

The Blue Stairwell

Mark 1:32-38

That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And 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. In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." He 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."

When's the last time you went to the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago? As you may or may not recall, they do such a good job of using their space that even the stairwells are exhibits. Each of the four central stairwells is a different color, and has something interesting that you can learn while simply moving from floor to floor.

The blue stairwell is home to a giant pendulum. All day long, it swings back and forth, back and forth. At nearly 66 feet long, it takes the pendulum about 9 seconds to swing back and forth one full time. But the longer the arm of the pendulum, the longer it takes to return to its original position. A shorter pendulum, like the one you might find on a grandfather clock, can swing much faster, usually completing one full swing forward and back every 2 seconds.

Whether you're looking at a huge pendulum like the ones found in museums, or whether you're looking at the clock on the wall, there's something soothing and gentle about the consistent, graceful movement. There's a sense of both purpose and balance. And I think Jesus lives his life in our story this morning kind of like a pendulum.

First, let me back up. Just before our story, Jesus was at the synagogue. There he was healing and teaching the crowd. After that, he retreats to the personal home of Simon's mother-in-law. After a day there, at sundown, the crowd returns. And Jesus does more healing. Who knows how late the crowd stayed, but the next morning, Jesus wakes up early so he can have a chance to be alone. He goes off to a deserted place to pray.

Notice how Jesus swings between being in larger groups and meeting their immediate needs and being alone or in a small group, tending even to his own needs. Making time for your own spiritual needs, making it a priority to simply listen for God's voice – that's the discipline of solitude. For most of us, when we pray, that's when we talk to God. If that's what prayer is, then solitude is God's chance to answer us.

For many of us, it's nearly impossible to experience solitude unless we first make room for silence. And not just silence from sound, but silence from all the visual noise we experience. Think about it – we are bombarded with sensory input all day long. But in our modern society, besides all the normal stuff we see and hear and touch, we add TV, radio, internet, online streaming, cell phones... And we like to combine those and multi-task. Richard Foster, a pastor who has worked a lot with the spiritual disciplines, reminds us that solitude is more a state of mind and heart. You don't need to have silence to experience solitude. But in our sensory-saturated culture, it definitely helps. Especially for beginners. Once we have practiced this discipline, once we are good at listening for God, we can do it with the radio on. But most people who are really practiced at solitude find they prefer it with silence.

We see that in the life of Jesus. When he seeks solitude, he does it by retreating. And Jesus knew solitude was important, so he made it a priority. He went up mountains, he went out of cities, he went to the countryside and to the other side of the sea. He withdrew often. After John the Baptist was killed by the king, Jesus and the disciples grieved. Jesus tells them they need to come away with him to a deserted place to rest. Jesus not only made time for his own solitude, he taught that practice to the disciples.

But Jesus also knew that solitude was not a constant. He sought it like a pendulum. There are those throughout Christian history who have made solitude so important that they have

forgotten the other end of the pendulum swing. They spend all their time in secret with God. Some founded or entered monastic communities, intentionally living their lives set apart from the common people. Some of those sought further isolation in solitary living as hermits. But with his life, Jesus shows us that solitude is not meant to be a constant condition.

Once, when Jesus and the disciples are trying to get away from the crowd, the crowd follows. But rather than demanding his solitude, the Bible says Jesus has compassion on them. The disciples let him teach, but then they insist that Jesus send them away. They are learning from him the value of solitude. But Jesus refuses to send the crowd away. They are in the middle of nowhere, and there is no way for them to get food. So Jesus feeds the 5,000+ people with just five loaves and two fish. But immediately after that, Jesus not only sends away the crowd, he sends off the disciples. He spends much time alone with God.

Another thing you'll notice as you watch Jesus is that sometimes he went away by himself for a longer time, and sometimes he simply retreated for a short time with a small group. The amount of solitude he needed depended on how demanding his recent ministry had been. On how long it had been since he had a chance for solitude. Because Jesus had been trying to get away several times, and each time ended up spending more time with the people, he needed to spend more time in solitude. Because of his time in solitude, Jesus has the guidance and strength necessary to be in ministry. Because he has been in ministry, he needs to seek solitude to restore himself. Yes, it's cyclical, but in the best kind of way. Listening to God helps us to do what God wants. And doing what God wants helps us to listen to God's voice.

The longer you spend doing the hard work of life, the longer you need to spend listening to God. It's like the difference between the pendulum on a grandfather clock and the pendulum at the Museum of Science and Industry. One moves quickly back and forth between the two

opposite ends. The other lingers at each end. Can you imagine the jerky motion of a pendulum that favors one side over the other? The only way for a pendulum to find balance is to spend equal amounts of time on either side of center. Some of us here may find it easier to experience solitude like a grandfather clock – in brief but frequent moments. Some of us may need to experience solitude like a giant museum pendulum, not very often, but for extended times.

So what does it look like for us to spend time in solitude? In part, it depends on if you're a clock pendulum or a museum pendulum. If you find that you have limited amounts of time, or a brief attention span, you may be a clock pendulum. You find it easier to listen for God in short bursts. It doesn't mean you find less of God – but it does mean you need to return to solitude more frequently. One way to do this is to look for the moments in your day that are already ripe for solitude. What about those first three minutes when you first wake up? What a great chance to take a few deep breaths and listened for any guidance God may have for the rest of your day. You might find another three minutes after you arrive at work, but before getting out of your car. Or on your way home. Maybe you're making dinner, and you don't need to stir or chop for 10 minutes. I once knew someone who had one of those watches that beeps every hour. Whenever his watch beeped, he gave a minute or so to God. His solitude moments were very short. But they also came around very frequently. And his watch helped him remember.

But maybe you're a museum pendulum. When you stop to listen for God, you need time to settle in. You want the chance to really drink deeply of God's presence. You don't have the opportunity to do it frequently, so when you can set aside time for God, you are willing to set aside a big chunk of your time. Maybe you seek solitude in a day of retreat, refusing to answer the phone or check the internet. Maybe you go camping alone for a day or two, finding God's presence in the natural surroundings.

Of course, I imagine a fair number of us fall somewhere in between these two. You want more than three minutes at a time, but you can't find a whole day to set aside from your schedule. You might find solitude on a long walk. Or sitting for an hour in a place where no one will disturb you. Maybe it's watching the sunrise or sunset. If you stop to think about your day, your week, your life, you will start to notice the ways and times that you might try to experience the discipline of solitude.

So what are we going to try as a congregation this week? Well, the challenge is to spend an hour in solitude with God. For some of you, that might be an hour all at once. For some of you, that might be about 10 minutes a day. Ten minutes a day sounds reasonable, right? The temptation for many of us is to turn our solitude into a time of 'doing,' but solitude is a time for simply 'being.' Even if you keep it spiritual – praying, reading Scripture, journaling – all of these are activities. Solitude is a time to simply rest in God's presence. But it takes a lot of effort to continue concentrating on God. Another temptation is to let our minds wander, or even to fall asleep! The key is to still our minds and bodies while still concentrating on God. We're so used to 'doing,' it might be easier to start your solitude with another spiritual discipline. Pray to God, then listen for God's response. Read a passage in the Bible, then wait to see if God will give you fresh insight. Is it worth it? Isaiah reminds us that "those who wait on the Lord will renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings like eagles. They shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint." Amen and amen.