

**Proper 11Bi - July 19, 2015**  
**2 Samuel 7:1-14a; Psalm 89:20-37; Ephesians 2:11-22; Mark 6:30-34, 53-56**  
**By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean**

**From Loneliness to Solitude and Community**

In today's gospel Jesus says to his busy and harried disciples, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.' For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat" (Mark 6:31). For me as an active person whose inclination has been to stay on the go and generally to feel my spiritual center in the midst of the active life, the Quaker educator and writer Parker Palmer helped confirm for me that, regrettably, in a lot of spiritual literature, the world of action is often

"portrayed as an arena of ego and power, while the world of contemplation is pictured as a realm of light and grace. [We] often read, for example, that the treasure of [our] true self can be found as we draw back from our active lives and enter into contemplative prayer. [Far] less often have [we] read that this treasure can be found in [the very midst of] our struggles [of work, creativity, and compassion in the world of action. A number of] contemporary images of what it means to be spiritual tend to value the inward search over the outward act, silence over sound, solitude over interaction; centered-ness and quietude and balance over engagement and animation and struggle. If one is called to monastic life, those images can be empowering. But if one is called to [action in work, creativity, and caring in an active world, these] same images [of spirituality] can disenfranchise [our souls, because] they tend to devalue the energies of [an] active life rather than encourage us to move with those energies toward wholeness."<sup>ii</sup>

In addition, I've also been one who is more transient than settled, and have been drawn to life in the city more than to quieter and less congested environments. We are the most mobile society in human history. The average American moves twelve times in their lifetime. That mobility, along with other factors, has deprived many people of a sense of belonging, a sense of rootedness. Many live in a kind of collective loneliness, being near to a lot of other people but feeling so lonely. We often don't know our immediate neighbors. Sometimes we don't know anyone in the whole neighborhood or city. At the same time, many are living in a forced isolation—the individual or small family whose parents, siblings or grandparents are many miles away; the single/divorced parent who must work and raise children, or attend to their homebound parent; the commuter stuck in a car or train every day; the parent(s) or grandparent(s) whose kids are gone and lead their own lives; the widowed person facing such loss; and those shut-in at home or in nursing homes. It is so easy to feel lonely these days, and to feel deprived of a sense of belonging or of being wanted. It's so easy to be close to other people physically, such as in a shopping center, or in busy traffic or a full train, or even in church, but to feel so separated off from others spiritually and personally.

We can often feel even lonelier and isolated when we try to fill up the empty feelings by listening to a lot of noise or by working at many activities. Unfortunately, what often happens is that when the music or work or pursuit slackens for a little while, sharp pangs of intense loneliness and even depression set in. We each came into this world alone and we will leave this world in a solitary way. We share this vulnerability with every human being and with all creatures, even with the earth itself, and thus have much in common with every other person and living thing. Yet, as early as the second chapter of Genesis (2:18) we read, “Then the Lord God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone.’” Loneliness is an enemy of hope, an enemy of God: “the first thing which God’s eye nam’d not good,” as the poet John Milton said of it.<sup>iii</sup> And even so-called fulfilled people occasionally experience the painful loneliness of the emptiness deep down in their lives. And this emptiness is not just nothing—it is a nothing that aches to be filled, to be connected and to communicate—and most people manage, more or less, for much of their lives to satisfy this urgent desire and need by work, amusement, family, friendships, marriage, religious and other community life. And yet, our center-piece, our God-space, in each of us is incapable of being filled completely except by God. It’s so easy to be lonely.<sup>iv</sup>

The good news is that loneliness can be changed into a marvelous reality called solitude *and* an equally important one called community. First, *solitude*. Solitude is a way to just relax without the press of constant action and expectations—our own and others’. It’s a time to darn our socks or write a letter—yes, the handwritten kind!—or just settle down. It is also a way to reflect, and to meditate or contemplate. If all we do is go from one activity to another without reflecting or centering ourselves in God or the “big picture,” our activities and experiences lose their meaning and our lives feel scattered and unhinged. Solitude is also a time to struggle, a time to confront the cynicism or fear or guilt that drives us into deeper loneliness. Solitude is also a time for setting priorities of value and for choices of action which can turn the curses of collective loneliness and forced isolation into blessings. And solitude is a time for encountering God who offers himself as the substance of the new self that we seek to become. Solitude as a spiritual discipline seeks to have our behavior shaped by a new mind, the mind of Christ. Solitude is thus a time for refreshment and reflection, for purification and transformation, for struggle and encounter. As Frank Bruni put it, “It’s in solitude that much of the sharpest thinking is done and many of the best ideas are hatched.”<sup>v</sup> It is even a time for adoration, a time to renew our wonder at the beauty of nature, a time to adore God and the life he has given us. When we can disconnect with the hyper-connectedness of our digital and overstimulated lives, we can discover that *alone* we have resources; and alone, books, food, music, weather, the bird singing nearby, can take on a sharper edge, as it were—a quality, a godly presence that otherwise goes unnoticed when we are with others, electronically or face-to-face. Reading from Scripture or some other book (and I’d be happy to suggest a few) can take an unfilled half an hour, and can fill the room and your heart with an expectancy wherein you can then become more able to live openly and even intensely in the midst of the miracle of this active life. A new gratitude for little things may then be released—a gratitude that has an echo and a home in the hollow of your life. But that isn’t all.

Solitude isn't just a time for self, or self with God. Solitude is also a time for renewing the quality of the heart, a time to discover the "non-individual elements" of which we are made, a time to move closer to people. Solitude renews compassion, love and sharing as fundamental values. And these values lead us closer to *community*. Solitude is a renewing dimension of being in community. It is interesting that Jesus has his disciples seek out a place of solitude, in essence to ditch and silence the crowds that kept coming to them. Yet, soon crowds of people gather again around them. In the verses that follow our text today, when the disciples see the crowds they want to have them go away so that they could get the fuller solitude they were seeking. Instead Jesus has them organize the crowd to be able to feed the 5000 or so who had gathered, as a natural consequence of their time of solitude. Solitude and community are the related redeeming movements which lead people out of loneliness. Loneliness can be transformed into solitude and genuine community where your deepest sense of self can be discovered in relationship to and in service with others and yourself. To discover this is to begin to turn loneliness into community and solitude—to turn a curse into a blessing.

Listen to the Jewish writer, Eliezer Shore describe this:

"The greatness of community is that it provides a person with a context for his life. Before we can know G-d, we must come to know ourselves. Without a sense of identity, a person cannot be whole; *it is community that provides man with his name*. Social relationships, responsibilities, larger values, all help us know who we are. In an ideal community, each person's place would be so clearly defined as to make him indispensable. This engenders a sort of *horizontal growth*, as our lives touch and are touched by many others, and it fosters in us a greater compassion and awareness of the human condition. In Judaism, we find the ultimate curse to be that of exile, the dispersion of community, the loss of one's place.

[Along with community]...*solitude speaks to the part of us that has no name* [or role], that wants to break free of the limitations imposed upon us by the thoughts and expectations of others. Solitude holds the promise of such complete [relationship with,] and commitment to G-d—such [necessary] *vertical growth*... 'Abraham was one,' says the verse ([from] Ezekiel 33:24). Like our father Abraham, a person who [truly] wants [to be one with] G-d must [also] learn to be one and alone"<sup>vi</sup>

There is one final thing to say about being alone. A friend of mine once said to me, "You know something, Kevin—there is a big difference between you and me. I'm an atheist and when I'm alone, I'm totally alone, because there is no God with me. But you're a Christian and you are never alone, because you believe that your God or Christ is with you always." I've thought about that a lot. What he said sounded true enough and yet I found myself falling far short of the experience that somehow Christ is always with me and that I'm never totally alone. But every now and then I do experience that presence, which gives me the foundation for both solitude and community. Christ's presence gives the assurance that loneliness can be transformed into a sense of belonging and of purpose by means of solitude and community. His presence doesn't dry all our tears, nor does it relieve all the pangs of loss, nor does it take away the outward fact of being in a

strange place or homebound situation. His presence, however, does enable us to bear witness to a heart-searching awareness of the crying needs of a lonely world. The gift of solitude allows us to share that awareness with ourselves and God; and the gift of community allows us to share it with each other. In both we are enabled to acquire a deeper capacity for communication and communion with one's self, God and others. And through this capacity, loneliness ceases to have its fearful inward-pulling power no matter what situation we find ourselves in.

On this last point, one of the most powerful things I say in our public liturgy of Holy Baptism happens just after each person's baptism when I press anointed oil on my thumb and with that make the sign of the cross on the forehead of the baptized and say, "You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own forever."<sup>vii</sup> That part of the service, called the Chrism, sets forth an invisible seal of identity—of being "marked as Christ's own forever."<sup>viii</sup> This Chrism is not some sort of magic talisman that will protect the baptized from all harm, or that it is some secret pass to all the privileges of belonging to some select club or group of the "chosen ones." Rather, it does mean that we are *never totally alone* no matter where we find ourselves—and so it means we *never have to go it alone*. This helps us on our journey from loneliness to solitude and community. It means we are forever in Christ and with Christ, understanding again that if we belong to Christ, we belong to no one and nothing else; and yet, if we belong to Christ, then we belong to everyone else in the church and the human family and God's creation.

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<sup>i</sup> See Henri Nouwen, Out of Solitude (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1974); Henri Nouwen, "Moving from Solitude to Community to Ministry" in *Leadership Journal*, Spring 1995; Roland Walls, From Loneliness to Solitude (Oxford: Fairacres Publications, No. 54, 1976); Susan Cain, Quiet (New York: Crown Publishers/Random House, 2012).

<sup>ii</sup> Parker J. Palmer, The Active Life (HarperSanFrancisco, 1990), p. 2.

<sup>iii</sup> Quoted in John Milton, "Tetrachordon" (1645). The lonely person is one who strives alone with limited and dwindling resources for the fight against emptiness, meaninglessness and despondency. Loneliness is an acute way of experiencing the basic human condition. We are all fundamentally lonely because we are made for infinite possibility: we are literally made for someone, made for God and for each other. As writers such as Thich Nhat Hanh point out, here are "non-individual elements," as it were, that we are made of, that can only become whole in relationship to God and others (Thich Nhat Hanh, Being Peace (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1987), p. 47). Having said that we are built round an empty space—a "God space" if you will—which much of the time we think we can fill with all sorts of people, pursuits and things.

<sup>iv</sup> And it is so difficult to be alone. We often equate being alone with loneliness. We fear being alone. We do not know how to creatively be alone. There are so many distractions in our lives and so much bumping up against other people that prevent us from being alone. Yet, it is precisely in allowing ourselves to have some time alone, some time to reflect and relax, some time to experience the sounds of nature and of silence, that we can overcome some of the sharp pangs of loneliness.

<sup>v</sup> Frank Bruni, "A Quiet Cheer for Solitude" in *The New York Times* (June 10, 2014), p. A25.

<sup>vi</sup> Eliezer Shore, from "The Soul of Community" in *Parabola* magazine, Spring, 1992

<sup>vii</sup> The Book of Common Prayer (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1977), p. 308.

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<sup>viii</sup> Not too dissimilar as the mark of Cain (Genesis 4:15), or the mark of the ashes on our foreheads on Ash Wednesday.