

Space for God

The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James

Mark 6:30-46

Sermon Series:
Best Spiritual Practices

Busyness has become America's new status symbol.

Virtually every Christmas letter we received this past year began the same way. “It’s been a busy year.” Ask someone, “How are you doing?” and you are likely to hear something about being busy. I’m partial to Martin Marty’s definition of a bore. “A bore is someone who, when asked about how busy he is, proceeds to tell you!” No wonder Soren Kierkegaard calls busyness “the most obnoxious of all sins.”

Busyness has become America’s new status symbol. As much as we complain about busyness, we find ourselves drawn to the hurried life. It makes us feel important. When I am busy, the devil whispers in my ear, “You are incredibly important.” My ego inflates as people recede in importance.

Busyness can become intoxicating. The rush of adrenaline carries us from one activity to another. Racing against the clock becomes something of a game. How many things can I accomplish in the shortest amount of time? Can I guess which checkout is the shortest or which route home is the quickest?

Busyness, if left unchecked, becomes addictive. That’s why its victims are called workaholics.

Excess busyness exacts a personal toll on our lives. It damages

our health, hollows out personal relationships and destroys intimacy with God. I’m reminded of the Greek proverb, “The bow that is always bent will soon break.”

Busyness is nothing new. During one hectic season of ministry, when the disciples were busy preaching the gospel and healing the sick, so many people were coming and going in Jesus’ life that his disciples didn’t have time enough to eat (6:31). Some of you might be tempted to claim this passage as your life verse. You’re hedging your bets that God is partial to busy people.

Not exactly! Jesus is acutely aware of the intoxicating effect of busyness. That’s why he tells his disciples, “Come away with me to a quiet place and rest awhile” (6:31). Yet, no sooner than they have set sail for this quiet place that a crowd assembles on the shoreline and stalks them to their destination (6:33). So much for a quiet place! Jesus, however, is undeterred. He feeds the crowd, which has swollen to 5000 people, with five loaves and two fishes; then he sends them packing. The disciples are back on task. They go ahead to this quiet place while Jesus retreats to the mountains for prayer.

At every critical stage of his life, Jesus centers his life and mission on solitude. Jesus inaugurates his ministry with an extended season of

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solitude. He precedes the choosing of his 12 disciples with solitude, just as he follows strenuous times in ministry with quiet reflection and prayer. When Jesus faces the prospect of the cross at the end of his life, he retreats to a remote garden for solitude. We tend to skip over these references to solitude in Jesus' life, since they are tucked into the end of stories. But these passages are not filler. They are vital to Jesus' sense of identity and call.

Henry Nouwen has written extensively on the subject of solitude and community. Nouwen is no academic lightweight, having taught at prestigious universities such as Notre Dame, Yale and Harvard. He shocked the academic world when he became pastor to L'Arche Daybreak in 1986, a community of mentally and physically handicapped people in Canada. Nouwen insists that solitude is indispensable to the spiritual life. He calls solitude "the furnace of transformation... where the old self dies and the new self is reborn."

Solitude seems on the surface to be less productive. We've been conditioned to think that success is dependent on our doing. What good is solitude if I can be out there working, achieving and doing?

The thought of solitude is frightening to some people. We're afraid of what we might find alone. Who knows what lurks under the surface of our busy lives? Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, "We are so

afraid of silence that we chase ourselves from one event to the next in order not to have to spend a moment alone with ourselves; so we will not have to look at ourselves in the mirror."

When you come upon silence, do you embrace the stillness or rush to fill it with noise and activity? When you have discretionary time, do you default to reading email, sending text messages and watching TV? Blasé Pascal writes, "Unhappiness arrives from one single fact that men cannot sit quietly in their rooms. We love noise and stir."

When I began in ministry 30 years ago, there was plenty of research to suggest that the technology boon would make it possible for people to work fewer hours at their jobs. Prognosticators spoke confidently of a coming four-day work week. Experts wondered what we were going to do with all this free time.

Technology has now encroached into every waking moment. Some of us are having a hard time putting boundaries around our work life.

In her book *Sacred Rhythms*, Ruth Haley Barton provides an instructive illustration of the benefit of solitude. She writes about meeting with a spiritual director, who is advising her on creating time for solitude. When Ruth laments on the pace of her hectic life, she is counseled, "Ruth, you are like river water all shaken up. You need to sit long enough to allow the sediment to settle so that the water will become clearer." When we take time with God, the sediment in our lives

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begins to settle and the things God is trying to tell us become clearer.

We are created by God for both community and solitude. Each by itself has profound perils and pitfalls. Together they bring balance to life.

Some of us find it easy to be alone. This is particularly true for introverts, who thrive on solitude. Introverts are people who draw strength from being alone.

The growing edge for introverts is to move toward community. Introverts must make a concerted effort to enter into community with other Christians.

Bonhoeffer writes in his book *Life Together*, “Let him who is not in community beware of being alone.” Solitude becomes problematic when we use it to isolate ourselves. In Bonhoeffer’s words, “Solitude without fellowship perishes in the abyss of vanity, self-infatuation and despair.” We need fellowship and accountability if we are to be alone in the right way. Otherwise, we will be too hard or too lenient on ourselves.

Some of us thrive in community. Extroverts like to be with people. Extroverts are people who draw strength from being with other people.

The growing edge for extroverts is to move toward solitude. Without solitude we are at the mercy of our compulsions.

I’m reminded of an experiment conducted with mice a few years ago. A researcher found that when amphetamines are given to a mouse in solitude, it takes a high dosage to kill it. Give it to a group

of mice, and they start hopping around and hyping each other up so much that a fraction of the dosage will be lethal. In fact, a mouse that had been given no amphetamines at all, placed in a group on the drug, would get so hyper that within ten minutes the non-injected mouse would be dead.

“Let him who cannot be alone beware of community,” Bonhoeffer writes. Solitude teaches us how to interact with people. When we take our silence with us into community, we stop interrupting people. Solitude helps us become content with ourselves and God in healthy ways that don’t cling to each other.

Last Sunday, on Easter, I mentioned that we’re devoting two months worth of sermons to Best Spiritual Practices. We’re encouraging you to read *Sacred Rhythms* to acquaint us to the spiritual practices of solitude, scripture meditation, prayer, honoring the body, self-examination, discernment and Sabbath. We’re culminating this series of sermons by encouraging you to write your own rule of life. How can we order our lives around the things we desire most?

You can start by taking advantage of little moments of solitude throughout your day: when you first awaken from sleep, over your morning breakfast or cup of coffee, as you take a shower or iron your clothes or drive to work or school (and avoid the temptation to turn on the car radio), as you wait at traffic lights or in the evening before sleep. You can be alone even in a crowd of people.

The faster we go in life, the more we need to find the center.

I would also encourage you to create space and structure in your day for solitude. Start with 15-20 minutes. Identify a place where you like to be alone—a park setting, this sanctuary or a favorite walking path. Turn off your phone. You don't need to answer every call. Push your "do not disturb" button. Create a distraction-free environment.

Once you are by yourself, Bonhoeffer suggests focusing on Scripture meditation, prayer and intercession. Notice he uses meditation in relationship to Scripture. We read the Word until it begins to address us personally. If you don't know where to begin, why not start with the gospel of Mark. Meditating on Scripture helps us to frame prayer. How does this Word speak into my life right now? What are you calling me to do or refrain from doing? What do I need to say to God in this moment? Prayer leads naturally to intercession, the practice of remembering each other before God.

When I was in elementary school, I lived for recess. If I had been graded on recess alone, I would have been a straight -"A" student. The merry-go-round was a staple of playground equipment in my elementary school days, providing endless hours of amusement. We would grab the rails, run as fast as we could, jump on and hang on for dear life. When the older kids came along, they would transform the merry-go-round into a spinning top. If you happened to be on the outside rails, you would likely be thrown off by

centrifugal force. But I discovered if I crawled to the center of the merry-go-round there was equilibrium.

The faster we go in life, the more we need to find the center. Busyness threatens to make short work of our spiritual life. Find the center where, in our life with God, there is equilibrium.

