



The Lost Art of Solitude

“Solitude does not pull us away from our fellow human beings but instead makes real fellowship possible.” ~Henri Nouwen

“You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.” ~Augustine

I’ve become increasingly aware of a pervasive affliction, which subtly plagues the Church. It’s guised under the cloak of isolation, but furtively permeates community. It silently screams as it cripples our feeble pursuit of wholeness. In our sociocultural day, the Church has managed to snuff out its capacity to practice solitude.

We live in a time where the concept of community is extremely in vogue. And rightly so, people are fragmented, individually and corporately, in ways beyond our imagination. There are so many options. So many influences. So many desires. So many acquaintances. So many roles and responsibilities. We are all pulled in a plethora of directions, and it’s becoming more and more difficult to have a sense of belonging to a particular place. Belonging to a people group in a particular place provides meaning and responsibility. It’s conducive for security, and develops one’s sense of worth. These are all good things provided in the context of community.

And yet, we may be blinded by the proverbial pendulum shift. In our thirst for authentic community have we forgotten the art of solitude? Henri Nouwen eloquently explains,

“Somewhere we know that without a lonely place our lives are in danger. Somewhere we know that without silence words lose their meaning, that without listening speaking no longer heals, that without distance closeness cannot cure. Somewhere we know that without a lonely place our actions quickly become empty gestures. The careful balance between silence and words, withdrawal and involvement, distance and closeness, solitude and community forms the basis of the Christian life and should therefore be the subject of our most personal attention.”

The practice of solitude provides the ebb to the flow of community. It provides a beautiful tension for the Spirit to work. It allows the time and space for renewal, rest, and perspective. Jesus embodied this paradigm of solitude and community as shown in Mark 1:32-39.

“That evening at sundown they brought to him all who were sick or oppressed by demons. And the whole city was gathered together at the door. And he healed many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons. And he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him. And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed. And Simon and those who were with him searched for him, and they found him and said to him, “Everyone is looking for you.” And he

said to them, “Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out.” And he went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons.”

Besides our instant-gratification prone culture, there’s another predominant reason we have forgotten the art of solitude, we confuse it with loneliness. We go to great lengths to avoid loneliness. The mere thought of sitting alone and feeling the weight of our isolation produces a guttural angst that drives us in all sorts of ungodly and unhealthy directions. Again Henri Nouwen describes this confusion aptly.

“When our loneliness drives us away from ourselves into the arms of our companions in life, we are, in fact, driving ourselves into excruciating relationships, tiring friendships and suffocating embraces. To wait for moments or places where no pain exists, no separation is felt and where all human restlessness has turned into inner peace is waiting for a dreamworld. No friend or lover, no husband or wife, no community or commune will be able to put to rest our deepest cravings for unity and wholeness.”

Wholeness. We desire to be made whole. We long for deep connection with our Creator. We strive for this congruence in our lives, but we neglect the basic context for this transformation to occur. The Spirit weaves together His people in community, but also de-fragments and solidifies our very identity through our intimate communion in solitude. You see, the key to appreciating solitude and focusing our attention in its practice is to recognize that we are not alone. Jesus consoles us in John 14:16-17,

“And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you.”

It is here, in solitude, that the broken meet their Wonderful Counselor, that orphans meet their Father, and the lonely meet their Greatest Friend.

Chris Ball

Executive Director,

Bridgehaven Counseling Associates

Raleigh, NC