



# SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

July 30, 2017

"Soulful Solitude" - How to Pray Sermon Series

The Rev. Steve Peich

**H**ow many of you have ever gotten into the shower and been so distracted by your thoughts, or by the latest deadline, or the latest argument with someone and ask yourself, "Did I shampoo my hair yet?" I do this all the time. I get so distracted I'm not even noticing what just happened seconds ago!

How many of us go through life in a similar vein, like when we drive home from work and we suddenly become aware of how far we traveled. I'm in Moanalua already? What happened to Kalihi?

Some of us live life on automatic pilot, going through life not noticing or being attentive to a whole lot of the deeper things going on in our lives—to the deeper things that are going on throughout our day, or week, or around the world.

When we simply live in the routine and pain of our lives without disrupting that routine, without taking deliberate steps to be God-centered, God-attentive, God-responsive...we can end up forgetting that we are on the greatest adventure for the greatest good with the Almighty God.

In other words, we can end up forgetting who we truly are and what we really exist for. We can end up being blind to and unaffected by the profound beauty

and blessings that constantly surround us and meet us each day. Or perhaps worse, we end up choosing pathways that are destructive to our lives and to those around us because we are distracted and preoccupied.

Today we are continuing our series on prayer. Last week we looked at prayer and the spiritual practice of Silence. Today I'm going to focus in on its important sibling, Solitude.

As Dallas Willard comments, "Without silence solitude has little effect... and solitude is needed to make the discipline of silence complete." They are disciplines deeply related to each other.

For a lot of folks solitude is not easy. In 2014, there were a couple of studies looking at how unbearable it is for people to be alone with their thoughts in solitude. In one study people were told to be with their own thoughts e.g. reflecting on something meaningful, for 15 minutes.

If they found thinking and reflecting difficult, the subject could press a button to give themselves a small electrical shock. You would think, who would give themselves a shock? Well, in the end, 67% of the men gave themselves a shock at least once. One guy did it 190 times!

(25% of the women shocked themselves). But my question is, "Why in the world would we shock ourselves at all?"

The researchers' conclusion? Most people seem to prefer to be doing something rather than nothing, *even if* that something is *negative*. We would rather have the experience of something negative than feel like we are not doing anything at all. As I said, being alone in deep thought is not always easy.

By way of review, and so it can help frame our talk today, let me remind us the purpose of spiritual disciplines like solitude.

Here's how I define spiritual disciplines: Spiritual disciplines are those spiritual exercises that we engage in to give God the space, time, and attentiveness to make us more like Jesus and to create a greater intimacy with Him. They are means by which we participate with God in order to be changed by God.

Remember there is nothing magical about spiritual disciplines. The act doesn't in and of itself make you ipso facto like Jesus. Only Jesus can make you like Jesus. Spiritual disciplines simply create the conditions in which change is possible.

**T**he discipline of Soulful Solitude is no different. In fact, it is crucial to our walk as Christians because life often seems to be filled with ever-increasing demands, with an ever-increasing pace, and ever-increasing distractions.

If we just “let life happen” it can squeeze out space, cut out time, and dull our attentiveness to God and to His passions, purposes, values, and direction for our lives.

As spiritual writer Henri Nouwen put it, “Discipline simply means to prevent everything in your life from being filled up. Discipline means that somewhere you are not occupied, and certainly not preoccupied.” Anyone wrestling with an occupied life or a preoccupied mind?

Sometimes what “occupies and preoccupies” are not bad things. In fact, they can be genuinely good things: Working a job, taking care of the kids, spending time with friends, playing sports, etc. all kinds of good things. But sometimes even in doing many good things we can be slowly preoccupied *away from* God’s passions, purposes, values, and direction for us.

I don’t know about you but my days are pretty packed and that’s even with trying to live with good boundaries! If I am not careful my cluttered days make for a distracted mind and a disoriented soul. I don’t like living there because of the result.

As John Ortberg comments, “When you’re in this condition (of being hurried and preoccupied) you find that you’re not becoming the kind of person that you long to become... You’re not enjoying life and relationships and work the way you know you could.” Anyone been there?

This is where in looking to Jesus we find this amazing example of how we can carry on our work and profession and ministry we are given to do in this world without getting preoccupied, distracted, and drained.

Take a look at Jesus in Luke 5. At this point in His ministry Jesus is healing people of all kinds of diseases. And people are hanging on every word He’s teaching. People are just flocking to Him.

And then it says this Luke 5:15-16: “Yet the news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. But Jesus *often withdrew* to deserted places and prayed.”

First of all, talk about your pressing needs! On your worst day you probably haven’t experienced this much “pressing need” with crowds flocking to you to learn and be healed. Who of us has a mob of people outside our office door earnestly pleading, “Teach me something! Heal me!” So, think of the pressing needs coming at Jesus.

Think about this for a minute. Here you have Jesus starting a new movement to save and heal the very people who are flocking to see Him. *But* instead of working like crazy to keep helping them, He frequently practices the soulful habit of withdrawing *from those very people* into solitude and prayer. It seems so counterintuitive to why He came.

I point this out because solitude is not *kind of* necessary, but it is a necessary, even vital, practice for the Christian because crowds are always present in our lives. Crowds of needs, crowds of

decisions, crowds of requests, crowds of demands, crowds of choices, opportunities, voices, agendas, *Crowds!!!* Anyone know what I’m talking about?

The reality is this: “Crowds” will always be a part of our life. You may never be able to stop that. So this is why we need to *regularly* infuse our lives with spiritual disciplines like Solitude, Silence, and Prayer.

Think about it, God Incarnate *needed* solitude. For Him it wasn’t a *bonus* to life. It was *basic* to His existence, to living an impactful life. It was the basic response to pressing needs. Is this your response to pressing needs? Or is it to simply to get busier? What happens to us if it is not at least one of our responses?

When God and His passions, purposes, values, and intentions get “crowded” out of our hours our days, our weeks, our months, even our years we may eventually slide into a slow and subtle deterioration of our souls and relationships.

After working with people for decades I would venture to say most often the damage to our lives in our relationship with God or with other people, the damage to our spiritual vitality, finances, sex life, etc., does *not* commonly occur as some sudden and steep drop off into the abyss of catastrophe.

The deterioration of the soul, heart, life, and relationships comes in much smaller steps. And this is in part why solitude is one of those things that we have to return to *regularly*—so that we can notice and heal the deterioration before it becomes catastrophic.

**S**olitude is to soulful and relational health like jogging is to physical health. You don't just jog once and then you're good for the year. There needs to be regularity to your jogging in order to experience a truly healthy life. One-time jogging will never get you in shape because your body is constantly experiencing things that make jogging necessary *again!* As every day and week go by your body falls off a bit off from the last time you jogged. So you need to jog *again*.

So too, with your heart, mind, and soul. They are constantly experiencing things that make solitude and silence necessary *again*. After all how long does it take before you become distracted again? Or become super busy again? Or hurried again? Or overwhelmed again?

The bottom line is, Jesus was a busy guy but Christ had a rhythm to His life. There was much action in His life, but there was often solitude even in the face of the needs and desires of the people whom he loved. Think about that for a second. Even His love for people and His passion for His mission did not deter Jesus from taking time away from those very people.

Spiritual health is not in choosing the solitude over action but integrating one with the other on a regular basis. As one person put it years ago, "If you don't come apart for a while you will come apart in a while." (Vance Havner)

So what is it that we do and seek when we "come apart for a while"? What goes on in the solitude I'm talking about?

Like last week, let me share some things which it is *not*. Much of what I'm saying is based on scripture and from reading about

the ancient Christian mystics and monks.

What I mean by solitude is not taking a break in life, or just taking a breather, or getting some me time, or even recharging your batteries so you can go back into the rat race and continue to try to win it. As Christian writer Richard Foster puts it, "In time we find that solitude gives us power not to win the rat race, but to ignore that rat race altogether."

This is why I say it is not a break or a breather. It's about transformation of life. Rest will happen, but it is more an outcome than a goal. Rest is the natural outcome of simply breathing slowly. It is the natural outcome of simply being away from many demands of life or from being preoccupied. It is the natural outcome of not feeling like you are performing at a job.

So the sense of rest and de-stressing will happen in solitude, which is great. But for me *the point* of solitude, not simply its outcome, is to give God the space, time, and attentiveness to be changed by Him and to become more intimate with Him.

Let me put it this way, solitude is a place where the compulsions of the world cease to shape us and where the Holy Spirit forms in us the mind of Christ and transforms us into His image.

In solitude we slowly find ourselves letting go of inner compulsions to be perfectionists, or to strike out against someone who hurt us, or to let go of inner compulsions to look more youthful than we are, or to attain more unnecessary wealth or status.

In solitude, what we do is to

take time to *Reconsider* our whole way of living. We take a long, loving look at the reality of the condition of our life. We also *Rethink* the identity and the world we have created outside of God's values, purposes, and plans. We then take what we see and *Realign* all the aspects of our life with the reality of the Kingdom of God.

In other words, we *Realign* and *Refocus* our lives to be more in line with God's values and visions, His purposes, and passions, His plans and perspectives on our world. In solitude we work on *Rebuilding* our identity and rebuilding our world with Jesus' vision for life.

To put it succinctly, in solitude we reconsider and rethink and realign and rebuild *everything* on the basis of Jesus.

Followers of God have been doing this kind of thing for millennia. Listen to one Psalm written hundreds of years before Christ. Psalm 119:59 says this, "I pondered the direction of my life, and I returned to follow your laws." The word, "ponder" here, means to take account of something; to determine the value of something.

Have you ever met folks who never seem to "take account" of their life—who never ponder deeply about the person they are, the person they are becoming, or the person they are to others?

Ever been around folks who for decades never ponder how controlling they are? Or how driven they are? Or how angry they are? Or how anxious and conflict avoidant they are? Do you see those folks around you? Do you see such a person when you look in the mirror?

As Dallas Willard says, “In solitude we confront our own soul with its obscure forces and conflicts that escape our attention when we are interacting with others.” Notice there is confrontation of *obscure* forces and conflicts, soulful conflicts that most often “escape our attention.”

When we don’t make focused and attentive time for experiencing God in this way then the harmful things in our life often gets obscured and starts to feel normal. And here is something very important to understand: Whatever remains obscure *to* us remains influential *in* us and leaks *out from* us to others.

I know sometimes when I counsel and disciple people I may ask them, “Why do you think you reacted like that? Or, why did you blow up like that? Why did you search for pornography on your computer again?” And if I can be honest, far too often I am met with “I don’t know.” In other words, “My motivations and reasons for what I do are obscure to me.”

Now if the stakes are high at this point in the person’s life I may graciously but firmly say, “My brother, ‘I don’t know’ will no longer do. Its time to know exactly why you are doing what you are doing.”

It’s time we confront our own soul “with its obscure forces and conflicts that escape our attention.”

Do I do that to nail people? To embarrass them? No, I do it because their “I don’t knows” are destroying their souls and their relationships, and it would be nearly immoral of me as a brother in Christ to ignore that.

Folks, one of the reasons why solitude is vital is because “I don’t

know” can be awfully destructive to our lives. I remember how early in my marriage I would sometimes blow up at my wife if she said some things a certain way. If you heard what she said you would think it pretty innocuous. But I took it as something deeply cutting so I would overreact.

So I took this problem into solitude and prayer and “pondered deeply” at it. I didn’t go into solitude asking God to get my wife to stop talking to me that way. But in this time I realized that there were certain phrases that were deeply associated with how my mother put me down or shamed me as a kid growing up. So my wife’s requests or critiques that were given in a similar way created the feeling of shame in me that I had as a kid. Once I realized that we were able to overcome a major hurdle and things really changed between us.

The reality is many, if not all of us, carry around deep soulful wounds, profound insecurities, and ego-driven ambitions. This is simply a part of what it means to be human. But when these things are *not attended to* by means of prayer, silence, solitude, reflection and biblical meditation, then we leave ourselves vulnerable to pursuing hurtful and unholy paths.

As you have heard me say before, we can’t fix what we don’t face; we can’t overcome what we overlook. So we need to go into solitude and look.

Straight up, if we don’t face things then everyone around us ends up wearing all the things we won’t face. They end up wearing all our anger, the insecurities, the lack of boundaries, the sarcasm, etc.

So again, we go into solitude to look at our lives with a gracious, but strenuous honesty. Not a brutal honesty, honesty never needs to be brutal, but one that only wants to see what is real. You see, the only place we can afford to live is in reality, not in denial or minimizing excusing or blaming others—just reality.

I want to make this very clear: what I’m talking about is by no means an exercise in self-flagellation. It’s an exercise of strenuous honesty and openness to the Holy Spirit.

Think of it like checking your oil in your car. Why do you check your oil? You check it because you want to care for your car and for it to run well. So if you open your hood and check the dipstick, and you find your car lacks some oil, what do you do? Do you go and take a sledgehammer to it, smashing it and saying things like, “You lousy, stinking car! Why are you low on oil?!”

No one does that just because it is low on oil. Instead, you joyfully supply what it is missing so it can run well. The same is true about solitude. You don’t bring your sledgehammer to what you may find “low” or missing in your life. No one has ever beaten themselves up into greater intimacy with God.

You see, the truest thing about you is not all your shortcomings, and struggles and sin, etc. The truest thing about you is that you are a child of God, loved with an unbreakable love, and created for a divine purpose.

Whatever you discover in solitude, whatever you find is a bit “low”, can never take away even one ounce of those truths from you.

**S**o before we finish, let me share a sample experience of solitude. This is by no means a prescription—just a description of one man.

**1. Start small and take advantage of the little solitudes in your day.** For example, driving to work; the time before you walk up the kids; the time when you are preparing dinner. Once a week, eat lunch in some quiet place alone, etc. If you move toward more extended periods of time, just start with one or two hours. Don't try to be Benedictine Monk in your first week. Pace yourself.

**2. If you are married, inform your spouse.** Don't just unilaterally decide to take time away from home. Moreover, plan to give them a day of solitude as well. My wife and I did this while our kids were young and it really helped a lot.

By the way, schedule it and guard it. As John Ortberg put it, "Days for solitude don't volunteer. They have to be drafted." When it comes to something like solitude time is made, not found.

**3. Find a place where you experience peace.** It could be a mountain, on the beach, a park, a back patio, etc. It's really crucial to have a place where you can feel at peace.

**4. Related to this, do something that gives you joy.** I often walk or run to begin my solitude to build up the endorphins in my brain and to experience real joy. I love to be outside exercising. It brings me great joy. So start with some reflection or activity that brings you delight. This usually leads me to spend the first part of prayer in thanksgiving and counting all the blessings I have in my life. I feel so alive.

**5. Spend time in silence and stillness.** Utilize the "How To's" of silence from last week. For example, slowly breathing, etc.

**6. Get your soul attentive to life all around you.** In solitude, we are seeking to be a soul fully awake. So try to see and listen to things you don't normally see or hear because you are too preoccupied to do so. Stop and notice something tremendous (e.g. like the Ko'olau mountains).

Notice something really small and beautiful (e.g. a tiny fish in a very small tide pool or the color of one particular flower or leaf or log or stone, etc.) Try to listen to all that is going on around you. Hear even the crunch of the pebbles under a person's steps. The distant bark of a dog the chirp of a bird. The sound of leaves rustling in the wind. Feel the movement of your clothes or the breeze on your face. Be fully alive. Be a soul fully awake.

**7. Spend time with some scripture.** Perhaps try meditating on scripture and then journaling your thoughts. Remember, this this is not a time for study, but for simply absorbing God's particular word to *you*. When we use the Word of God we are not trying to get at something, per se, but we are trying to let Someone get *through* to us.

If you are having trouble getting things started, you can try and pray Psalm 139:23-24: *"Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any hurtful way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."*

So remember, in solitude we reconsider and rethink and realign and rebuild *everything* on the basis of Jesus.

By the way, and this is important, don't get anxious if "nothing is happening." This is not about trying to spiritually perform. It's not like God is going to pull out a score card and say, "Well, I give that a six because you were starting to get sleepy while meditating." God is there to walk with you, not to grade you.

Think of it like this. Christian psychologist Larry Crabb once asked spiritual writer Brennan Manning, who was going on a long retreat of solitude, "What do you hope to get out of it?"

Manning answered, "I'm not sure I have looked at it that way. I just figured my Father likes it when I show up." And He does. So just show up and see what He does in you.

+ + + + + + + + +

*Note: Sunday sermon texts are also available at [fpchawaii.org](http://fpchawaii.org) The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes. You may also request the audio version by visiting: [fpchkoolau@gmail.com](mailto:fpchkoolau@gmail.com)*