

“Solitude: Quietly Yearning for God”

Neal Windham, Lincoln Christian College & Seminary

“I wish my students would go after prayer like dogs go after meat.”

Martin Luther

“Kelli Lashbrook couldn’t hold it in any longer. I could see that her face was turning red with only a few verses to go. Then the tears just started falling down both sides of her face. But she kept going, undeterred, right on through to the end. Her lips quivered a time or two. I could see that she was fighting it. But her eyes remained closed, as they had been the entire time, as though she were seeing the text she was quoting, sensing our Lord’s deep, saving mercies, savoring the blessed assurance that is ours in him, carrying her through this passage on eagle’s wings, steadying her life against coming satanic assaults on her good and holy status with our Lord.

In over twenty years of teaching I had never had a single student recite this text from memory. Now I find myself scratching my head and asking why. The ancients knew vast sections of the text by heart. Postmoderns I think want to. At the end of her nearly perfect, seamless recitation, it was all Kelli could do to mutter the words, ‘That’s so beautiful.’ Romans 8 has always had the effect on me too” (*Journal*, April 30, 2000, quoted here with Kelli’s permission).

I. Solitude and Shipwreck

Kelli is quietly yearning for God. She is a gifted, alert student, though not at all showy. So it should not surprise anyone that this assignment would mean a great deal to her. She had spent considerable time alone with God in his life-giving Word in preparation for this moment, time away from crippling distractions, away from mindless things, away from crowds. Time in His Presence. And it was all she could do to mutter, “That’s so beautiful.” I’m not surprised. Are you?

Many leaders of the third, fourth, and fifth century Egyptian church left their shipwrecked world behind to be close to God in the desert. Like Kelli, they were taken with the beauty of His Word, though they could not even read it. As the persecutions played out, they no longer followed as blood martyrs but chose the route of quiet solitude as the way of escape from conformity to this world. One of them, Anthony, heard the call to “Go and sell what you own ... then come and follow me.” For twenty years he lived in the desert, where he fasted and prayed continually. In this way, God shaped him to become a spiritual giant so that, upon his return, he could pull others out of the soul-killing secular wreckage which was destroying much of the early church.

Don’t be mistaken about this. Solitude is not getting away from it all. It is not a vacation from work. Nor is it privacy, something Americans have come to view as a right. Neither is it to be confused with loneliness. Mark G. Davies (*Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 1996) has made this point extremely well: “In contrast to loneliness, solitude is experienced as freedom rather than confinement; peacefulness rather than restlessness; fulfillment rather than emptiness; calmness rather than anxiety; a sense of being in rhythm rather than out of step.” Solitude is a “place of conversion,” a “furnace of transformation,” “the place where ministry and spirituality embrace each other,” even the place where we are saved (Henri Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, 1981).

So it should come as no surprise to us that solitude is profoundly *intentional*. While some writers speak of a kind of spontaneous solitude – practiced at a stop light, while waiting to pick up a prescription, or during a coffee break – this notion, by itself, is too easy, too small, too cheap. Solitude, real solitude, is sustained yearning for God in a quiet place, perhaps even at a given time.

II. Solitude and Surrender

Our Lord knew this very well. He spent countless hours in the wilderness, praying to God. Surely, this was what he was doing those forty days after his baptism. And, like Israel before him, he was tempted there. *What is significant for us is the fact that the temptations he encountered there were direct assaults upon his ministry.* Take, for example, the temptation to turn stones into bread. Henri Nouwen says that this is the temptation to be relevant. It is a subtle temptation because relevance sounds so good. The relevant self can do things, show things, make things, sell things, deliver scintillating talks on practical, day-to-day issues. Why, if it is not relevant, why would we spend any time at all with this program? That lesson?

Nouwen locates low self-esteem as one of the great problems of today's ministers. They feel as though their work is irrelevant. He writes, "They face an ongoing decrease in church attendance and discover that psychologists, psychotherapists, marriage counselors, and doctors are often more trusted than they ... The secular world around us is saying in a loud voice, 'We can take care of ourselves. The problem is not lack of faith, but lack of competence. If you are sick, you need a competent doctor; if you are poor, you need competent politicians; if there are technical problems, you need competent engineers ...'" (Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus*, 1993). In this pragmatic climate, ministers often lose their sense of direction as they attempt to turn stones into bread, becoming all things relevant to everyone who has any kind of need. They're not equipped for it; failing, they despair.

Jesus, on the other hand, surrendered himself to God as he embraced his focused mission to seek and save the lost. And he did this while praying in the wilderness. Nouwen concludes, "The leader of the future will be the one who dares to claim his irrelevance in the contemporary world as a divine vocation that allows him or her to enter into a deep solidarity with the anguish underlying all the glitter of success and to bring the light of Jesus there." Jesus, after all, knows better than any of us that man does not live by bread alone, but by every *word* that comes from the mouth of God. And this is *our* vocation, *our* calling, proclaiming Good News.

I am convinced that planned solitude affords us a necessary opportunity to face these temptations squarely and secure our calling in the Word of God afresh. Jesus returned to uninhabited places regularly for this purpose. He practiced solitude. After healing many and casting out demons, Luke tells us that "Jesus went out to a solitary place" at daybreak (4:42). Luke 6:12 further indicates that Jesus spent an entire night in prayer on "the hill" (not on "the hills," NIV) to pray, after which he chose the Twelve and commenced to minister with them. Later in Luke's account, we learn that Jesus and the apostles "withdrew by themselves to a town called Bethsaida" (9:10) after a preaching tour, presumably for a retreat. And, still later, in that same chapter, Jesus took Peter, John and James with him and went up onto the (again, not "a") mountain to pray (9:28). Luke 11:1 says, "One day Jesus was praying *in a certain place*," and afterwards his disciples said, "Lord, teach us to pray." In his Passion, Luke tells us that "Jesus went out *as usual* to the Mount of Olives," again, to pray (22:39). The summary verses for Jesus' practice of solitude come in 5:15-16, where Luke indicates simply, "The news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. *But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.*"

From this summary we learn that Jesus was a man of holy rhythms. He withdrew persistently. But there is more to it than that. He apparently sought solitude in regular places, as the repeated emphasis of praying on “the hill” would seem to indicate. Further, it is clear that when he withdrew, privately and with his disciples, he did so for the express purpose of prayer. We might well wonder just what he was praying for. The text does not usually tell us. But I have an idea that he was praying that God would help him to overcome those distracting temptations we spoke of earlier.

Here’s why. First, Jesus was repeatedly tempted during his first experience in the wilderness (Luke 4:1ff.). Second, when he was praying in Luke 11, and his disciples asked him to teach them to pray, his last words were “Lead us not into temptation.” Third, when on the Mount of Olives he prayed, “not my will, but yours be done,” he also encouraged his disciples with these words, “Get up and pray so that you will not fall into temptation” (22:46).

It would be so easy to be lured away from our calling without a prayer haven. Solitude is the place of full surrender to the will of God. It is a battleground where the enemy competes with God for your soul. He is tempting you with power, popularity, and relevance, bidding you to accept his agenda, wooing you away from God. And that is precisely why in solitude we are called to pray and pray hard, praying with Jesus, “Not my will, but your will be done.” Today’s minister is tempted to unfaithfulness, self-centeredness, even despair. He or she is called upon by people to do more than anyone is humanly capable of doing. One thing I notice about Jesus, the greater the demands of ministry, the greater the need for solitude. The great devotional masters are clear on this point. You most need solitude when you can least afford it. You most need God when you can’t do without him. Go to a specific place, and pray you will not fall into temptation. Solitude was for Jesus a necessary environment for this prayer!

III. Solitude and Self

In April of ’98 I served as team manager for the Flatland Steeple Chasers, a group of eight runners who ran 80 miles across Southern Illinois from the Mississippi River to the Ohio River in what is called the River-to-River Relay. In order to run the race, each team has to provide an eight-passenger van, which serves to transport the team to each new exchange point (except for the one who is running, of course). I asked Graue Chevrolet to sponsor our team with a van. When I got to the dealership, Mark Graue quickly showed me our red, late model, Chevy Astro van. Later, we went inside the sales floor, where I signed papers and got into a conversation with my nextdoor neighbor, Laz, a salesman at Graue. Meanwhile, outside someone moved our van in order to make room for a parts truck. When he was done with the delivery, employee Debbie Ebelherr, returning from her lunch break, parked her red, late model Chevy Astro van in the slot formerly occupied by our van. She left the keys in it.

That weekend I blissfully drove the stolen van and its cargo of eight smelly runners across southern Illinois, putting better than 500 miles on the vehicle. I thought how nice of Graue to supply us with four cases of pop, though had they really been thinking they’d have provided Gator Aid. I also thought it was a little odd that the van was not really all that clean and that it had a windbreaker in it. Perhaps it had just been traded in, I thought. The next day, when I found out from Mark Graue what had happened, my heart sank. I vacuumed the van, washed and waxed it, took Debbie roses – something I’m not sure my wife Miriam has yet forgiven me for – and gave her some cash. I was relieved to hear her refer to it as a comedy of errors. I had not seen anything funny about it to that point. To me, it was clearly a case of mistaken identity.

When Christians do not practice solitude, they lose their sense of identity. This is so because prayerful solitude affords us that rare opportunity of coming face-to-face with ourselves. Solitude allows people to explore and develop their private side and reconcile it with their public side. In other words, solitude creates space for honesty. And, conversely, if our life is entirely social, always lived out in the presence of others, we will likely try to be something we're not. I regularly pray several prayers before I preach, one of which is this, "God, please help me to be genuine, to be the man you've made of me." Coming to a convention like this, hearing so many fine speakers, I may be seduced into thinking I can become one of them if I can just get down their manner, their flair. I may see my church grow if I can just duplicate what they've done. If only I could learn to see the things they're seeing in the text, in the life of the church, in the culture.

But that is not the way of solitude. It's not honest. It is a case of mistaken identity. I am who I am, and prayerful solitude is the means by which I make this needed discovery. My fears are probably not quite the same as yours. My dreams are likely not exactly like yours. My gifts and skills do not perfectly match yours. My darkness must be named as my own. So at times it becomes necessary for me to be alone in order to see this and to do something about it.

But in solitude I am never entirely alone. Years ago, I was reading Thoreau's *Walden*, when I was reminded of the difference between solitude with and without God. Henry David Thoreau was doing a little ice fishing one day on Walden Pond. He used a borrowed axe to cut several holes in the ice and, heading back to shore, carelessly flung the axe back out onto the ice, where it found its way to a hole and sank some twenty-five feet down into the clear waters of Walden. Here we find Thoreau faced with a problem which will tell us much about the man. His response is simple. He walks to the spot, looks to the bottom of the lake, sees that the axe has fallen on its iron head, and heads back into the woods. There, he procures a long, slender pole to which he attaches a noose at the smaller end. Back out on the ice, he literally fishes the axe out of the pond, cleverly securing its handle with the noose. An inventive, resourceful fellow.

Thoreau went to the woods, in part, to see just what was necessary for a man to get along all by himself. He lived in a tiny cabin which he had made with a borrowed axe, farmed a large plot, and ice fished, concluding that it was altogether possible to get along without the railroad and other modern advances. He practiced solitude alone, and, except for the occasional visitor, continuously, for a period of two years.

Now contrast Thoreau with that poor young seminarian in 2 Kings 6 who, along with his fellow classmates, urged Elisha to build a new, larger dorm down near the Jordan. The text says, "As one of them was cutting down a tree, the iron axhead fell into the water. 'Oh, my lord,' he cried out, 'It was borrowed'" (2 Kings 6:5), like Thoreau's. And, like Thoreau, Elisha wanted to know precisely where it had fallen, and like Thoreau Elisha cut a pole. But unlike Thoreau, Elisha simply threw the stick in the water and made the axehead do what the stick did – float. Then the younger prophet was able to lift it out, without a noose. It was a miracle. God was in the thing.

In solitude, Christians see themselves and their world clearly because they have come to meet with God for the purpose of prayer. Solitude is not an act of self-reliance, not a self-help quick fix, but a posture of humility. It is not trying to find out what we can do without, but a clear indication of Whom we cannot do without. It is not isolation, but Presence. It is not emptying ourselves, but being filled. It is a sort of desecularizing our lives and ministries so that we can recover the Abiding Presence within, so that we can see just who and Whose we are. In solitude, all we really need is God's Word, some quiet, and time to allow the Spirit of God to remind us that we are not loved for what we can accomplish, but for who we are, God's children.

For some this is a very scary experience. Stripped of their music, of favorite books and videos, and reduced to silence, they find themselves bored. Nothing to do. Nothing but prayer. Precisely the point.

IV. Solitude and Silence

But it is so hard to pray. Ours is a noisy world. What with constant television, radio, and film. Newspapers. Tabloids. Journals and books. Enter any major city. Behold a world of words. As you drive down the road at sixty-five miles an hour - cars everywhere - your eyes are seduced with billboards of every description, advertising everything, competing for your eyes, your mind, your money, your very soul. Erotic images. Humor. Each passing exit a new gateway to endless pleasure.

In such a world one wonders whether it is even possible to quietly yearn for God. I really believe it is, but I also believe that it is necessary to find a quiet place, one without advertisements, in order to do so.

I have a favorite spot, a special place. It's about 30 miles from my home, and during the school year I go there regularly. It all started several years ago when I could not get needed direction for a chapel sermon I was preparing. I decided that it would be necessary to get away and chose the Weldon Springs State Recreational Area. As I drove into the park, I noticed there were actually hills – rare in central Illinois – a lovely lake, all kinds of wild fowl and mammals. There, on a sun lit hill in the cold of March, I read, prayed, and reflected for several hours. There my sermon came together. But, more than that, my soul came together as it had not for some time. I wanted to share the discovery. As I preached the sermon only days later, I invited the first twenty students who signed up to join me in the college minibus for a trip to Weldon. When we got there, many seemed a bit disillusioned, not knowing what to do with the quiet. I provided them with devotional literature and turned them loose, not knowing what would happen. We came together a couple of hours later, reported what we'd seen and discovered, sang to our great God, and prayed. To the person, this time had been absolutely wonderful. Liberating. We've been back nearly every semester for several years now.

In recent years, I have regularly gone to Weldon on Thursday afternoons. If *Tuesdays with Morrie* was good, Thursdays with Jesus are better. I do this with the Dean's blessing, but it also means that I have to make up for the time away from the college, often in the evenings. It is not always easy, nor do I always look forward to it. The demands of the spring semester, in particular, are large. Nor is the weather always nice, but I have learned to dress appropriately. What I have discovered is that for me it becomes necessary to get away – a holy rhythm, a sacred time. Some Thursdays, I read lots of Scripture. Occasionally, I read a devotional classic. I usually took a walk around the lake. Frequently, I run a few miles. Many weeks I write in my journal. Once, I entered a lengthy entry as I attempted to answer Peter's profound question, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of life." I turned over every stone, examining my heart carefully to see where I would go were Christ not in the picture. It was a scary, illuminating experience, one that taught me a great deal about my priorities, my idols. Always I pray. Prayer is the heart of solitude.

In time, I began to take a student or two with me. Once, I spent the afternoon with a senior whose sister had died during that school year. Another day, after time alone with God, I attempted to help another senior sort through a weighty ministry decision. One student simply

wanted to know how to pray. Simply? Last fall, three young women joined me at the park for a long walk and leisurely conversation. They had much to share and have since returned to the park on a number of occasions on their own. Weldon has become my favorite, and perhaps most effective, classroom. And, while I never allow these group trips to take away at least some personal time in the Word, at the same time, I am reminded that Jesus often took his disciples with him while practicing solitude. I've done some of my very best teaching in the wilderness. One day, while jogging through the woods, I encountered a good friend who emerged out of the bushes in my path, stopped, and walked the rest of the trail with him. It was a delightful surprise to see Jeff there. We had a marvelous conversation about faith and friends and family.

V. Solitude and Sunday

You may be saying to yourself, All this sounds wonderful, but it will never happen for me. I just don't have time. As a paid minister, I have to get ready for Sunday. Let me remind you that for Jesus ministry was done in a holy rhythm of engagement and withdrawal (Luke 5:15-16). We need to learn this rhythm from our Lord. Believe me, planned solitude will make all the difference in what happens on Sunday morning.

John Ortberg (following Glandion Carney, *The Spiritual Formation Toolkit*) suggests spending an entire day away, beginning with prayer the night prior. Use the first hour of the day to prepare your heart and mind. Take a walk. Put distractions aside. Next, read and meditate on Scripture for about an hour, stopping to reflect when God seems to be speaking to you through the text. Prior to lunch, write down your responses to what you've read. Pray over these. At noon, eat your lunch and take another walk, reflecting on the morning's experience. From 1:00 to 2:00, a nap is in order. When you awaken, think through the goals that emerge from the day, and write these down. Don't rush this.

Chuck Tompkins (*Leadership*, Summer 1999) left his ministry behind for a full ten days with no reading list, no TV, no agenda. He reports that it took three days alone just to get acclimated. "This is ridiculous. What will I have to show for the time if I haven't journaled, can't keep my mind on what I am reading, and don't feel like praying. I can't just sit here." Tompkins did not indulge his love for outdoor recreation. (I never carry a fishing rod, either. You don't know how hard this is for me.) He fasted from things he loves, especially reading. He asked God rather to give him "a thorough spiritual examination from head to toe." He prayed, "Search me, O God, and know my heart. See if there be any wicked way in me." He reports:

"I did not take a vow of silence. Worship music was a tonic to my soul. I reveled in the majesty of God – pondering the ways of an ant, observing the doe and her fawn, peering for hours into the foliage canopy overhead, admiring the clouds. The outdoors became a theater staging God's glory."

"By the end of my retreat, I could have easily stayed longer. Discoveries were coming for my spiritual life and ministry and I felt renewed health. My retreat carried no guarantees, but I may have prevented some trouble down the road by inviting my soul's creator to do a thorough inspection."

If you're thinking long term, let's talk sabbatical. That's right. Sabbaticals are not just for academicians. Jay Beuoy, at Oak Hill E. Free Church (*Leadership*, Summer 1999) in Evansville, asked only that his leaders read a pamphlet outlining the unique nature of a minister's workload. The pamphlet also listed the benefits of a sabbatical: a grateful minister whose vision is renewed, a thankful spouse, happier kids, enhanced training, a deepened awareness of the congregation's

love for its minister. He simply had the leaders read the pamphlet. The request for a sabbatical was passed unanimously. As a safeguard, the church built in a provision for a sabbatical policy. Jay agreed not to use the time to look for another church, and the church agreed not to look for another preacher. They also agreed to a minimum of two years after his return.

Whether for a day, ten days, or two months, people in ministry – any ministry, paid or unpaid, all Christians! – need solitude. As a professor, I often tell people that I get my soul back in the summer. Long hours of reading, uninterrupted seasons of prayer, time spent in reflection – all of these help me to see things more clearly and minister more effectively. Perhaps the Christian Church should learn from the academy on this one. We need to take advantage of retreat houses like those provided by Harvest Prayer Ministries and Blessing Ranch. I wonder why we don't provide more spiritual directors for the sheep *and* their shepherds? There are so few. Why do we persist in stranding overworked ministers without relief?

And why do we allow our employers in the larger workforce to work us 60 hours a week without a break? Is it because we are attempting to maintain a certain standard of living? Perhaps we should learn to live more simply. That too is a fruit that attends solitude. The spiritual disciplines work together for our good. They are one means of receiving the gifts of God, and we neglect them at our peril. It is time for Christians to effect a large scale revolution in the culture, a revolution of simplicity and sanity, a revolution of solitude. Time to stand up to employers who overwork their employees. Time for a Sabbath's rest. Just for once, I'd love to see the Church take the lead here. So often we follow the whims of culture. We read their books on management. Practice their principles.

Jesus had another idea. He met God, not management, in a garden, on a hill, by a lake, and he prayed. He prayed until he really prayed. He listened. He secured his identity not in the crowd, not in the most recent church growth literature, but with God in the wilderness. He fought the Evil One there. He internalized the Word there and used it, when necessary, to stave off temptation. And when the crowd came to him – you could only keep him in the wilderness for so long – he embraced them, secure in his mission, filled with compassion. Ready to heal. Ready to save.

When I was young, I recall hearing my good mother say “Be still!” more times than I can count. Usually, it happened while I was at church. Perhaps at an adult meeting of some sort. Always there was absolute clarity about the meaning of the words. Mom's messages were usually unambiguous even *before* she verbalized them.

If you care to know who's in charge of things, be still for a while. “Be still,” as the Psalmist says, “and know that I am God.”