

DISCIPLINES OF FAITH: SOLITUDE

SHERARD EDINGTON

Matthew 14:22-33

There is a low-level, lingering debate that persists within our congregation. In fact, this same debate has existed in every church of which I have been a part. My colleagues report that they too get dragged into this never-ending brouhaha. The issue at hand has to do with how we, as a congregation, conduct ourselves in the moments before the worship service begins. As we gather, should we sit quietly in sacred reverence as we prepare our hearts and minds for the worship of God? Or, can we use this time to visit with our friends and strengthen the bonds of the congregation?

The tricky part of this discussion is that both sides have valid arguments. They are both right. It just depends on what kind of person you are.

According to the work of the Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung, there are two types of people in this world—introverts and extroverts. Working in the 1920s, just 100 years ago, Carl Jung—a younger colleague of Sigmund Freud—developed a classification of personality types. At the top of his classification are extroverts and introverts. Jung's work has been used to help us better understand one another and has become the basis of such tools as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. As a note, not all experts except Jung's theories. I, however, have found that what he says is useful in helping me understanding individuals.

So, what are introverts and extroverts? Well, the answer has to do with energy. Where do people get their energy? Extroverts derive their energy from other people. There is nothing they like more than a large social gathering where they can careen from person to person shaking hands, slapping backs, and telling stories. This tops off their tanks and leaves them feeling like a toddler guzzling espressos.

An introvert, on the other hand, in the same situation, may have indeed enjoyed the party, but leaves feeling drained and after the experience needs a quiet time alone to recharge.

The common misconception about introverts is that they are shy, socially awkward misanthropes. This is not true. Extroverts can be these things as well. Many introverts, however, will agree with the French playwright Jean-Paul Sartre that, "Hell is other people at breakfast."

While introverts seek time to be alone to recharge, extroverts when left alone will wilt and fade. They will seek out other people or at least grab their cell phones.

An example from scripture of an introvert and an extrovert are the brothers Jacob and Esau. The book of Genesis tells us, *When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents* (Genesis 25.27).

America is an extroverted country with about one-quarter of the population being introverted and the rest extroverted. Politics, as should be no surprise, is dominated by extroverts. The very introverted president, Calvin Coolidge, is known to have remarked, "Don't you know that four fifths of all our troubles in this life would disappear if we would just sit down and keep still."

In our congregation, we have some strong introverts and some strong extroverts, and then a lot of folk in the middle who exhibit characteristics of both. It's a bell curve. There is nothing right or wrong about being introverted or extroverted. It just is. It's like being male or female, left-handed or right-handed, or Ford vs. Chevy.

The past two years with COVID have been especially rough for churches. The extroverts weren't happy because the COVID protocols prevented them from gathering and hugging. Masks and social distancing ruined the social component of going to church. On the other hand, you would assume that the introverts would thrive in the environment created by COVID and flock to church. They would have except we that gave them the option of staying home and watching online. COVID was a double whammy for the church.

During this season of Lent, I am preaching a series of sermons on spiritual practices. Last week, we looked at the practice of fasting. Today, I want to consider the practice of solitude. In the gospels, we find many instances where Jesus himself sought out time to be alone. His ministry, in fact, begins with him spending forty days in the wilderness fasting and praying. That itself is the hallmark of spiritual solitude. On the night before choosing the twelve who would accompany him through his ministry on earth, Jesus spent the night alone in prayer (Luke 6:12). When he learned of the death of his cousin John—beheaded by Herod—we are told that Jesus *withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself* (Matthew 14:13). Jesus even instructed his disciples after they returned from a mission of preaching and healing *to come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest awhile* (Mark 6:31). In another place, we read that Jesus *would withdraw to deserted places and pray* after healing the crowds (Luke 5:16). And then, on the night before his death, he sought the solitude of the garden of Gethsemane in order to pray. There are more examples, but it is clear that Jesus regularly sought out time of intentional solitude. This is not to say that Jesus was an introvert, but that he practiced the discipline of solitude.

So, what is solitude? Solitude is a state of being alone. We've all had solitude thrust upon us with COVID's social distancing (and more so if you were

quarantined). But as a religious practice, solitude is deliberate. It is when we seek out a time and a place to be alone to commune with God. It may be only a moment on a crowded bus, or it may be a week in a mountain cabin. Spiritual solitude is when we push aside all the distractions and diversions and temptations and choose to empty our lives. Just as an introvert will seek to be alone in order to recharge, a person in spiritual solitude seeks to recharge their spiritual battery. In solitude, by emptying ourselves of distractions we are make room in our lives for the divine.

As I said, there are numerous accounts of Jesus seeking solitude. But the one that I want to focus on is the account of Jesus walking on water. This takes place immediately after he has performed the miracle of feeding 5000 people with only seven loaves and a few small fish. After the meal, after they had cleaned up, Jesus put the disciples into a boat, and sent them around the lake with the promise that he would catch up. He then goes up a hill to pray. He is there until it grows dark. During this time, a storm has gathered over the lake. Out in the boat, the disciples are battling the waves as the boat is blown away from the shore. They are afraid that if they should sink that they will become the subject of a ballad by Gordon Lightfoot. They fight this storm all night. At daybreak, Jesus comes to them walking across the water. Understandably, this scares the disciples more than the storm. They are certain they are seeing a ghost. But Jesus says to them, *Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.*

Peter replies, *Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.* Jesus invites him to do so. Peter steps over the gunwale onto the water. He takes a few steps but quickly realizes the impossibility of his situation and he begins to sink. He cries to Jesus, *Lord, save me,* and Jesus catches him by the hand. Jesus says to him, *You of little faith, why did you doubt?* Jesus pulls Peter into the boat and the wind dies down. The disciples worship Jesus and proclaim, *Truly you are the Son of God.*

This familiar story has some important lessons for us. First of all, it begins with Jesus seeking solitude. He climbs a hill in order to pray. Why a hill? Probably because that is where he was most likely not to encounter anyone. On that hill, he prays. Now, some might say, “where is the solitude in that? Isn't prayer just talking?” No. As we will discuss in a couple of weeks, prayer (also a spiritual discipline) is more about listening than talking. Prayer is not taking a shopping list to God. Prayer is opening ourselves to hearing God's voice.

Jesus, having spent time in solitude being refreshed with God's spirit, heads down to find the others. Out in that boat, tossed about in the tempest, their situation is a metaphor for the chaos and distractions that continually stress our lives. The disciples are so overwhelmed that they cannot conceive of the possibility that Jesus could be walking on the waves. I would argue that Jesus was able to do this because of his time of solitude. I know that in those moments when I have felt especially close to the holy, when my spiritual adrenaline is pumping, I have felt that I could walk on water if I wanted to. It is the runner's high of faith.

And then there is Peter who is confident that he can also walk on water. But he sinks because he has not displaced the distractions in order to make room for the divine.

There are innumerable ways to find solitude. Set aside a quiet spot in your house, take a walk, climb a mountain, go on a boat, take a drive, walk the dog, sit in the sanctuary. Turn off the phones and the tablets and remove the headphones and be alone. Some of my colleagues like to spend several days at a monastery. Solitude is not just about quiet. Anyone can sit in a quiet room. Solitude is about pushing aside the noise in our lives and listening to the quiet.

In the Old Testament book of Kings, the prophet Elijah is running for his life. He hides out in a cave on Mt. Horeb. There, God comes to him. In the cave, Elijah can hear a great wind raging outside, a wind *so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.* That was the Lord—not in the chaos, but in the silence. (1 Kings 19:11-13)

For everyone, the first time attempting spiritual solitude can be terrifying. What if I meet God? What if I don't? Solitude, like every spiritual discipline, takes practice; it takes discipline. Stick with it, you'll get better. The results will amaze you.

I want to conclude with another instance that Jesus goes up a mountain to pray. This time he takes Peter, James, and John with him. And as he prays, he is changed; he is transfigured. And then, suddenly, standing beside Jesus are two heroes of the faith, Elijah and Moses, two prophets who each knew what it was like to be in solitude with God. And as they all stood on that mountain, a voice comes down from a cloud and commands, *This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!* (Mark 9:7)