



TOUCH POINT

Engaging Solitude – Touchpoint for January 31, 2024

Mark 1:29-39 (NRSVUE) Jesus Heals Many at Simon's House

²⁹As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. ³⁰Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. ³¹He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up.

Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

³²That evening, at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed by demons. ³³And the whole city was gathered around the door. ³⁴And he cured 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.

A Preaching Tour in Galilee

³⁵In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. ³⁶And Simon and his companions hunted for him. ³⁷When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." ³⁸He answered, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also, for that is what I came out to do." ³⁹And he went throughout all Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

Grace and Peace to you from the mystery in whom we live and move, and have our being.

How humble and healthy is Jesus? He knew when it was time to walk away. He knew when it was time to be in the presence of God in solitude. He must have been up all night since the people didn't come till sundown. In the morning, he went to a solitary place.

What did he do at this deserted place, sing a hit from *Jesus Christ Superstar*? Did he hide behind an olive tree and smoke a camel before the next big demon drive? Did he read a devotion from *Jesus Calling* or in his case, *Me Calling*?

The translation we are using says Jesus went to a deserted place. Deserted sounds lonely. But the Greek for deserted is translated *eraymos*. Secluded, solitary, deserted by others, deprived of the aid and protection of others, especially of friends, acquaintances, and kindred.

He had friends, family, and the whole city near him that night. But perhaps Jesus was lonely. Lonely in a crowd. Maybe he felt deserted before he went to a deserted place.

Last week's passage said Jesus' fame was growing after they witnessed the miracle of his healing the man in the synagogue. The word spread, and they brought him all those who were sick or possessed. The whole city was at the doorstep. He was famous! By the end of his day Jesus belonged to everyone else's perception of who he was. Healer, magician, friend, or Messiah. He would surely need a break from those who did not see his human self. God sees our human selves. God loves the human Jesus. Perhaps God does not love Jesus for his potential. He certainly doesn't love Jesus for what he can do for others. Did you hear that, you exhausted perpetual givers and lovers? True self can only be restored by being loved unconditionally... away from others. In a solitary place.

In a solitary place, we can be reminded of our identity. We can be reminded of the place where we had a moment of clarity. Where we were baptized. Where we had a major touch point. Where we heard our identity proclaimed over us. When we first heard the song of grace.

Jesus had this experience at the Jordan. Prior to this, he was facing great temptation in the wilderness, engaged by Satan. This time Jesus went to a solitary place to engage spirit. It is a very vulnerable place to receive high admiration, commendations, and popularity. But people are usually attracted to you for what you can offer them. It can be very lonely. Solitude and loneliness are not the same. To go away to a solitary place is not isolation.

Mark says Jesus prayed. Prayer is an umbrella term that encompasses every intentional practice of conscious contact with God.

We must separate from the rest of the world to go to a solitary place and engage spirit. Loneliness, we can feel in a crowd. Loneliness is isolation, it is not solitude.

In the places that I've worked, I have met some very well-known, high-profile people. By the time they come to me, they are seeking connection. What a paradox! They had more friends and acquaintances than most people. The world knows them, but often they are lonely. Most have been lonely for some time, with no one knowing. The expectations to perform strip them of the humanity we, in our typical lives, take for granted. Failure and mediocrity are not an option. All eyes are watching. Loneliness was a crisis long before COVID. If people were not making connections in solitude before COVID, they lacked the skills during and after COVID to connect without physical presence. Don't get me wrong, we all had a difficult time, but those who engaged in spirit in solitude were more able to be there for others.

In May 2023, the Department of Health and Human Services stated, "Today, United States Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy released a new Surgeon General Advisory calling attention to the public health crisis of loneliness, isolation, and lack of connection in our country. Even before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, approximately half of U.S. adults reported experiencing measurable levels of loneliness. Disconnection fundamentally affects our mental, physical, and societal health. In fact, loneliness and isolation increase the risk for individuals to develop mental health challenges in their lives, and lacking connection can increase the risk for premature death to levels comparable to smoking daily."

Jesus' fame grew and just like the famous people I mentioned, he had to deal with his loneliness when the lights faded. Even Jesus needed a reminder of who he was. In our jobs, where we carry titles and responsibilities, we pray, "God, remind me who I am." Without words our bodies will cry out. There is an epidemic of employees calling out of work. Makes me wonder if it is related to a lack of genuine connection.

In our intentional solitude, we do the engaging. We engage in reflection. In loneliness we are isolated. In solitude we engage silence, the voice of God. We engage the Mystery that we call God and exhale away who others say we are.

Jesus was exhausted and perhaps lonely amidst those who saw him only for what he could do. Maybe this is what the writer meant when he said, Jesus had no place to lay his head. Perhaps his time in the wilderness prepared him for this moment. The devil engaged Jesus, but Jesus engaged the truth of his identity. Scripture says he was tempted, you guys! It didn't say the devil tried to tempt him. We are vulnerable in our loneliness, but Jesus sought engagement with the light that was previously revealed to him in the Jordan. He quoted words that he held on to his whole young life. He had no desire to be famous or powerful. In this moment,

when his fame was at its peak, it was time to go to a solitary place for authentic connection. What a paradox that in a crowd, we may need to be alone to connect.

I imagine if he had a talk with the father, it would have sounded like this:

Father: "Hey Jesus! Hey big guy. Messiah Man. Look at you! Would you sign my tablet?"

Jesus: "Okay, knock it off, Dad!"

Father: "Alright son. Rest now. Remember who you are to me. You're not the Messiah or King. You're not the healer or the teacher. You are my child in whom I am well pleased."

I was in a spiritual direction session with a pastor not too long ago. He was seeking discernment on important issues. Like so many, his ministry could be dramatically altered depending on his evolving theological positions. In his moment of deep discernment, I asked, "Do you mind if I tell you what I think?" He said, "Please, absolutely!" I said, "I don't think God gives a shit about your job, all he cares about is you. You are more important to God than the work that you do or the theology you have." He threw his head back and laughed. I asked him what he was feeling, and he said with tears, "It's so good to hear."

Were you ever taught in church that you were supposed to be a man of God or a woman of virtue? Give me a break. We are always a child of God, never a man or woman of God. Then we can be men and women in the world mature enough to know we must go to a solitary place to be reminded we're loved unconditionally as a child of God.

We forget, don't we? We forget who we are. Image management will do that. So will being in high demand, like Jesus.

There's a therapist once who was working with a man who had a difficult time resting. He kept himself busy and his mind occupied most of the time. It interfered with meaningful connections.

The therapist gave him an assignment to spend an hour in solitude before their next session. The man came back to his session the next week and was asked how his hour of solitude went. He said, "It was great! I got comfortable in my study, laid on the couch, and read a book. It was great!"

She responded, "I didn't tell you to read a book. I said to spend time in 'solitude.' Why don't you try again this week?"

The next week she asked again how it went. He said, "It was great. I lied on the couch put my headphones on and listened to a podcast and some music."

"I didn't tell you to listen to music and a podcast," she said. "I said spend some time in solitude with yourself. Why don't you try it again?"

The following week, he simply stated before she inquired, "I don't think I know how to be in solitude," to which she responded, "If you don't like spending time with yourself, why would you inflict it on somebody else?"

Jesus went away to a solitary place. He didn't go to be alone, to disengage. He went to connect, to engage.

What is solitude? Solitude is time with the Mystery we call God, Divine Presence, higher power, collective consciousness, or as Anne Lamott called God, Phil. She had triggers with the word God. Name it as you will, we must have meaningful connection with God. Prayer. Conscious contact with what is greater than myself.

Then Jesus went into Galilee with the disciples to proclaim the message. That's what it means to heal others. You and I do not have the awareness and physical power to transmit the energy for healing the way Jesus did. But we can proclaim the message. Like it was for the pastor, it's healing to hear the gospel, the good news. Jesus went out from that moment into Galilee and proclaimed the good news. The good news that we are loved, that we belong, and we have a divine companion who can be engaged.

Loneliness is about disengagement; solitude is about engagement.

I love the song, *You Are My Hiding Place*. Think about it. In solitude, we are invited hide ourselves in the presence of God. I love the engaging words of the song, *Jesus Draw Me Close*. I love it even more in Spanish.

Abrázame señor

Acércame a ti

Hazme Lo Mundano olvidar.

Jesus, draw me, closer Lord to you.
Let the world around me fade away.

Talk about engagement, the paradox of letting the world around me fade away and returning to engage world, not to *be* engaged.

Years ago, my friend Stu Graff invited me to go to a little house on a hill off Highway 17 in Black Canyon City called Our Lady of Solitude. It was started by a sister who would pray for all the passing cars driving through the hazardous Black Canyon Highway. She offered rooms for personal days of solitude. The only rule was you had to be silent on the property. We arrived and went to separate rooms. In my room was a bed, a desk, and a window. I had brought several books to read and was ready to really get spiritual. I remember thinking I really don't know what to do in solitude, but it sounded great! We arrived early and would be heading back at 4 PM. When I saw the bed, I set the books down and sat on the edge of the bed. I laid back with my feet still on the floor. I thought, I'll just lay here for a second. I didn't wake up until 4 o'clock! I heard a little knock on my door. It was Stu, and it was time to go. I slept in the position with my feet on the floor the entire time. I had read nothing, and I wasn't sure if I did solitude correctly. But I will tell you this. I was completely out of touch with how tired my body was. I felt rested and it had felt sacred. I was in a solitary place, but not lonely."

In our lives, connection can happen when we engage the world around us. I invite the awareness of beauty in nature and nature invites me to linger. I engage my family and they are blessed with the presence of Papa. Mutual engagement finds laughter, tears, and meaningful connection. Intimacy. When we go away to a solitary place, we make ourselves receptive to that which we cannot force our way into by doing more.

Amen

Opening Songs

Be Still

(The London Fox Taizé Choir, Remember Me)

Be still, know that I am God

Calm Me, Lord

(Margaret Rizza)

Calm me Lord as you calmed the storm.
Still me Lord, keep me from harm.
Let all the tumult within me cease.
Enfold me Lord, in your peace.

Bible Passage

(A passage takes us from one place to another)

Touchpoint

(Where God's story touches our life story)

Dwell Among Us

(Salt of the Sound)

- 1) Keep moving and living and breathing in us
- 2) Keeping working and singing and speaking through us
- 3) You dwell among us...
- 4) With all this life I long to see, more of You and less of me
- 5) Lord send Your Spirit here to work in us.

The Meal

The Lord's Prayer

(The Scottish Festival Singers)

Benediction

Sevenfold Amen

(The Emmanuel Quartet)

Amen.