Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

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THE NEED TO BE Mark 1:29–39

“In the morning, while it was still very dark,

he got up and went out to a deserted place, and

there he prayed.” —Mark 1:35

This verse, often overlooked, is to be found between two scenes from Mark’s Gospel reporting on Jesus’s activity as a healer. In the first of the two scenes, after his appearance in the Capernaum synagogue, he heals Peter’s mother who was suffering from a fever, and then at sunset in the presence of the townspeople, he heals many who are sick or possessed with demons. In the second scene, he travels throughout Galilee teaching in the region’s synagogues and casting out demons. One can sense the hurried just short of frantic pace of his teaching and healing ministry. But even Jesus cannot keep up this pace without a time out. And so, “in the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.”

Jesus certainly had a need to do, but he also had a need to be, to be alone in a deserted place, a lonely place, to be alone in the presence of God, to be alone without any distractions or demands, to be alone away from others. Jesus entered into a solitude where he could listen and pay attention to the voice of God and the leading of God’s Spirit. Otherwise, his ministry of teaching and healing could have become something he did quite apart from the kingdom of God and God’s leading in his life.

We all have a need to be, especially in an age such as ours. Our lives can become so filled with doing and busyness that we lose sight of who we are and whose we are.

Our society does not value solitude, that place apart, where in the presence of God we may come to know who we are. Our society does not value who we are as much as what we do. We are valued for our usefulness as human beings. We need to be useful in the eyes of those who employ us. Even our families value us in terms of our usefulness. And so does our church community. We are needed to do this and that, to serve on this or that committee, to help with this or that task. Those who make themselves useful in the church are known to be “good church workers.” The problem is that we age and find ourselves with less energy and less capacity to be useful in the usual sense of the word. “Your church is aging,” we are told, as if there could be nothing worse.

But wisdom comes only with age. Indigenous societies value the wisdom of the elders; in fact, only the elders are asked to govern. Their usefulness in the conventional sense of the word has come to an end. Now, no longer defined by their usefulness, they are now defined by their wisdom.

Henri Nouwen, a teacher of the spiritual life, writes:

In solitude we become aware that our worth is

not the same as our usefulness. We can learn

much in this respect from the old tree in the Tao

story about a carpenter and his apprentice.

A carpenter and his apprentice were walking

together through a large forest. And when they

came across a tall, huge, gnarled, old, beautiful

oak tree, the carpenter asked his apprentice:

“Do you know why this tree is so tall, so huge,

so gnarled, so old and beautiful?” The

apprentice looked at his master and said:

“No . . . Why?”

“Well,” the carpenter said, “because it is

useless. If it had been useful it would have been

cut down long ago and made into tables and

chairs, but because it is useless it could grow so

tall and so beautiful that you can sit in its

shade and relax.”

Nouwen continues:

“In solitude we can grow old freely without

being preoccupied with our usefulness and we

can offer a service which we had not planned on.[[1]](#footnote-1)

At Nu‘uanu Congregational Church, we are blessed to have so many *kupuna* in whose shade we can sit and relax. They are our wise ones, but they did not get that way without realizing that our worth as human beings is not as much dependent upon what we do as it is upon who we are. They learned this in solitude.

Last Sunday, a wise one, Shigeo Kimura looked at my *fitbit* watch and asked me if, on the Sabbath, I was planning to walk my 10,000 steps. “Perhaps we shouldn’t, he said, “After all it’s the Sabbath.” I confess: I did not take his advice, but perhaps I should have. We have a need to simply be. For me, my landscape photography has taken me to those places where I sit and watch and wait. I am “doing” in a sense but not really. I am alone with myself and with God, immersed in the beauty of creation. It is good for the soul, simply to be, and when I am able to capture an image that inspires, I find I am offering a service I had not planned on.

Oh, in the fastness and busyness of our lives, especially in these tumultuous days of ours, so “full of sound and fury, signifying nothing” (Shakespeare) we need writers of the spiritual life who speak of solitude and we need poets who share with us the beauty of Sabbath rest more than ever before. We need to hear voices like the voice of Wendell Berry, who writes the following in his essay *“What Are Humans For?”*

We enter solitude, in which also we lose

loneliness . . . True solitude is found in the wild

places, where one is without human obligation.

One’s inner voices become audible. One feels the

attraction of one’s most intimate sources. In

consequence, one responds more clearly to

other lives. The more coherent one becomes

within oneself as a creature, the more fully one

enters into the communion of all creatures.

And then there is Mary Oliver and her poem, *“Today”,* which goes like this:

*Today*

*Today I’m flying low and I’m*

*not saying a word.*

*I’m letting all the voodoos of ambition sleep.*

*The world goes on as it must,*

*the bees in the garden rumbling a little,*

*the fish leaping, the gnats getting eaten.*

*and so forth.*

*But I’m taking the day off.*

*Quiet as a feather.*

*I hardly move though really I’m traveling*

*a terrific distance.*

*Stillness. One of the doors*

*into the temple.[[2]](#footnote-2)*

And to Mary Oliver’s poem we could add . . . *Stillness. One of the doors into the temple . . .* the temple of God,the temple of one’s truest self, the temple housing our deepest worth and value as human beings.

My sisters and brothers, as human beings and as a Christian

community, let us learn how to keep Sabbath. Let us learn how to rest and to be still that we may know who we are and whose we are. So will we know better the ways in which we are called to do the will of God in this, our time and place.

May that example of Jesus recorded in our Gospel lesson for today inspire us always: “In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.” May the pattern of his being and his doing be our pattern also. May it be so. Amen.

1. Henri Nouwen, *Out of Solitude* (Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 1974) 22-23. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Mary Oliver, *A Thousand Mornings* (New York, The Penguin Press, 2012) 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)