

Soul Care | *Spiritual Basics for Hungry People* Week 10 – Approaching Shared Experience: ...*With Community*

“It is easily forgotten that the fellowship of Christian brethren is a gift of grace, a gift of the kingdom of God that any day may be taken from us, that the time that still separates us from utter loneliness may be brief indeed.” - Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*



Corporate Reading and Prayer

Psalm 100:1-5 (NIV) – *A Responsive Reading:*

¹ Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth.

² **Worship the LORD with gladness;**
come before him with joyful songs.

³ Know that the LORD is God.

It is he who made us, and we are his;
we are his people, the sheep of his pasture.

⁴ Enter his gates with thanksgiving
and his courts with praise;
give thanks to him and praise his name.

⁵ For the LORD is good and his love endures forever;
his faithfulness continues through all generations.

Silent Prayer:

Withdrawal and Engagement

The withdrawal that we discussed last week is complimented and strengthened by the practice of engagement. We are sometimes consumed by our introverted, self-protective, individualized faith. We are persuaded that the Christian life is a personal activity, that “my faith is really my business and a personal matter”, rather than a corporate or communal endeavor. This individualized approach is highly damaging to the church and to the individual.

There are a few reasons why 21st Century Christians are not so good at the engagement with the church community:

1. *Pollution.* Many in the past have viewed engagement with others as polluting. The true follower or really devoted follower of Christ should pull away from community, withdrawing into the desert away from other men and women. Stoics, ascetics and others withdrew to avoid the persecutions in the church, as well as to reject the things of this world practicing rigorous self-discipline.
2. *Hypocrites.* In other realms we see the individual pulling away from the church because of hypocrites and because the worship style sucks and the preaching is lame. Satan does well to cultivate dissatisfaction with the Church, with members of the Church. If Satan can convince us, or leaving us to our own vices, be irritated by the church and its members, we will inevitably pull away from it limping along on our own.

3. *Individualism.* Our westernized faith is individualized and fiercely independent, we talk about an individual committing to Christ, the age of accountability, the ferocious protection of our private lives and the defense of our agendas are all indicators that Satan is convincing us we can do it alone, we don't need the church, or the church is somehow to give us what we need.

There is a positive balance of engagement and withdrawal, if we look at the life of Christ, we see this healthy pattern.

Mark 1:32-39 (ESV)

³² That evening at sundown they brought to him all who were sick or oppressed by demons.

³³ And the whole city was gathered together at the door. ³⁴ And he healed many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons. And he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

³⁵ And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed. ³⁶ And Simon and those who were with him searched for him, ³⁷ and they found him and said to him, "Everyone is looking for you." ³⁸ And he said to them, "Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out."

³⁹ And he went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons.

This rhythm of engagement-withdrawal-engagement provides us with the tools or the training to develop and strengthen our spiritual reflexes. P90X is a workout regiment that several of my friends are experimenting with, the idea is called "muscle confusion", the workouts are varied regularly to keep the muscles from fatiguing, becoming so conditioned that the muscle no longer actually strengthens. P90X varies the workout in such a way to comprehensively increase muscle mass, speed, and point of fatigue in the individual.

Similarly we must work our spiritual muscles. If you keep doing the same workout all the time, your fitness instructor will tell you that you will eventually plateau and your muscles will fall into patterns and settle into a condition which is weaker than if the exercise is mixed (hence cross training is a part of physical strength development). Our spiritual lives will fall into similar patterns if we are not applying "muscle confusion", mixing our workouts, changing how we play, varying our environment.

Nate's Story

Each winter since my sabbatical in 2005, Kara has encouraged me to return to Lake Nebagamon, WI in the dead of winter for a retreat of silence and solitude. For a week in a cottage with no water and heat from the fireplace and space heaters, I spend the time in prayer, journaling, reading, and saying as few words as possible (going to town I am compelled to use my words). The time, when I have been able to engage" has been formative and challenging: I am cold, I miss my wife and kids, I sleep a lot and sometimes get very little "done".

What I am always convinced of when I am about to return is that I need other people. I need to hear them, see them, touch them, embrace them, speak to them about what God is doing in me and through me. As I return to the community of people that I love and that love me, I am able to articulate what I am learning about myself. I am able to communicate the manner in which God is loving me, wooing me, chastening me from my sin. By week's end, I desire to return to others, I desire to see the image of God emblazoned on the face of another woman or man. Someone that I love, someone with whom I travel.

When I am away from my life here in Aurora, when I WITHDRAW, I think differently about my world. When I am away from my family or friends I have new perspective and clarity about who I am, what makes me tick, what pace of life I am living, what patterns have shaped me. Then, when I return and ENGAGE with my family and friends, I have a new perspective on my life. The relationship has greater value because I saw my need for it when I was gone. Absence does make the heart grow stronger. Fasting shows my need for food or how food has become more than nourishing sustenance.

Shared Experiences

Shared Experiences: In Light of Community

Solitude, Silence, Fasting, Retreat, Pilgrimage are activities we must engage in light of community. Community requires that we practice these disciplines. Last week, Keith taught on the experiences that help shape or form our shared experience. Last week and this week are two sides of the same coin. We must withdrawal and we must engage, the two practices compliment and strengthen another in the life of the believer.

- Have a close connection and revelatory aspect with our themes of hunger, growth, being and mystery.
- Deepens and transforms our approach to Scripture and Prayer
- Withdrawal from community to focus on our communion with the Trinity
- Withdrawal from aural distraction to hear the Word of God
- Withdrawal from those things that fill our senses so that we can be filled with God
- Withdrawal from hectic schedules so that we can focus on "wasting time" with God
- Withdrawal from our ordinary places so that we can spend time in our sacred places

Shared Experiences: With Community

Worship, Confession, Fellowship, Service, Simplicity, Submission, Discernment and Spiritual Friendship are some of the exercises *with community* in which we must participate, they are corporate, not individual. These activities are demonstrations of love; they are core to the growth and health of the believer. These activities will cost us something; they will require of us something that we are to give to another.

Recall from the first week, we were looking at our soul's health, looking for indicators of health or disease:

- **Symptoms of Soul Neglect:** *self-absorption, shame, apathy, anxiety, physical fatigue, anger, strong temptation to sin, driven-ness, feelings of desperation or despair, panic, insecurity, callousness, judgmental attitudes, cynicism and lack of desire for God*
- **Symptoms of Soul Health:** *worship, sensitivity to the Spirit, comprehension of God's word, submission to his will, security in the promises of God, demonstrations of the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control, care for others, confession and repentance*

Colossians (as one of many examples in scripture) reminds us of our need for community and the purpose of being community. We see the needs that exist in community and the purposes for which we are to engage in community. Take a look:

Colossians 3:12-17 (ESV)

¹²Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, ¹³bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. ¹⁶Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. ¹⁷And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

vv. 12-13 does not/cannot happen in isolation! To whom are any of these actions directed if not those in the church with us? The passage (having been written to a church) is predicated on the fact that *a church is a church of many, not a church of one*. For what purpose(s) are we in community? The answer is found not only vv. 12-13, but also again in vv. 16-17. We see the corporate opportunities to demonstrate love, to show God's love to our neighbor, these are our practices in the realm of community.

Shared Experiences for what Reason?

Community:

In our church history, the term *covenant theology* is a valuable, essential doctrine. When we understand how God engages with us, we see he engages with more than just individuals, but people groups, with families and communities. The covenant with Abraham delineated in Genesis 12, 15, 17 is one not only with Abraham, but for his children as well. The covenant that God has made with people is not simply with each individual, though each must respond in faith, **the covenant is made with a community of people.**

Matthew 22:34-40 (ESV)

³⁴ But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. ³⁵ And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ³⁶ "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" ³⁷ And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. ³⁸ This is the great and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. ⁴⁰ On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets."

Recall the beginning of the time when we talked about four areas of Hunger, Growth, Being and Mystery. The corporate practices both enhance and solidify our spiritual change in each of these areas. We are able to see another's growth, see them in their worship of God, and be called back to *First Things*. In community we see what other people are eating and our appetite is changed for the things of God, we often drift from these when we are only pursuing a private, individual faith. **Engagement in the following practices brings our attention to God, bringing him glory.**

Consider for a moment how these practices help us show love for our neighbor and love for God (Matthew 22:34-40). Also, how do these practices bring God glory and increase our knowledge in, or response to: Hunger, Growth, Being or Mystery? Take some time to meditate on these areas:

Worship – in corporate worship, the heart is drawn into praise of *our* glorious God, he is a God who has redeemed a people, together we praise. Often we sing for one another, when our voices cannot sing, when our heart cannot believe, when our spirit is wounded or tired, my sister sings for me, my brother recites the creeds that have fallen on a cold heart.

Confession – in confession, the good news of salvation is brought to bear on my own sin. I confess the sins of my body, mind and heart to my brother who stands in the stead of Jesus and speaks his words of forgiveness for me, 1 Peter 2:9 "we are a royal priesthood", Col. 3:13 "bear with one another, forgiving one another just as the Lord has forgiven you."

Fellowship – in the Old Testament the fellowship offering was a voluntary act of worship, one where the meat offered, for the most part was eaten by the family. The sacrifice was one that communicated peace, well-being, covenant or fellowship with God. In the same way that we are to be at peace with God, we are to be at peace with fellow believers, there ought to be unity, purity and joy in our gathering with other believers, we ought to seek right relationships within the church, cf. Rom 12:18; Mark 9:50; Matthew 5:23-24

Simplicity – the practice of simplicity allows me to serve my brother and sister well, when I choose to forego having something or doing something, my resources are conserved in such a way that I can give to others, Acts 2:42-47. When I deny myself, refusing to take on the nature of this present world, I am able to minister to the needs of others, "live simply so that others may simply live" By removing certain elements we are able to lower our waste of energy, land, space, time, money and place possessions in their right place for our enjoyment, another's benefit and God's glory.

Service – serving is manifest in a number of ways: holding babies in the nursery, teaching a class, mentoring a young person, investing in a leadership team a church, picking up litter in your neighborhood, carpooling, providing a meal for another person, cleaning your child's bedroom. How

are you in the service department of life? Read John 13 (with secondary notes/guide if you have them). What does it mean for you to serve in the way that Jesus served the disciples?

Submission – an active, intentional subjecting one's self to another out of reverence for Christ. We do this toward civil authorities in one's life, to our fellow believers in the church, wives to husbands, ultimately to the Lord himself. Our submission is evidence of a person walking in love, a life filled with the Spirit of God, in which the Word of God dwells richly, Eph 5:15-21, cf. Col 3:16

Discernment – through attention to our inner condition, under the counsel and care of others who know us best, in the pursuit of God in the reading and meditating on scripture, we pursue godly wisdom. "we are able to distinguish between what is good (that which moves us toward God and his calling on our life) and what is evil (that which draws us away from God). Ignatius classifies these inner dynamics under the categories of *consolation* and *desolation*, what "gives life" and what "takes life". Rom. 12:1-2

Spiritual Friendship – a ministry of spiritual guidance between 2 or 3 people which includes the practices of discernment, sharing, support, prayer, and listening; Hebrews 10:24 "urge one another toward love and good deeds" (among many other passages). The desire is to informally, but intentionally engage in spiritual transformation with someone else, to commit to his or her spiritual well-being.

Personal Practice

This week (and in the coming months!) consider the above areas again and again. Spend time in scripture looking up passages that refer to these corporate disciplines, make the extra effort to memorize the passages, place in on your mirror, steering wheel or console, computer, or microwave. Share what you have learned with someone you know, or someone who is traveling with you in your spiritual journey (your spiritual friend!).

1. Meditate on how each of these areas are valuable for your spiritual growth as well as the spiritual growth of others. What does each person gain by this sort of engagement?
2. Review each area and consider your immediate response to the word, phrase or definition, then note where you are in the journey. Take some time to journal your thoughts so you have a marker to look back to as you grow.
3. Review each area and write down how you engage in the discipline. For example, are you a good worshiper? Do you live simply? Do you have a spiritual friend? Are you a spiritual friend? Then ask the harder questions that help you explore your inner self...example: why do you resist simplicity, service, or spiritual friendship?
4. Compare these practices against the four areas we discussed in week one. How do each practice contribute to the four areas of Hunger, Growth, Being and Mystery?

Recommended Reading

Ruth Haley Barton, *Sacred Rhythms*

Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*

James C. Wilhoit, *Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered*

Quotes on Community

"The mark of solitude is silence, as speech is the mark of community. Silence and speech have the same inner correspondence and difference as do solitude and community. One does not exist without the other. Right speech comes out of silence, and right silence comes out of speech." Dietrich Bonhoeffer

"The first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists of listening to them. Just as love of God begins with listening to his word, so the beginning of love for our brothers and sisters is learning to listen to them." Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*

"Let him who cannot be alone beware of community. . . Let him who is not in community beware of being alone" Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*

"We live, in fact, in a world starved for solitude, silence, and private: and therefore starved for meditation and true friendship." C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*

David Adams | *the Road of Life*

*Come on pilgrimage.
Let us walk together the road of life.
We will go on well trodden paths,
and also open us new ways.
We will seek,
we will search,
we will rejoice,
and perhaps we will sing.*

*You cannot come as an onlooker,
that leaves you on the outside,
yet still influencing us,
as we influence you.
Come and share your experiences,
your sorrows and your joys.
If your prayer has gone dead,
your God is too small,
your vision too narrow,
Come journey into new depths,
let life be an adventure.*

*Come and participate,
come and discover -
we will go to strange places,
we may even meet dragons.
But we do not journey alone
we go together along the road
and our God goes with us.*

David Adam in *The Road of Life: Reflections on Searching and Longing*