

Cultivating Space Apart
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 March 17, 2024

Luke 8: 23-25

²² One day he got into a boat with his disciples, and he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side of the lake." So they put out, ²³ and while they were sailing he fell asleep. A windstorm swept down on the lake, and the boat was filling with water, and they were in danger. ²⁴ They went to him and woke him up, shouting, "Master, Master, we are perishing!" And he woke up and rebuked the wind and the raging waves; they ceased, and there was a calm. ²⁵ He said to them, "Where is your faith?" They were afraid and amazed, and said to one another, "Who then is this, that he commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him?"

Mark 6: 30 -32

³⁰ The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. ³¹ He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. ³² And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves.

This Lent, we have spent some time considering what it means to cultivate space. What it means to cultivate space for God in silence and in prayer. What it means for God to cultivate space within us in the wilderness. What it means to cultivate space for God within ourselves (and if you have not heard the sermons from last week, I encourage you to go to the worship archive page on our website and do so). And today, what it means to cultivate space apart. To cultivate space on retreat.

Because, as much as I believe in the importance of gathering for worship, here, with this community, in this Sanctuary.

As much as I believe the words of Stanley Hauerwas when he wrote:¹

Being a Christian should just scare the hell [heck] out of us. It's like on Sunday we need to rush together for protection. "Oh, I'm not crazy." That we believe that God was in Christ reconciling the world is craziness. It's going to make your life really weird. And you just need to get together on Sunday to be pulled back into the reality of God's kingdom.

As much as I believe in what Anne Lamott shared when asked why she made her teenager go to church in part so he would be in the presence of people who love God back"²

¹"Sunday Asylum: Being the Church in Occupied Territory," page 81. First seen in this article: <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/ponderanew/2016/03/13/killing-the-church-with-sunday-school/>

² I noted this as being in Christian Century in 2003, but she references something similar in a Salon article: https://www.salon.com/2003/07/04/church_7/

And as much I believe that “True self-care is not salt baths and chocolate cake, it is making the choice to build a life you don’t need to regularly escape from”³

As much as I believe all of these things, I also believe that retreat, the space we cultivate for God in places and times that are apart from our normal routines, is not only significant, it is essential.⁴ As Emilie Griffin puts it, it is important that we make “a generous commitment to our friendship with God.”

As people of faith, if we want to grow in our faith, increase our discipleship, strengthen our relationship with God, we must, from time to time, retreat. Withdraw. To be present with God in a different location. To claim time to give God our undivided attention.

Why? There are lots of reasons, but none are more clear or more important than this: It’s what Jesus did, and what Jesus invited his disciples to do. Two of those examples were our readings for today. One where Jesus gets in a boat to go across the lake and promptly falls asleep.

The other, where Jesus invites his disciples to come away to a deserted place and pray with him. Inviting them. Teaching them. That they could not be who God called them to be unless they claimed those times for retreat for prayer, for conversation, for communion.

And These are just two of many instances where Jesus withdraws to pray, to spend time. And it would be easy to say, “well, that’s Jesus, he could do whatever he wanted,” but the text tells us time and again that people tried to pull him out of his retreat. From his rest. From his withdrawn times of prayer. And yet Jesus did not concede. Did not give in. Did not stop.

Jesus invites us to this same kind of persistence.

Because sometimes, when we are in the middle of everything, it can be hard to see what is in front of us. Around us. To see what, when our eyes and hearts are cleared, what God has placed in front of us. We’re too busy. Too distracted. Too worried.

<https://www.christiancentury.org/voices/showing-church-when-i-don-t-want?fbclid=IwAR3KH2AuGAAU5K2pINEW1YkXbusinnimeCDcW1QPfabtIV8JMSInJepaFV0>

³ <https://thoughtcatalog.com/brianna-wiest/2017/11/this-is-what-self-care-really-means-because-its-not-all-salt-baths-and-chocolate-cake/>

⁴ From *Invitation to Retreat: The Gift and Necessity of Time Away with God*, by Ruth Haley Barton. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2018. Pages 4-5.

“Retreat in the context of the spiritual life is an *extended time apart* for the purpose of being with God and giving God our full and undivided attention; it is, as Emilie Griffin puts it, “a generous commitment to our friendship with God.” The emphasis is on the words *extended* and *generous*. Truth is, we are not always generous with ourselves where God is concerned. Many of us have done well to incorporate regular times of solitude and silence into the rhythm of our ordinary lives, which means we’ve gotten pretty good at giving God twenty minutes here and half an hour there. And there’s no question we are better for it!

I grew up in Charleston, South Carolina.
College was in Decatur, Georgia.

Both of these were places where there were flowers twelve months out of the year. I knew that wasn't what happened everywhere, but until I experienced my first winter in New York City and the grayness of snow, I did not understand the hope that came from the crocus poking their leaves up from the ground, the reminder that the world would turn green again. And Yellow. And pink. And Purple.

It's why we support our youth going on mission trips. It's not because there aren't any needs right here in our own backyard, it's because they need to go to a new place. A different place, and in the unfamiliarity of what is before them they learn to train their eyes and hearts for ministry in new ways.

Thomas Merton came to the conclusion that the value of retreat is that it gives you perspective that should bring you back into the world.

As Dallas Willard wrote: "If we don't come apart for while, we will come apart after awhile."⁵ Sometimes those places of retreat are ones we can return to, time and again.



I regularly return not only to Ring Lake Ranch in Wyoming but to one particular hike, the Torrey Ridge, or Little Whiskey. It is not a horribly long hike, just a few miles, but most of it is directly uphill, and when you get close to the top there are several false summits. When I take this hike I always have at least two or three moments, and sometimes more, when I am pretty sure I won't be able to make it to the top this time. That I'm going to have to turn around. But I find if I rest and breathe, I can take a few more steps in the right direction, to the top, where there is a 360° view that includes badlands, glaciers, lakes, other hikes I am not strong enough to take, and sometimes, just

⁵ Belden Lane, *Backpacking with the Saints*. New York: Oxford Press, 2015. Page 202.

Theologian and professor Belden Lane reminds us, we need to, from time to time, put ourselves in unfamiliar surroundings, different surroundings, "making yourself vulnerable in order to be stretched into something new." To be in places where "It wasn't about me, But it required me."

sometimes, some bighorn sheep. And there is silence up there like no other silence I know. Silence that is both terrifying and hopeful, Silence that strips away pretense and allows a conversation that does not happen in other places. And so I choose to return again and again.

Do you have places like that where you can hear God speaking with more clarity than others? Places to which you turn and return?

Sometimes, we learn what a retreat has to teach us in spite of ourselves. God can teach us even if we go kicking and screaming. Katherine Willis Pershey, a pastor who wrote in the *Christian Century* that her long-time and much-trusted therapist prescribed a retreat for her in the hopes it would lead her to a spiritual experience. She writes

A spiritual experience isn't easily manufactured. My faith has never been especially experiential, though not for lack of longing. I've rarely felt the presence of God, a fact that used to trouble me until I realized that my perseverance in the face of this lacuna was itself a form of faithfulness. I keep showing up despite my doubts, keep praying despite my lingering sensation that my prayers are whispered into an empty abyss.

But her therapist told her she needed to try, and so Kathrine signed up for a day-long spiritual retreat, regretting the decision immediately and in almost every moment leading up to it. But go she did. She went and walked around the lake. Took pictures. Saw an eagle. All the while repeating the refrain they had been given that morning. "God is here, and you are loved. God is here, and I am loved." Katherine says she felt happy as she walked, something she hadn't felt in a long time. But that wasn't her spiritual experience. That came after lunch.

She writes:

After lunch I met with one of the retreat leaders for spiritual direction. I regretted signing up for the session; I wanted to retrace my steps around the lake instead. I wasn't ready to talk. But once I started I could barely stop the words. Or the tears; the narrative required nearly as many teardrops as adjectives. I used up all the tissues in the room and wiped my nose on my sleeve. The spiritual director was a woman of few words but she chose them carefully, sending me on my way with another heartening promise: that all this sadness may be harrowing, but it was harrowing in me a deeper capacity for joy. She gave me a Puritan prayer that I've kept in my pocket since:

Let me learn by paradox
that the way down is the way up,
that to be low is to be high,
that the broken heart is the healed heart.

Katharine had a spiritual experience, and it wasn't in the place she expected, but it nonetheless resurrected her in a way she needed more than food itself. But it would not have happened had she not gone on retreat, chosen the time set aside.

Sometimes retreats are reconnecting with God in a place where we have become familiar with the encounter, and others it happens in spite of the blinders we where. However they happen, we need them.

To connect with the one whose image is knit within us.

To learn to listen and see anew.

To share mercy by receiving mercy

To be generous by receiving God's generosity.

How are you

How might you

How can you

Claim sacred time of retreat for your own faith journey?

To learn, to grow, to face that which you might rather ignore, to see what you cannot when you are in the middle of life and all that it brings?

And here is the good news, if going away for a week of silent prayer is not within your reality right now, God's got you.

In creation, God set it up so that retreats don't have to be things that require planes or even plans, because God put one into each week. It's baked into creation itself. It's a part of the big Ten.

Sabbath. A day set aside to rest. To actively spend time with God and cultivate the things we cannot on the other six days.

In the classic book on Sabbath by Abraham Heschel, he writes "He who wants to enter the holiness of the day must first lay down being yoked to toil... and learn to understand that the world has already been created and will survive without [you.]... Six days a week we wrestle with the world, wringing profit from the earth' on the Sabbath we especially care for the seed of eternity planted in the soul. The world has our hands, but our soul belongs to Someone Else."⁶

Retreat, no matter how much time it is or what the location is, is not an accessory to the spiritual life, it is at its heart, for it is in that time that we lay down that which is not ours and pick up the image God knit within each of us.

If you cannot go on retreat, can you claim a sabbath day?

If you cannot claim a sabbath day, can you claim a sabbath hour?

If you cannot claim an hour, can you claim thirty minutes?

I'm sure that we all have things we cannot do, but what can we do?

What can you say yes to, to give God your full and undivided attention?

⁶ Abraham Joshua Heschel, The Sabbath. New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1951. Page 13.

Having been on small boats in sudden storms before, I have an inkling of what the disciples might have been feeling as they wondered if that day would be their last, as the wind and the waves threatened to overtake them, one of the risks of working on such a boat. And why they might have been just a wee bit frustrated that Jesus was down below, sleeping.

But I wonder how it might have been different if they hadn't stood in opposition to Jesus but had joined him in taking a nap. Was that maybe what Jesus had hoped they, and now we, would learn? Would they have missed the whole thing entirely, and awoken on the other side ready to encounter God?

And Jesus said to them, as I believe Jesus says to us: "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." Amen and Amen.