

Quiet Time

Mark 1:35-39

Discipleship Essentials - Part One: Growing Up in Christ

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Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

I think that it's quite ironic that of all the topics in this sermon series on discipleship, I get the one on "Quiet Time." Just in case you haven't heard me say it, let me tell you that my family crest is the Looney Tunes Tasmanian devil. I once had a screensaver in which Taz flew around the screen, destroying everything that wouldn't get out of his way. Quiet time? It's next to impossible to find any and it is absolutely necessary, if we're going to follow Jesus in the crowd of all those things trying to get our attention and our allegiance.

Let us pray: Gracious and patient Lord, you are willing to wait for us to slow down, so in this moment of quiet, may you have our attention. By the power of your Holy Spirit, may we hear only your voice and may your words shape and transform us in unimaginable ways and always in ways that point to you as our only Savior, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Right now, in the mainline churches there is an increased interest in the classical spiritual disciplines and practices. Many of you are gathering to read books like Richard Foster's *Celebration of Discipline* or his book on Prayer. Others of you are meeting regularly as you recover the ancient church practice of sacred reading or *lectio divina*. You have a sense that God is at work among you. I know this because you have told me that this is so, but I also know it because I see its effects in your lives.

And that's why we have the Brunch Bunch Qs in the bulletin. We want you to have at least some time each week where you have a chance to ponder your life in Christ. So, we encourage you to use these questions as the fodder for your table talk when you gather for your Sunday meal.

Now, many of us us, whether we are from the mainlines or other traditions, have had the concept of a Quiet Time stressed for most of our Christian life, especially if we've been involved in any kind of parachurch ministry. Greg Johnson, who works at the St. Louis Center for Christian study, has been told his entire Christian life that he must have this quiet time and he has struggled with it all his life. He comments that the church has taken a gracious invitation to quiet time and turned it into Quiet Time Guilt, with a capital "G". It's become another demand, obligation or work of the Christian life. He goes on to say that just as the Reformers gave us the concepts of *sola fides*, *sola scriptura*, *sola gratia* -- salvation by faith alone, scripture alone and grace alone, so other well-meaning folk gave us *sola bootstrapa*. Sure Christ saves you, but now pull yourself up by your bootstraps and get it right.

He may be overstating it, but for those of you who struggle with consistent spiritual disciplines, Greg Johnson lets you know that you are not alone. What we want and need is quiet time. What we more often get is Quiet Time Guilt. I have been on the receiving end of it and I have been on the giving end of it.

We've been encouraged to spend time in prayer because one of the Church Fathers ((it's not clear just exactly who) said, "I have so much to do today that I can't afford to spend less than three hours in prayer." That prayer time in the car on the way to work seems puny in comparison. So, maybe it's time to get to the scripture for today and see what Jesus can teach us about this.

Just exactly how does Jesus handle the whole concept of quiet time? Well, in the Gospel of Mark, it's pretty tough go. Let's hear that again: In the morning while it was still very dark, Jesus got up and went out to a deserted place and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him they said, "Everyone is looking for you." He answered, "Let us go so that I may proclaim the message, for that is why I came." (Mark 1: 35ff)

This is one of very few instances in this gospel where we see Jesus alone and in prayer. This is the first instance and you really need to understand the kind of schedule Jesus has had. Last week, I actually went through the first ten chapters of Mark and tried to format Jesus' schedule on a two- page-per week Day Timer®. This man was busy and his schedule was crowded. Even his meals, when he got to them, were working meals. For example, before and after Jesus has that early morning prayer time, here's what his calendar looked like:

Get baptized, fight temptations in the wilderness, preach, call some disciples, teach, cast out a demon, heal Peter's mother-in-law, cure the whole town of Capernaum. Then...go to mountain to pray. Prayer time cut short, start preaching tour, heal leper, heal paralytic while his friends destroy a roof, call another disciple, have a dinner debate, teach some more, heal on the Sabbath, try to get away with the disciples...oops that's not going to work, the crowds are here again.

We get the sense that life and people were constantly crowding around Jesus. His time was not his own. But that was the point. His time belonged not to him, but to the One who sent him. I think that the time he had that morning, however long or short it was, was enough. Jesus doesn't gripe at the interruption. He moves on with a great sense of purpose...he says, "Let's go. This is what I'm here for." From now until chapter 10, Jesus will try to get away three times and all three times he is thwarted. Only once, in chapter 6, do we find him off in prayer. And he had to climb a mountain to have that time.

We know from our reading of the other gospels that Jesus made it a priority to have some solitude for prayer, but Mark informs us that it was a struggle and sometimes it didn't happen. Mark is the gospel for our city. We can look at Jesus' schedule and understand the pressure. Even more, we know that Jesus understands our schedules and work loads. As the hymn says, "Jesus knows our every weakness."

I was having a conversation with our son, who had noticed that my schedule was pretty full. He instructed me that I needed to take some time off. I was working on this sermon, so I pretty smugly brought up this whole matter of Jesus' schedule and the rare amount of 'down time' he had. He listened, paused for a moment and then said, "Mom, I hate to be the one to point this out to you, but you're not the Divine One in this story."

That made me stop and think. Is Jesus the one who is the model for us in Mark's gospel? He certainly is in the passage we read, but when you read the whole gospel in one sitting (and you can do that quite easily) you realize how incessantly the crowds seek Jesus. They are always looking for him. So, I think that the crowds as well as Jesus instruct us on what it means to spend time with God and to desire to be with the Lord.

Now, I am going to make a very radical suggestion and I want you to listen carefully. The scripture nowhere commands us to have a designated quiet time of bible study each day. It's a good idea. I recommend it, but it is not a commandment. There. I've said it. But lest you think that you're off the hook, I need to tell you what it does require. Throughout the Old Testament, we are told to meditate on the Law of the Lord both day and night. Feel better?

How does a 24/7 commandment make things better than half an hour or so a day? The primary thing it does is to take it out of a compartmentalized block of time, where you can just check it off a to-do list. The word of God is present with you every moment of the day.

Meditate on it day and night? Just what does that mean? It means to ponder it, chew on it, ask questions of it, and be delighted by it. When it confuses you, you say so and talk about it with others. When it brings you joy, you share that with others. Simcha Torah is a Jewish celebration when the congregation dances around celebrating the completion of another year of reading through the Torah. They take delight in the presence of God's Word among them. One teen wrote in her blog that this was her favorite service of the year because it was the only time the adults didn't look bored.

The book of Deuteronomy tells us what meditating looks like. This refers to parents and children, but the important thing to remember is that this takes place in a community. It may be family, but it can be friends who share your desire to take delight in the word of God. Hear what it says from Eugene's

Peterson's paraphrase, The Message:

Write these commandments that I've given you today on your hearts. Get them inside of you and then get them inside your children. Talk about them wherever you are, sitting at home or walking in the street; talk about them from the time you get up in the morning to when you fall into bed at night. Tie them on your hands and foreheads as a reminder; inscribe them on the doorposts of your homes and on your city gates. (Deuteronomy 6:6-9)

This is meditating in community, but what we see in Deuteronomy and how we try to live that out doesn't sound quiet does it? Let's paraphrase that passage (hmmm, a paraphrase of a paraphrase... pretty dangerous):

Make sure the scriptures become a part of who you are. Talk about what you're learning about God all the time...when you're riding on the Metro, sitting at Starbucks, or eating lunch in the Union Station food court. Put verses all over the place with post-it notes...stick 'em on your mirrors and your dashboard.

That's not quiet, but you know what? This kind of active meditating can indeed lead to a quieting of your heart and soul, so that no matter what the pace of your life is, you are at peace. Jesus spent quiet time with his Father, whenever he could. He walked and talked with his disciples as they meditated on the scriptures. And when he was the center of brute and chaotic injustice, he was the only island of calm in the storm.

I have struggled with the concept of quiet time myself. I don't have trouble spending time in the scriptures on a daily basis...I love it. But those times are not what I would call 'quiet.' Quiet bothers me. In fact, I think it's deafeningly silent if only one media source is on in the house. There's a great line in the Manchurian Candidate, where a newlywed tells his bride who has just turned on the television at the breakfast table: "I have found that there are two irreconcilable groups of people in the world: those who turn on the television when they enter the room and those who turn it off. They usually marry each other."

But, we will never hear the voice of the Lord speaking to us through his word if we don't turn off those distractions. When we were living in Colorado, I served as a leader for a Young Life wilderness trek. We took about six kids into the Wimenuche wilderness area of south central Colorado. Part of the deal was that we had to spend 24 hours on a solo experience with just a sleeping bag and water. Oh, I forgot to tell you about the fasting part. I got to my little part of the forest and was just plain jittery about the quiet. No one to talk with, no media for entertainment or distraction. Just me and the trees.

So, I did what I always tend to do – I tried to manage my surroundings to my liking. I rearranged my little section of the San Juan Mountains. It was pretty cool. By moving deadwood and rocks, I had a little living room and a bedroom. But at some point it was just me, and my Bible, and God. And the quiet. It was in that still moment that God was able to break through my frenzy and speak to my heart with some transforming clarity. That clarity came in the form of a quote from the French theologian and sociologist Jacques Ellul: the frenzy of our lives is a measure of our alienation from God. That's a pretty serious and sobering thought, isn't it? On some level I was busy thinking that I could not enter God's presence unless I had earned it through all my ministry activity. But, as a dear friend reminded me last week, "God is more interested in our morning prayer than in our evening report card."

Last week we sang the old traditional hymn Dear Lord and Father of Mankind. The entire hymn is a sung prayer, asking God to be present in our lives in ways that make a difference. Its words and its tune are gentle and serene, a distinct contrast to the way most of our lives unfold. Anyway, one of the verses says this: "Let sense be dumb; let flesh retire; speak through the earthquake, wind and fire, O still, small voice of calm."

Can God really do that? Is it possible for us to hear him in the earthquake...when things in our life just won't stay still long enough to get a handle on them? Is it possible to hear him in the wind, when life seems to always blow the things we're chasing always just out of reach? Is it possible to hear him in the fire, when our lives seem to be going up in smoke?

Can we hear him then? I certainly hope so. Our ears hurt from the noise of life. We need to hear the reassuring and gracious voice of our Savior so that we know who we are and where we are going. Like Jesus, we need to move in the direction of time with Lord, so that our work does not descend into a frenzy emptied of God's presence. Like Jesus, we want the first voice we hear each day to be that of the One who made us, saying, "You are my beloved." And he's just waiting for us to be quiet enough so that we can hear him say it. Amen.