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Dwelling in the Word: Matthew 4:22-36
“Nature of Iron Fireplace Pokers”
August 21, 2016

Steve and Debbie have introduced us to our new series of Dwelling in the Word entitled by Jesus’s words “It is I... Come”. For the next four Sundays we will sit with, dwell with, and immerse ourselves within this text from the gospel of Matthew. This morning we desire to set the context of this passage and then focus on the first two verses as we hear the invitation to come away to Jesus.

If you have your Bible I invite you to turn with me to Mathew chapter fourteen. This chapter is packed full of stories that would make a riveting movie. There is action, deception, violence, miracles, sexual overtones, drama, trauma, grief, joy, fear, irony, suspense, and faith. It all begins with the retelling of the death of John the Baptist. Remember that John had been imprisoned because he called out Herod and challenged his marriage to his brother’s wife. Well, dear Herod did not like to be challenged, or have it pointed out that what he did was not under God’s law. So, his solution was to throw John into prison. However, the story does not end there. The chapter continues to describe a birthday party that included dancing, swearing of oaths, deception, and finally violence and destruction.

We pick up the story in verse thirteen where we are told that “When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place.” I imagine that he was deeply grieving the death of John. However, I also could understand his needing a time to reorient himself to his mission and purpose on earth in light of hearing that Herod is considering him John the Baptist risen from the dead. John the Baptist had been killed for standing up for what he believed. So, if they think Jesus is connected with John he too must begin to wonder what the

people will have in store for him and his future. It is in the face of those uncertainties, and perhaps even fears, that Jesus withdraws to a solitary place.

However, we are told that the solitary place where Jesus withdrew doesn't stay solitary for very long. The crowds hear of Jesus' departure and followed him on foot and met him at the side of the lake. Now, whatever happened while Jesus was alone must have helped to confirm his primary identity and to keep his soul directed to true north. He had disengaged from the world around himself but upon seeing the people we are told he had compassion on them and healed their sick, thus reengaging the world and the noise and the needs and the crowds of people.

Now we are not told that the disciples had also sought out solitary time alone. Perhaps their lack of engaging in that practice can explain or excuse their insistence to Jesus to send the people away as they needed to get their own food. Jesus looks at his disciples - those who have been following him, learning from him, hearing his teachings and observing his miracles - and says to them "You give them something to eat."

I wonder at this point about the status of the hearts and souls of the disciples. Do they feel rejuvenated? Are they firmly grounded in their primary identity as beloved children of God? Or, do they feel weary? Bone deep weary? They have been on this road with Jesus and here it is getting to be evening and honesty they are just ready to be done with it all. And on top of it, they are hungry and they are aware that others around them are also getting hungry. So perhaps we can rationalize that it makes sense that they interrupt Jesus from ministry and healing and teaching to instruct him to send the people away. Do you think that they understand the mission of Jesus? Of their mission as followers of him? Do you think they observed all the healings there on the lakeshore and after so many just thought that they were common place instead of seeing

the miraculous nature of them all? Were they beyond the point of exhaustion and therefore could not even think straight? Did they get it?

We are familiar with the rest of this story. The disciples offer that they only have five loaves of bread and two fish. Jesus asks for the meager items. Then he invites the crowds to sit down, you know, get comfortable for dinner. Jesus then takes the items of food, blesses them, and divides them out. Surprise! There is enough for all! In fact, there is more than enough and baskets upon baskets are gathered as leftovers!

As we reach verse twenty-two we come to our dwelling in the word passage. Knowing the context we should not be surprised when we read these words “Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray.”

Throughout the gospel story we read time and time again of the ways Jesus established a rhythm of finding places to pray. From the temple, to the wilderness, to the mountainside, to the garden, to an upper room, time and time again we are told that Jesus withdrew to pray. “While Jesus knew that God was always present and always listening, he recognized his need for time away from others, from the voices and claims of work among the people. In the quiet of God’s presence in solitude, he found fresh direction for the tasks at hand and was restored in his awareness of the care and sustaining love of God (Mark 1:33-39).”ⁱ

We see here in chapter fourteen that life and ministry was full and busy for Jesus and the disciples. We could also say that it had a lot of external noise and chaos that could also lead to internal noise and chaos. And yet *in the midst* of enormous demands on Jesus, Jesus makes time to enter silence and solitude to pray. No, that is quite stated correctly. It is more accurate to assert that *because of* enormous demands on him, Jesus makes time to enter silence and solitude and

pray. It is here in Jesus's rhythm of engaging with ministry and then engaging in silence with God that we detect his utter dependence on God.

I believe that also in the times of Jesus there was work to be done. A never ending to-do list or ongoing streams of possibilities for engagement with others and the outside world. He too worked at the balance of engaging and disengaging... of engaging in meaningful work, and then disengaging to stay grounded his primary identity. If Jesus recognized his need for regular patterns of silence and solitude, why do we think that we don't need them? As we read the Biblical narrative we read time and time again of Jesus living into his needs for "frequent retreat and solitude to do his work. Yet we somehow think we can do without what he deemed essential."ⁱⁱ

As Anabaptists we focus on our calling to emulate Jesus and to grow in our likeness of him. Throughout the years we can go back and forth debating what particular Bible passages mean or say or ways to apply them to our lives. However, as we look into the patterns and practices of Jesus some of them appear to be crystal clear with not much need for translation. "After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray." Jesus valued and leads by example our need to move apart from our daily life and to stay rooted in our primary identity as a beloved child of God.

What is your primary identity? Of course given what I just said I'm sure you are all eager to name "Beloved child of God." Right? I would assert that our primary identity has the power and potential to influence how we live and breathe within each of our other identities. I am a pastor, a wife, a mother to four young children, a daughter, a sister, a scrapbooker, a gardener, a friend. Throughout the day I flux in and out of different identities. And while it is true that I never completely leave one identity as it is a part of me, it is also true though that not every

identity has the power to influence another identity. However, we are called to keep our primary identity as beloved children of God. This identity then infiltrates to every other identity we have and influences, and flavors, and strengthens, and defines how we live and breathe within those identities. Finding time and space for silence and solitude before God helps to reinforce our primary identity as primary.

In times of silence before and with God we are reminded that there is a mighty God who created us, liberated us, and redeemed us. And thanks be to God, we are not that God. Moving in to time of silence and solitude “does not promote inactivity, but it does promote dependent activity. No longer do we take things into our own hands.”ⁱⁱⁱ Rather we are better able to keep things in perspective as to what is ours to carry and what is not ours. In the silence we stop striving to accomplish, stop focusing on our to-do list, stop participating in the rat race of life, stop being flooded by external and internal noise and distraction, and we simply rest, delightfully rest in knowing that we known, and loved by God. In those moments we are reminded that this truth is enough. Here in the silence “Slowly, we loosen our grip on all those projects that to us seem so significant. Gently, we become more focused and simplified. Joyfully, we receive the nourishment of heavenly manna”^{iv} as solitude “serves to crack open and burst apart the shell of our superficial securities.”^v

So, if we believe as Jesus did, that the practice of retreating and being in and with God in silence is an essential practice... then why do we struggle with engaging in this practice, or incorporating it into our lives? I would suggest we avoid silence and solitude for three main reasons: lack of priority, level of fear, and myriad of distractions.

First, the lack of priority. I suspect that many of you had anticipated that the main reason we do not engage in silence is that we simply don't have time for such frivolous activities! I

assume that if I could offer an all-day silent retreat at a beautiful setting that many of us would sense a longing deep within us for such a day. And yet, we would say, who has time for that? Or let me check my schedule, and then after checking it offer a deep, heart felt sigh, and say, there just isn't time for that. However, I wonder how it feels to you if we replace I don't have time for silence and solitude with the statement silence and solitude are not priorities for me. We actually could use this strategy for most things in our lives. I don't have time for exercise... or Exercise is not a priority for me? Contrary to the excuses we offer, we will in fact find time for those passions and priorities in our lives. Perhaps that is part of the mystery.

Second, I think we avoid and move away from silence and solitude due to our levels of fear. As I offered an all day silent and solitude retreat I also bet that many of you thought next, "What in the world would I do all day?" Some of that question is generated by fear... fear of silence, fear of taking a break and stopping production, fear of what we will learn of ourselves, fear we will have to face how exhausted and weary we are, fear of what God might want to say to us. So out of our fear we avoid silence and solitude. When we find we are alone, and we hear the deafening silence and we quickly turn on the TV, or radio, or computer, or engage in meaningless chatter, anything to do to avoid facing or embracing the silence. Or when we have external silence we are not able to turn off the internal noise and therefore are still not present to the presence that is with us in the silence.

Which leads finally to distractions. We live in a complex, noisy, overfilled, over structured, technology consumed world. It is **not** a world of silence and solitude, and therefore one needs to work cultivate space and time for silence and solitude. Already Jesus demonstrated the value of moving into a solitary space, withdrawing from others, and knowing and being still before God. As one author so eloquently named in our "contemporary over-stimulated lives, (we

can) be “distracted from distraction by distraction.”^{vi} Yes, it can actually be that much of an epidemic.

My challenge to each one of us is to find ten minutes a day, yes only ten minutes, to go away by ourselves and embrace silence in and with God. During this time I invite us to breathe deeply; to remind ourselves that there is a God who created us, liberated us, redeemed us, and we are not that God; to remember the primary foundational identity of being a beloved child of God. In the time of silence our to-do lists cease to exist, the pressures and demands of life may be laid aside, as in that time and silence we simply rest in knowing that God is God, and we are miraculously God’s beloved. I have witnessed that even ten minutes a day is able to help keep us grounded and oriented to God throughout the day. I have also observed that once we start incorporating regular silence and solitude in our lives we will become aware of other opportunities throughout the day to simply sit and be still before God.

As we conclude I want to share with you an image to help capture what it is I believe happens when we make time and space in our lives to sit and rest in and with the presence of God through silence and solitude.

The story is told of a nun at monastery who led people through different faith formational practices. During one such lesson she was striving to communicate what happens when one put themselves in the presence of God through silence and solitude. For her lesson she utilized just the common, everyday, iron fireplace poker. She walks over and picks up the rod of cold, charred, iron. And with it she begins to stir the burning logs. She explains “When one moves into a new home, the hearth is the heart of their home. She shares, this is the picture of all life: the fire of God – radiating warmth and light – is the center of everything.

Then the nun begins to stir the fire again with the fireplace poker. She offers “one of the first things a couple needs to acquire is a fireplace poker. They save up all their money or some tradable goods until they can pay the local blacksmith to fashion one for them. They use it every morning to stir into flame the embers left from the previous night. They use it to position the kindling and logs they add to the fire. And of course, they use it to pick up a pot by its handle to remove from the fire. As she is talking she removes a pot of water and prepares to make some tea.

*As she returns she points to the fire and says “You’ll notice that I made a mistake a few minutes ago.” You follow her gaze and realize that she left the fireplace poker with its tip in the hottest embers. **And something at once expected and yet remarkable has happened: the iron fireplace poker has begun to glow. The tip of the rod that is deepest into the hottest embers is now indistinguishable from them: it pulses with the same orange luminosity and the same mysterious radiance.***

*Now this nun doesn’t have understandings of atom and molecules, or radiant energy or heat transfer, or rapid oxidation and combustion. Instead she instructs you on the nature of iron being cold and dark and the nature of fire being hot and light. She explains that the power of fire is far greater than the power of iron, so instead of iron making the fire cold, the fire makes the iron hot. **As a result she says, if the iron is placed in the fire long enough, the nature of fire overshadows the nature of iron, and the iron begins to “catch” the nature of the fire.** The light and heat of fire illuminate and warm the darkness and cold of iron so that the iron is fire-ized. It partakes in the nature of fire until it becomes light and heat itself.*

She draws together the concluding teachable point that as we move into silence and solitude with God we place ourselves in the light and fire of God and as we do so we are overpowered by the nature of God, and we begin to glow with God’s radiance. If our rod of iron is placed in God’s light and heat long enough, if we stay close enough to God for long enough, close enough to breathe God’s breath, then the nature of the iron will be transformed to the nature of fire. As we sit and breathe in the presence of God in the midst of silence and solitude our nature will be transformed into the nature of God.^{vii}

This my friends is why I present us all with the challenge of following the model of Jesus and finding ten minutes a day to simply sit and rest in the silence and solitude with and before God. While I cannot offer you ten minutes right now, I will invite you to begin to engage God in the silence of the next couple of minutes. In this time may you be remind that there is a God who created you, who liberated you, who redeemed you, and you are a beloved child of that amazing God.

ⁱ Wendy Miller, *Invitation to Presence: A Guide to Spiritual Disciplines* (Upper Room Books: Nashville, Tennessee), 19.

ⁱⁱ Richard Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home* (HarperSanFrancisco: San Francisco, California), 101.

ⁱⁱⁱ Foster, *Prayer*, 96.

^{iv} Foster, *Prayer*, 100.

^v Foster, *Prayer*, 100.

^{vi} Deborah Smith Douglas, "Stay Awake" in *Weavings* 27:4, 40.

^{vii} *Drawn/adapted from* Brian McLaren, *Finding our Way Again: The Return of the Ancient Practices* (Thomas Nelson: Nashville, TN), 159-174.