conversation with someone who kept adjusting their hair as they looked at themselves instead of at me.

There are things we do in conversations with other people that help those conversations, and things that hinder our conversations. If we're distracted, that hinders our conversation. If we look the other person in the eye as they speak to us, that helps our conversation. If there's too much noise, that hinders a conversation. Being able to hear clearly helps a conversation. These are the obvious things. But there are lots of less obvious things that also help or hinder conversation. If we spend our time thinking about what we're going to say, instead of listening to what the other person is saying, that hinders a conversation. How we position our body can help or hinder. For instance, when a person folds their arms tightly in front of them, they communicate that they are closed to our words; when they are relaxed and lean in, they communicate a readiness to listen.

Some people are really great conversationalists. They know, not just how to listen well, but also how to make sure the other person knows they're being listened to. For some people, these skills are natural. They're absorbed somehow as they grow up and they don't even have to think about what they're doing. For other people, these skills are less natural. They have to make a point of learning them and practicing them.

All of this is true, whether our conversations are with each other or with God. There are things that help and there are things that hinder. And perhaps unsurprisingly, the things that help or hinder our conversations with each other have the same effect on our conversations with God. And just like with other people, if our conversations are mostly hindered, because of distractions or not paying attention or being closed to what the other is saying, our relationship with God will also be hindered. Because friendship – relationship – requires listening. It requires paying attention.

When we talk about the Spiritual Disciplines of Silence and Solitude, what we're talking about is positioning ourselves where distractions are minimized so that we can be fully present with God. Because it is when we are fully present with God that we come to know him and discover that we are known by him. It is when we are fully present with God that our friendship with God is allowed to bloom.

When I was first introduced to the Spiritual Discipline of solitude, I mostly ignored it. I figured that as a single person living alone I was pretty well versed in this particular Discipline. I knew solitude. I thought. But just being alone isn't really what this Spiritual Discipline is about.

Because even when we're alone, there are so many distractions – there's so much noise. I began to realize that my television was on for hours on end when I was home, not because I was paying attention to it, but because the voices filled the aloneness of my space. Even though they weren't real people in my living room, they kept true solitude at bay. For other people, the radio or music plays the same role. So, what is solitude, really? More specifically, what is the Spiritual Discipline of solitude?

To answer that question, I want to read for you some of what Henri Nouwen wrote in his book, *The Way of the Heart*, in which he makes the point that what we have come to think of as solitude, is not the same thing as the Spiritual Discipline of solitude. This is what he wrote:

“We say that we need some solitude in our lives. What we really are thinking of, however, is a time and a place for ourselves in which we are not bothered by other people, can think our own thoughts, express our own complaints, and do our own thing, whatever it may be. For us, solitude most often means privacy... We also think of solitude as a station where we can recharge our batteries, or as the corner of the boxing ring where our wounds are oiled, our muscles massaged, and our courage restored by fitting slogans. In short, we think of solitude as a place where we gather new strength to continue the ongoing competition in life.”ⁱ

Nouwen tells us that that understanding of solitude is not what we're talking about when we talk about the Spiritual Discipline of solitude. He writes: “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 the new woman occurs.”ⁱⁱ

Here's what he means by that. He writes:

“In solitude I get rid of my scaffolding: no friends to talk with, no telephone calls to make, no meetings to attend, no music to entertain, no books to distract, just me – naked, vulnerable, weak, sinful, deprived, broken – nothing. It is this nothingness that I have to face in my solitude, a nothingness so dreadful that everything in me wants to run to my friends, my work, and my distractions so that I can forget my nothingness and make myself believe that I am worth something. But that is not all. As soon as I decide to stay in my solitude, confusing ideas, disturbing images, wild fantasies, and weird associations jump about in my mind like monkeys in a banana tree. Anger and greed begin to show their ugly faces. I give long, hostile speeches to my enemies and dream lustful dreams in which I am wealthy, influential, and very attractive – or poor, ugly, and in need of immediate consolation. Thus I try again to run from the dark abyss of my nothingness and restore my false self in all its vainglory.

The task is to persevere in my solitude, to stay in my cell until all my seductive visitors get tired of pounding on my door and leave me alone... That is the struggle. It is the struggle to die to the false self. But this struggle is far, far beyond our own strength. Anyone who wants to fight his demons with his own weapons is a fool. The wisdom of the desert is that the confrontation with our own frightening nothingness forces us to surrender ourselves totally and unconditionally to the Lord Jesus

Christ... Only in and through him can we survive the trials of our solitude. [But] solitude is not simply a means to an end. Solitude is its own end. It is the place where Christ remodels us in his own image... Solitude is the place of our salvation.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Silence is a Spiritual Discipline very much like solitude, in terms of its intent and efficacy toward our growth in Christ-likeness. Dallas Willard talks about silence and solitude as being the “primary means for correcting the distortions of our embodied social existence.”^{iv} What he means is that sometimes we have to step back from the day-to-day so that we can reorient ourselves toward Christ. He writes,

“God will, generally speaking, not compete for our attention. If we will not withdraw from the things that obsess and exhaust us into solitude and silence, he will usually leave us to our own devices. He calls us to ‘be still and know.’ To the soul disciplined to wait quietly before him, to *lavish* time upon this practice, he will make himself known in ways that will redirect our every thought, feeling and choice. The body itself will enter a different world of rest and strength. And the effects of solitude and silence will reverberate through the social settings where one finds oneself.”^v

That is heady stuff. Who wouldn’t want to enter a different world of rest and strength? But just like with solitude, silence is not easy. We are not a people who are comfortable with silence. It feels like it drags on and on and on, even if in reality it’s only a very brief few moments of silence. Think about what it feels like when someone asks a question, and no one answers right away. Think about how it feels on Sundays when I invite people to share something, and no one speaks. How long does it take of me waiting quietly for someone to say something before you begin to feel really uncomfortable? And yet, that being said, sometimes don’t we long for silence? Don’t we long for the words and the noise to stop?

Last November I had dinner with my family at my sister’s house. This was our first gathering since the wedding in which my new sister-in-law and her kids were present. As we sat around the table, the 10-year-old competed with the 14-year-old to be heard. I was so exhausted from all the talking, that I didn’t turn on the radio or listen to anything but the silence in the car for the whole drive home. It’s in moments like that, that I am reminded that silence is a gift from God. I am reminded that it is good to step away from the noise for a time to be in the silence. There is a healing that happens in that place. There is a calm and a stillness when the noise disappears. But it’s not just about all the external noise; it’s the internal noise that also needs to be stilled. It’s the racing thoughts in my own head that need to be quieted. And I can only begin to quiet them if the noise outside my head is also silenced.

In John 14, there’s a wonderful conversation between Jesus and his disciples, in which he tells them about the Holy Spirit who will come and stay with them forever. He talks about his own departure from them and of his desire for them to continue living as he lived and as he taught them, even after he is gone. In the midst of all of this wonderfulness, Jesus says this: “the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me.”^{vi}

Jesus and the Father were so connected – so intertwined – that Jesus’ words were the Father’s words. Without suggesting that it’s possible for any of us to be as connected or intertwined with

God as Jesus was with the Father, I would suggest that the more time we spend practicing the spiritual discipline of silence, the more likely it is that when we speak, our words, like Jesus' words, will more fully reflect God's words. It's not the silence in and of itself that has such an effect. Rather, it is that when we practice silence as a spiritual discipline – when we quiet our own voice in order to listen for God's voice – we will hear God's voice. Because God has things to say to us. If only we would stop talking long enough to hear.

At the beginning of our service today, we listened to the words of 1 Kings 19:11 – 13, in which Elijah went up a mountain to meet God. We're told that God wasn't in the wind, or the earthquake, or the fire. God was in the silence. And it was out of that silence that God spoke with Elijah.

This encounter with God happened at a time when Elijah was at his weakest. He'd battled Ahab and Jezebel and all their prophets. He was a wanted man. There was a price on his head. He wanted to die. So he ran off into the wilderness, where he sat under a solitary tree all by himself and asked God to take his life. He had nothing left. He was alone. And in that place God's angels gave him food and drink and rest. And then God met him in the "sound of sheer silence".

God did not take Elijah's life. He sent him back out into the world to continue as his prophet. In doing so, he also gave him Elisha – the man who would succeed him as Israel's prophet and who would, over the ensuing years, become Elijah's closest friend.

This is the power of solitude and silence when we practice them – when we discipline ourselves to include them as regular parts of our lives. It is in solitude and silence that we are healed, strengthened, and that our hope is restored. It is in solitude and silence that we meet the God who does not compete for our attention, but who is always ready and waiting for us to allow him to lavish his attention on us. It is in solitude and silence that the Holy Spirit is empowered to shape us more and more into Jesus' likeness.

This week, can you carve out time for solitude and silence? Perhaps you can take 15 or 30 minutes at the end of the day to shut yourself away from the world and all its distractions and noise, to breathe deep in the quiet for a bit, and listen for that "sound of sheer silence" in which God is met. Maybe use some words – a phrase or sentence of Scripture, to help focus in the quiet. Maybe there's a simple song that can help turn your mind to God. There's an old hymn – it's at least a couple hundred years old, though its words are much older – they come from Psalm 46:10 which reads, simply, "Be still and know that I am God." Maybe that song can accompany you into your solitude and silence.

Now, I know that if there's music playing, it's not really silent. But what I find is that if there's some kind of repetitive or meditative sound, like this song, it actually helps focus us just enough that we're able to quiet ourselves internally as well as externally, such that we are less likely to be distracted by all the creaks in our homes and sirens in our streets. So in a moment I'm going to play the song, "Be Still and Know that I am God." Sing along or simply breathe in the quiet meditation of the song's words.

ⁱ Henri J.M. Nouwen. *The Way of the Heart: Desert Spirituality and Contemporary Ministry* (New York, HarperOne: 1981), 27.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid., 27 – 32.

^{iv} Dallas Willard. “Spiritual Disciplines, Spiritual Formation and the Restoration of the Soul.” *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 26, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 101-109. <https://dwillard.org/articles/spiritual-disciplines-spiritual-formation-and-the-restoration-of-the-soul> (accessed April 2, 2022)

^v Ibid.

^{vi} John 14:24.