

## **Homily – Silence, Stillness, and Solitude**

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**August 22, 2021 – St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church**

This week we have another Gospel reading about bread. And, in this reading Jesus is once again teaching some pretty dense stuff. It is dense enough that, two thousand years ago, the Disciples didn't really understand it. Much about God is beyond our understanding. It is a mystery. But after much study, I fall back on the universal Christ concepts to help me understand. I shared this before, in fact it was part of my sermon last week. I think the universal Christ concepts are important enough that I include them over and over. When I retire in many years, if you were to put together a greatest hits list, this universal Christ stuff would be near the top. Here goes, again.

Before the beginning of time the first emanation from God was the Christ, the perfect union of spirit and matter. With the Big Bang and the expansion and evolution of the universe, Christ, this perfect union of spirit and matter is across all of time and space. Christ is in all the stars, all the dust, and all living things. The theological term for this is panentheism or God in all. Two thousand years ago, perhaps when humanity was finally ready for it, Jesus was born into the world as a baby boy. Jesus is the Christ. He is the perfect union of spirit and matter or of divine and human. And, the secret that isn't much of a secret is that you and I are also the union of spirit and matter, though we are not perfect. We were made with original beauty but as we go through the zigzags of life, stuff gets layered over the beauty. It can be quite a bit of work to unpack or reveal the immortal diamond that is contained within each and every one of us. Whether you know it or not, whether you see it or not, we each have a God-given beauty. Through his life, death, and resurrection Jesus reveals our beauty to us as our birthright and heritage.

While Jesus is the Christ, the perfect union of spirit and matter, we also have Christ abiding in us. That same beauty that is in Jesus, is in us as well. That same intimate relationship that Jesus has with God, is available to us as well. And all of this is not just available to some of us. It is available to all of us. It is available whether we acknowledge it or not. It is available whether we know about it or not. Christ is in and around all, so what are you going to do about it?

Now, it is not easy to accept the immortal diamond that is our very being. Our fears, regrets, and resentments get in the way. The nasty things that we see in the world add another layer that hides the beauty. The bad things that have happened to us add more. The bad things we have done to others adds again. The misguided theology of hell and damnation, still more. It can be quite a bit of work to wash off all of these things that separate us from God and the beauty inside of us. And, the sad thing is that we spend so much energy clinging to the many layers of junk that hide the

beauty. Our egos and self-centeredness get in the way. We feed our needs for control, power, or approval. We fill our lives with busyness and noise so that we don't have to be alone with our selves. In this way we hide our anger, shame, or fear. We are never going to unpack the immortal diamond until we stop the noise of life, and move into the silence, stillness, and solitude that we all need.

Last week I share a bit about my thirteen week sabbatical. I had a lot of downtime. Life slowed down. Most of my time off was either on the family farm alone with my mother, or at home with Jeff. I read twenty-six books including Don Quixote and Frankenstein. I took two wonderful online classes with a total of eighteen sessions. And, as I shared last week, contemplative practices were a large part of my sabbatical. In the spiritual sense, contemplation is a way of seeing or perceiving with our hearts and bodies rather than our rational minds. It is a way of seeing God, the God who is all around us. It is a way of praying that does not use words. Contemplation is a focused effort that requires the full self. Contemplation is usually done in times of silence, solitude and stillness. Through daily practice contemplation will lead to better insights, calmer demeanors, and the embrace of pain that is always part of life. I am becoming firmly convinced that contemplation is what I have been missing in my own life, and in most of our lives. The path to God and to the immortal diamond inside of you, is through silence, stillness, and solitude. So, I am going to stand up here today and do a deeper dive into these important potentials.

One person who is important to me made the comment that silence, stillness, and solitude should have silliness added to the list. And, another person said silence, stillness, and solitude seem like the same things. They are of course very related to one another but they are distinct. Here are some of the details as described by Christopher Heuertz in his book "The Sacred Enneagram." First, let's look at silence.

You and I are constantly distracted. We are forever listening to a racket that keeps us from focusing. There is so much noise in our lives—emails, texts, phone calls, Twitter notifications, Instagram notifications, Facebook updates, there is so much noise that we are unable to hear or listen. And, then there is the twenty-four hour news cycle. Our attention is always being interrupted. Here is an example from my own life. I like to hike, but I hike while listening to a book tape. Hiking is a wonderful way to embrace silence, so I have to be intentional about leaving the audio book behind so that I can have silence. For you see, silence actually teaches us to listen. It helps us learn how to listen to the voice of God, a voice we may have not been able to recognize. It helps us listen to the people in our lives who speak loving, truthful words of correction or affirmation. In silence we hear the truth that God is not as hard on us as we are on ourselves.

The second quality of contemplation is stillness. We live in a cause-driven age. Outrage and moral indignation have become part of our social fabric. Just look at people's social media accounts to see how they've branded themselves around their social justice concerns. It seems all of us want to do good in the world; we want to help. But in many ways the world is getting worse, not better, despite our best intentions. In addition to our drive to build a better world, we also live in a time when productivity and impact feed the lies we believe about ourselves. The constant pressure to do more, to fill up our schedules, to work harder. But we have to stop the busyness or we will be stopped by burnout and exhaustion. When asked "how life is" many of us always answer with one emphatic word. "Busy." Stillness teaches us restraint, and in restraint we are able to discern when to engage with action and when to let go.

Finally, there is solitude. Lots of us are surrounded by people all the time. Many of the people we know, many of the people with whom we interact, and many of the groups we work with are community-oriented, community-based, community-focused. Even when we aren't physically present with each other, our days are punctuated with texts, tweets, and social media interactions. But somehow people still feel deeply and profoundly lonely. Solitude, intentional withdrawal, teaches us to be present—present to ourselves, present to God, and present with others. Silence, stillness, and solitude are important qualities that are missing from many of our lives.

Now, not all of are the same, for some need more of one of the qualities than another. For example, with my personality type, I need more solitude for spiritual growth, and I got a lot of it during my sabbatical. And, some people already have one or two of these qualities in their lives. Maybe there is already a lot of solitude that was reenforced during Covid. If you already have some of silence, stillness, or solitude then my prayer is that you engage with it and embrace it. It is a gift and not a curse. More often silence, stillness, and solitude are rejected or resented. However, giving ourselves to silence, stillness, and solitude not only nurtures the inner spirituality our souls long for but also quiets the mind in a way that offers us the chance to make major corrections to our behaviors that are otherwise obscured by life's noises. They helps us reconnect with God through deep and focused communion. Silence, stillness, and solitude lead to better holistic health, with benefits for the mind, soul, and body. And, they help us unpack the immortal diamond and see the beauty that is already in and around us.

Now, before I end today I want to give you instruction on a very specific contemplative practice. I've pieced this practice together from several sources that I read during my Sabbatical. In short this practice is about moving things from your head to your heart. First, ground yourself by thinking about someone that you love very deeply. Perhaps it is a child or a pet. Think about your beloved. Then move that

image from your rationale brain to the heart in your chest. You might visualize the move of the image from head to heart. Move your beloved from your head to your heart, and then focus on how your body feels as you hold the beloved in your chest. Remember that embodied feeling. Now, think of another person. Maybe someone you don't know as well. Take that rationale thinking of the person and move it from your head to your heart. Again, you may need to visualize the actual move of an image of the person from your head to your heart. Finally, overlay the heart-felt image of the second person with that feeling you had in your body with your beloved. Take that embodied feeling and make it happen with this second person. Like anything this exercise becomes easier as you practice. I like to actually go through our online photo directory and do this prayer exercise for our community here at St. Barnabas. It is easier for people you like, and harder for those with whom you carry some baggage.

The exercise of the heart is a way for you to build up the love in your life and increases your ability to see Christ abiding in all. That is why we are in community together. We want to worship God and we want to help each other increase of quotient of love. Silence, stillness, and solitude is the path. They help us abide in the love of God and the immortal diamond of Christ that is within.