

As we start the second half of our series, we're going to talk about several practices we believe, will put you in a position to grow in the character of Jesus. These aren't exclusive for growth; every moment in life is formative, but we believe these are worth your time and effort. Consider each of these practices, see which ones resonate with you, and then make plans to practice them.

### **The Tension of Slowing**

In this message, we are going to talk about silence, solitude, and slowing down. Inherit in this topic is a tension many of us face as we consider slowing down: though we want to practice slowing, it is difficult.

Slowing is difficult because it doesn't seem realistic in our modern day. Silence and solitude seem like behaviors of middle age monks with nothing better to do. We have families, work, and beyond, which would be harmed if we ran off to the woods whenever we wanted to be alone. Some of you are parents, and your time is devoted to work, family, and children. Extra time seems like a fantasy world. For many, work has increasing demands. I have had seasons of work, particularly in corporate environments, in which it felt like I lived at the office. Stepping away wasn't realistic. The 17th-century French philosopher, Blaise Pascal, wrote, "All of humanity's problems stem from man's inability to sit quietly in a room alone." There may be truth in that. But is sitting in a room alone while we have responsibilities realistic?

The other side of the tension is that though slowing is difficult, slowing is attractive. We've reached a point in our culture in which busyness, rather than the love and justice that flow from Sabbath, rule our schedules. Apart from the merits of time and effort, our busyness has wrecked us at our core in such a way; we're not sure how to move forward. The Catholic priest, Henri Nouwen, pointedly observed 40 years ago what could be said of us today: "When we have no project to finish, no friend to visit, no book to read, no television to watch...when we are left all alone by ourselves, we are brought so close to the revelation of our basic human aloneness and so afraid of experiencing an all-pervasive sense of loneliness that we will do anything to get busy again and continue the game which makes us believe that everything is fine after all." In that chaos is, I believe, a longing for something different. A longing to cease the endless cycle of motion.

We're going to talk about the spiritual practice of silence, solitude and slowing. Here's where we're going: I want to tell you about a monastery, a French cafe, and the thing that unites the

two. But first, we'll start in a secluded place outside of a village in the ancient near eastern village. In the middle of success and popularity, Jesus did something that you wouldn't expect.

Jesus was in Capernaum. He did astonishing things including healing people and exorcising demons. People streamed to Jesus, drawn to God at work among them. In the middle of this experience, Jesus did this...

**Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. Simon and his companions went to look for him, (Mark 1:35–36)**

Jesus woke up early while it was still dark. Jesus chose to give up sleep. You can picture Him as He tip-toes out of the room while others around Him are sleeping. This was a choice by Jesus. This mattered enough for Him to be intentional. Jesus did this so He could go to a solitary place.

It's important to define what we mean by "solitude." Solitude is not merely being alone but is the practice of being alone with God (Gordon T. Smith). The spiritual practice of solitude is an intentional engagement with God. That's what Jesus did; he spent some duration of time in prayer.

**...and when they found him, they exclaimed: "Everyone is looking for you!"**

**Jesus replied, "Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come." So he traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons. (Mark 1:37–39)**

Meanwhile, Jesus' disciples wake up and can't find him. You can imagine them asking each other, "Have you seen Jesus?" Jesus is so much removed they can't immediately find Him. And the disciples are annoyed.

But they are annoyed not because they are concerned for Jesus, but because they think Jesus is failing to capitalize on this popularity and success. They have expectations of Jesus—what He should do and how He should spend His efforts. You can imagine their expectations: "These people love you. We can get this movement off the ground. Capernaum needs you!"

Jesus stepped away from the demands, urgency, and the expectations. He didn't disengage from the world, but He did something we can learn from. He did something, which can help us recover wholeness in ourselves and our relationships. To see

what He did, I want to tell you about what it's like to spend time at a monastery and then at a cafe.

## **The Monastery**

The monastery is a fascinating place. It carries seemingly innate holiness and separateness. It is intentionally designed as a retreat from the chaos of everyday demands. For example, when I first contacted the monk responsible for overnight retreats, I asked, "Is there anything that I need to bring (bedding, etc.)?" His response: "What would you possibly need?" The monastery is the place of clarity and absence in retreat from the world.

At the Benedictine monastery in France, where I took several retreats, silence was expected most of the day and required from late afternoon until midmorning. The monks prayed seven times a day in the chapel, beginning at 4 am. Each was announced with the ringing of a bell in the chapel tower. The prayer services were powerful experiences, as the monks filled in and took their places at the front of the chapel (visitors in the pews). We chanted Psalms and heard various Scripture read.

As visitors, we ate our meals with the monks—sort of. We had a table in a middle of the room, while the monks ate at single row table around the room, facing us. One monk forgoes eating to read to the room throughout the meal from a prayer book. The meal was family style (bowls of shared food), which sounds fun until you remember that the meal is to be in silence. Getting someone to pass a bowl of potatoes becomes an exercise in pointing and sign language. To enter the dining area, we lined up with the monks (a small group of 15 or so). They were gracious and hospitable, but communication was often entertaining. I took one of my retreats with my co-pastor at the time. He is an outgoing, extrovert guy. He decided at the beginning of the retreat that he wanted to spend the three days not saying one word to anyone in our group. It was going fine, until during one meal-time when we were lined up waiting to enter the dining hall. The head monk (there's probably a more technical name than that!) was walking through the line greeting each of us. He had been on a weeklong solitude experience. Think about it, you're a monk living in a monastery, and you go on a solitary retreat. This is serious stuff. He's a big deal. As he went through the line saying a quiet hello to each of the visitors, he reached my friend who vowed to himself to not say a word for the weekend. The monk greeted him, and my friend, not wanting to be rude, pointed to his lips, shook his head and smiled politely. The monk seemed confused, and look back at me and asked in French, "Your friend, he can't speak?" The monk thought my friend was mute. To correct him would require a long explanation and probably more confusion. Being the loving person that I am, I replied, "Yes, he's mute." The monk nodded understandingly and moved on. My friend and I had a good laugh later.

The monastery is a fascinating place. But here's what stays with you about a monastery: it's unsustainable. Silence, solitude, and slowing can happen at a monastery—and you should take a retreat—but it requires us to disengage from real life. Is there something we can learn from the monastery?

## **The Cafe**

Like a monastery, a European cafe has unique characteristics and intended purpose. A cafe is placed on a street or plaza in the midst of every day. Sit at a cafe in a European city, and you are surrounded by the bustle of people going to work, laughing with friends, fighting with lovers, and others people watching. At a cafe, you belong to a specific place, a community,

The city in France in which we lived, everyone had "their" cafe. Your cafe is where you have chosen your place in the midst of the city. My cafe was L'Unic. It was near where I lived, away from the tourist cafes, in the heart of the city facing a busy plaza. My first several years, L'Unic was where I went each morning to read Scripture, journal, and sit in the early morning hours. I ordered a cafe crème each time, and eventually, one particular waiter would bring it out when I sat down. There were half a dozen regulars each morning, who also went through their regular routines.

One of the regulars was a woman named, Solange. Solange and her husband, who were in their 80's, spent time at L'Unic each morning before going to the vegetable market stalls. Solange was outgoing, and the type of person who loved to talk with people so much that she eagerly looked for an opening. That's probably how we met. I sat next to them, happened to look over with a smile, and she decided we should talk. And she didn't stop speaking with me for years! She wasn't bothered that I didn't understand French at the time, nor that I rarely responded. This was part of our shared place at the cafe.

As my French grew, I'd ask her questions. I learned about her family and history. I saw the tears as she talked about living during WWII occupation. I heard about modern day politics and frustrations with city living. This is the holy experience of the café. You are present with neighbors to learn a new story or sitting alone watching and imagining people's stories. You are in the world—in all of its noise and blur—but you can also have solitude in the midst of the bustle. Is there something we can learn from the cafe?

The monastery is solitude from the world. The cafe is solitude in the world. What connects them? How does this help us today? The thing that connects them is space. Both spaces can be inhabited with intentionality for silence, solitude, and slowing.

## **Jesus created space**

That's what Jesus did in our passage in Mark. He created space. By creating space, Jesus freed Himself from three things. First, Jesus created distance from the demands of Capernaum. He

wasn't overwhelmed by the requests of Capernaum. Someone once said community can be oppressive. Second, Jesus created distance from the urgency to act immediately. The disciples attempted to burden Jesus with their urgent agenda. Third, Jesus created distance from the distraction of requests, which would take away from what He was called to do.

He intentionally created distance without disengaging. He created space, not because He hated Capernaum or the disciples, nor because He couldn't wait to leave. He did it so He could better engage with the world around Him. Interestingly, Mark describes Jesus as pursuing solitude in this Gospel. Each time it happens in darkness, and it is at a turning point in Jesus' ministry (Mark 1.35; 6.46; 14.32-42). Before Jesus moved forward, He pulled back.

Interestingly, Jesus continued the practice of solitude and slowing throughout His ministry. On the night before He died on the Cross, Jesus created space to speak with His heavenly Father. In the midst of a tumultuous event, Jesus created space. He created space from the demand urgency expectations. Because he did, he was fully committed and dying on the cross, because he did it, you and I have the potential for new life.

### **We can do the same**

We have the opportunity to live in the same way. That's what the Monastery and the Cafe teach us. The Monastery and the Cafe teach us, we can create space wherever we are. Each is a space to be cultivated. If you can pull out of the busy of every day, then do it. Create a space to pursue your heavenly Father. It is holy space. But if you can't pull away—if the kids still need to get to practice, if work keeps you late each night this week—create space within

the busy. Take the 15 minutes you have as you walk to lunch and be still. The monastery doesn't have a monopoly on slowing down. The cafe can be calm in the middle of hurry.

Here's what I want to challenge you to do. I want you to take 15 minutes each day this week and practice silence, solitude, and slowing. If you can pull away, then do it. If you have responsibilities that demand your time, find 15 minutes in the middle of it. Practice this, not because you should, nor even because it's good for your soul (though both of those are good reasons). Practice slowing down because you have an open invitation from your Heavenly Father to learn His way of life, to glean who He is like. Here are some ideas, Change your usual routine when you first wake up. Spend a few minutes asking your heavenly Father for the filling of His Spirit for the day. Or, if you're like me and usually have music/podcast on in the car, spend a journey without any music. Another option is at some point this week; you will be waiting at a stop light, a food/coffee place, or somewhere else. Instead of habitually pulling out your phone, listen. Be alert to what God is saying to you in the waiting time. Those are holy moments. As you are parenting, working, or driving, choose 15 minutes to be silent, in solitude, slowing down. Every space around you is sacred. As Frederick Buechner put it, "There is no event so commonplace but that God is present within it, always hiddenly, always leaving you room to recognize him or not to recognize him.". In every circumstance, you have an opportunity to slow down and be in silent communion with your Heavenly Father.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC South. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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