

**DISCIPLINES FOR DISCIPLES, II:  
SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP  
SERMON PREACHED AT FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH GREENWICH  
FEBRUARY 10, 2008  
THE LESSON FOR THE DAY - MATTHEW 4:1-11  
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**L**et us Pray: *Holy God, we come to you today from all different places in life. Some of us come from places of stillness and rest, some of us are feeling lonely and isolated, some of us are busy and hectic, and some of us are disappointed and sad. Come to us now, Holy Spirit, wherever we are, come to us in power and in truth, to illumine our minds and open our hearts. May we hear your word for us today. And may the words of my mouth, and the meditation of our hearts, be pleasing to you, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.*

Lent is a season in the life of the church that reminds us of who we really are. When we hear the familiar words on Ash Wednesday, “Remember, from dust you have come, and to dust you shall return,” and we see the ashen forehead, we are reminded that we are mortals. We are human beings, not God. In much of life, we are tempted to be more than human, to show no weakness, to model perfection and control in all our dealings. We are tempted not to act as human beings at all. As Lent reminds us that we are dust, and to dust we shall return, we are invited to be honest with ourselves. We are mortal, human, not Divine. Lent is not meant to frighten us, or to depress us, but to remind us who we are.<sup>1</sup>

Today, as we begin our journey through Lent, we also begin a series of sermons on the spiritual disciplines. These sermons, on both Sunday mornings and Wednesday evenings, will cover those disciplines listed in your bulletin. Spiritual disciplines create in us a particular spiritual posture. By practicing these disciplines, we become spiritually formed and more open to God’s grace. While this grace is always available to us, our form may prevent us from receiving much of it. A fist catches little water from a faucet, but an open hand may be filled.

Our examination of the spiritual disciplines begins with solitude. Now, solitude is simply undistracted time spent alone. By “undistracted,” I mean to exclude the time you spend alone while sitting in traffic on 95. I spend plenty of time in that situation, and—believe me—I usually don’t feel very open to God afterward. Solitude does not simply consist in being alone but in being alone without distractions so that you can attend to God.

Today’s gospel text from Matthew illustrates a time of genuine solitude for Jesus. Immediately after being baptized by John, Jesus is led by the Spirit into the desert to be alone. Since his baptism traditionally marks the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, the very first thing that God directs Jesus to do is...well, nothing! Jesus is commissioned to be alone. We might expect that God would

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<sup>1</sup> Taylor, Barbara Brown, "Remaining Human," *The Christian Century*, 1996.

have organized a lavish celebration to mark the debut of Jesus' ministry. Miracles and a crowd of important people would have guaranteed that Jesus got attention right from the start. Yet Matthew records that the Spirit led Jesus into the desert, where he could exercise no influence, nor be influenced, by others.

It is very clear in the text that Jesus gets divine direction to get away from others and to go out to be alone. Matthew says that the Spirit literally "sailed" Jesus from the Jordan River out to the desert. God is the one who leads Jesus into a place of solitude, hunger, thirst, and testing. This is a different kind of "spiritual leadership" than we may be familiar with. There are many reasons that God guided Jesus into the desert, but I will focus on the importance of Jesus being alone. By sending Jesus to a place of solitude, God isolated Jesus from those who occupy his family life, social life, commercial life, and religious life. Left to himself, Jesus was forced to confront two figures: himself and his God.

After leaving the desert, Jesus experienced three years activity marked by an increasing mob appeal. He was often pursued by crowds. When his life became hectic with dodging zealous fans and enemies alike, he retreated to practice the first mission God gave him: solitude. The gospels describe numerous occasions on which Jesus sought solitude: before choosing his disciples (Luke 6:12), after a long night of healings (Mark 1:35), after learning of John the Baptist's death (Matthew 14:13), after feeding the crowd of 5,000 (Matthew 14:23), and—most poignantly—before his arrest in garden

Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36-46). Retreating from others, being alone, taking time away, practicing solitude—this was a regular pattern in Jesus' life.

The discipline of solitude in the life of Jesus indicates the importance of spending time quietly and alone. Like Jesus, we may either elect to isolate ourselves, or we may find ourselves propelled by God into places of solitude. Let's first think about how God might lead us into solitude.

We might at times find ourselves cast into it like Jesus was led into the desert. God may intervene to ensure that we experience being alone in order that we might not entirely forget who we are and who God is. Blaise Pascal suggested that the most evident illustration of the unhappy state of humanity is that none of us can sit quietly alone in a room. Undistracted solitude can be scary because it forces us to confront ourselves and our relation to God. We may not make time to be alone because our lives are hectic, but more than that, we may fear meeting ourselves. It is to help us face such fears that God may grant us the terrible grace of solitude. Spiritual leadership may provide us the opportunity to sit quietly alone in a room and become reacquainted with ourselves and our God.

In contrast to being led into solitude, now let's consider how we might choose solitude on our own. The philosophers, sages, gurus, and mystics of all ages have sought solitude as the context for acquiring wisdom. The monastic movement within Christianity was begun by the so-called "desert fathers and mothers" who sought solitude in the wilderness of Palestine and Egypt. If

such people could see our culture, they would surely warn us of the dangers of neglecting solitude. Without it, they might inquire, how can you possibly attend to your soul or your God?

Perhaps the chief reason why we deny ourselves the very thing that our ancestors found most important is that we have filled up all our time with prior commitments. Finding time for solitude does not come easily. We live busy lives that are full of activity: family, education, work, philanthropy, entertainment. Seeking to maximize our productivity in every 24-hour period makes our lives feel rather hectic. Throughout the day, I usually find my to-do list shouting for my attention much more loudly than the still, small voice of God. There are great books to read, movies to watch, people to call, meals to eat, cars to drive, races to run, and deals to make. Though these are good in themselves, their cumulative effect on our lives may be to rob us of solitude. They crowd around us and create static in our life.

If there is any hope of spending undistracted time alone, then we will need to carve out space for this in our schedules. The demands of life naturally tend to fill in any unclaimed time. If we are going to practice the discipline of solitude, we'll have to consciously make it happen. Rather than making busyness a habit, pause on purpose. Develop a discipline of solitude. When we make this a habit, we open ourselves to carry with us, as Richard Foster says, a "portable sanctuary of the heart."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Foster, Richard. *Celebration of Discipline* (New York: Harper Collins, 1998), 108.

There was once a memorable little league game marked not by outstanding play but by a break in the action. In the bottom of the eighth inning, the score was tied and the best player for the home team was at bat. He stepped to the plate and sent the first pitch flying into the air. An outfielder chased the ball back to the fence and watched it sail over his head. He jumped the fence to retrieve the ball, but he did not quickly return. Both teams waited and waited to resume the game. Finally, the visiting team's coach ran to find the boy past the outfield fence. Beside a blackberry thicket lay the outfielder's mitt, and near the mitt was the ball, while the boy sat picking fruit. He had simply stepped away from the game, taken a personal "time-out" from the activity. Like him, we need to learn how to step away from the game.<sup>3</sup>

We can begin by taking advantage of the pockets of quiet in our day. Enjoy the time in the morning before anyone else wakes up. Or in the evening, slip outside to enjoy the silent night. Perhaps you will find a retreat center, a park or church that provides some needed silence. Set a yearly goal to step away from your life and evaluate your life goals. Step away, and find a new openness to receiving God's grace.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Lucado, Max. *Cure for the Common Life: Living in Your Sweet Spot*. (Nashville, W Publishing, 2005)