

Sermon March 22, 2020

Message on Solitude, via Zoom during the time of Quarantine

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Good morning. I miss you all and I miss the world we shared only a few short weeks ago, before the onset of this Virus on our nation's shores. The problems we had and the heaviness of those concerns is paled by what we are facing together today with the virus' exponential growth. It is so strange that the way we are called upon in this moment, to face this crisis "together," is to remain "apart"-- socially at a distance from each other. The shut-down of businesses and restaurants, libraries, concert halls, schools and churches is damaging to our collective economy as a whole, and devastating to the economy of each family. The removal of our social structures is also profoundly disorienting; birthdays, weddings, even funerals cannot take place. It is a lonely, anxious, and even frightening time. But here we are, on March 22, which was intended to be New Member Sunday and One Great Hour of Sharing Sunday, but instead we are in our respective homes, unable to come together to welcome others, unable to come together to share. We have been challenged to face a newly imposed solitude in ways we were completely unprepared for. I hope this virtual gathering brings some peace.

I have been thinking about what to say to you today in the uncharted territory we find ourselves in. I want to comfort and lift spirits, help you discover where a sense of hope might be found for you in the midst of this global pandemic—and, most importantly, to point to how God's message through our scriptures and the life of Christ can touch each of us with an **eternal** certainty at this time of great **uncertainty**.

I looked back at my notes and realized that on March 1, before we knew what was ahead. I spoke about the spiritual value for each of us in spending some time in solitude. I used the passage about Jesus facing the demons in the wilderness, and talked about what this story could mean to each of us in our time. Well, be careful what you ask for, I guess. We have suddenly been thrust into a different time. Now we are not choosing solitude but are learning how to relate to it. Paul Tillich, the great 20th Century theologian once wrote, "Our language has widely sensed the two sides of being alone. It has created the word "loneliness" to express the **pain** of being alone. And it has created the word "**solitude**" to express the glory of being alone." Solitude is a complex thing, both longed for and dreaded. It can fill us with great joy and newfound meaning in meditation and prayer, a long walk in nature, slowing down and taking in music, art, or simply silence. The 20th Century Christian monk and mystic, Thomas Merton, wrote, "It is in deep solitude that I find the gentleness with which I can truly love

my brother (and sister).” Times of deep solitude can guide us to be more compassionate, caring people.

But solitude can also be quite disturbing, making us acutely aware of our vulnerability, of our limitations, of our seemingly unresolvable loneliness and grief.

This current pandemic hits us on so many levels and it hits the poor, the elderly and the ill the hardest--in body and in spirit. In a major National Academies of Sciences report on social isolation and loneliness in older adults, the researchers found that even before the coronavirus, about a quarter of older adults fit the definition of socially isolated — which measures routine social contact — and 43 percent said they felt lonely. The mental health risks in social isolation, for the older adult population are great, and in this crisis even greater. In this time of prescribed social distancing, we all depend upon communication via technology (virtual communication) and yet the elderly, most affected by the pandemic, are also often less technologically adept, which also contributes to loneliness.

In her email to Rocky Mtn Clergy this past week, Sue Artt, our Conference minister quoted another Conference minister, Rev. Bill Lyons, sharing that the word “quarantine” comes from the word *quaresima*, the Italian word for Lent. Apparently their word for, Lent, or quaresima, was derived from the practice of ships being “quarantined” for 40 days in port before they were able to dock and unload people and supplies. That makes more sense to us today, than it did only a few weeks ago as we have heard stories of cruise ships on our shores, where passengers were prohibited from unloading due to Covid-19.

We are deep into the 40-day Christian season of Lent, Quaresima, a Lenten season we will never forget. The traditions of our faith call us to turn inward, to pray, to reflect, to confess, to fast, to let go, and to make way for new life. How might we embrace solitude in this time of Quaresima? How might we have a greater sense of its deep purpose both for ourselves and for our world, for this current moment and for the days that stretch beyond **this crisis**, and perhaps even beyond **us**? How can we stand up to our suffering minds and hearts, and perhaps, even our bodies and sense the joy and peace to be found even in times such as these? How can we allow the soul that lives within us to speak to us?

The early 20th Century German poet, novelist, painter Hermann Hesse tackled the importance of solitude in coming to understand one’s own destiny. He once wrote,

“Solitude is the path over which destiny endeavors to lead the human being to himself... We must become so alone, so utterly alone, that we withdraw into our innermost self. It is a way of bitter suffering. But then, our solitude is overcome, we are no longer alone, for we find that our innermost self is the spirit, that it is God, the indivisible. And suddenly we find ourselves in the midst of the world, yet undisturbed by its multiplicity, for in our innermost soul we know ourselves to be one with all being.”

None of us would have chosen this current quarantining and I do not wish in any way to romanticize it. It is not beautiful and self-actualizing, it is lonely and anxious and mournful, but it is here and it will bring both its sorrows and its inspiration.

Hesse continues...“In each one of you there is a hidden being, still in the deep sleep of childhood. Bring it to life! In each one of you there is a call, a will, an impulse of nature, an impulse toward the future, the new, the higher. Let it mature, let it resound, nurture it! Your future is not this or that; it is not money or power, it is not wisdom or success at your trade — your future, your hard, dangerous path is this: to mature and to find God in yourselves.”

Lent is a time we imagine Jesus’ hard dangerous path to the cross on Golgotha. It is a time to join with the Christ spirit and to find God within. Things will be different when this time is over. We will forever be changed. The late Celtic priest, John O’Donohue, a mystic and prophet, described this time quite well in his poetic blessing “On Interim” from *To Bless the Space Between Us*. I will read a few excerpts.

*You are in this time of the interim where everything seems withheld
The path you took to get here has washed out; The way forward is still concealed from you.*

*"The old is not old enough to have died away; The new is still too young to be born."
As far as you can, hold your confidence. Do not allow confusion to squander this call
which is loosening your roots in false ground, that you might come free from all you
have outgrown.*

*What is being transfigured here is your mind, and it is difficult and slow to become new.
The more faithfully you can endure here, the more refined your heart will become
For your arrival in the new dawn,*

In closing today I will use the last stanza of another of O’Donohue’s blessings, “For Loneliness.”

Cradle yourself like a child Learning to trust what emerges,

*So that gradually you may come to know that deep in the black hole
You will find the blue flower that holds the mystical light which will illuminate in you
The glimmer of springtime.*

Jesus said, "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened." Embrace this season of quaresima prayerfully. You are not alone and Springtime will come.

Prayer

Dear God,

We come humbly before you today in prayer. At this time in our world we draw near to your presence with many petitions. We pray for those who are sick with Covid-19 and for those who are the most vulnerable to becoming sick. We pray for those who are in grief over a lost loved one. We pray for the medical teams, especially in large cities, who have the enormous and dangerous task of caring for the virus victims. We pray for leaders to make wise decisions and citizens to stay at home if they are able, to mediate the virus' spread. We pray for those who must go to work in grocery stores and police departments, hospitals and government, delivering mail, caring for children and the elderly and so many more essential tasks. We pray for our own health and wellbeing. Help us be a congregation that supports each other and finds ways to support our community at this time of trial.

We thank you God for this time of worship that brings quietness to our being, slowing us down to reflect on our lives and our relationship to you. We know that you are the great I Am who brings life and sustains our life even through dark, frightening, confusing and lonely times. Your presence in our lives is the origin of any courage and compassion we can muster up and we are deeply grateful. Empower us to share our trust in you with each other and with those who are anxious and lonely. Help us come together in new ways; accepting, supporting, uniting, inspiring, and appreciating each other more fully and openly. Help us understand and live out what it means to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Despite so much uncertainty, we vow to walk forward in faith into the days ahead, trusting that you will be our ever sure companion and that, even at a distance, we will be sure companions for each other. And now let us join together in the Lord's Prayer.

Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy Name. Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, as we forgive

those who sin against us. And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, The power, and the glory, For ever and ever.