

Faith Mennonite Church
August 14, 2011
Taste & See: God is Good
Joetta Schlabach

Practices that Sustain: Solitude and Community

Matthew 14:13-23

Greg Renstrom, a retired Methodist minister who worshiped with us for two years before stepping out of retirement to begin a new church that meets in the historic Wesley Church building near the Convention Center, still comes to our Tuesday morning sermon text discussion group. When we discussed this scripture passage two weeks ago, Greg recalled a conversation he had with a psychologist who was part of one of his congregations. Greg had commented about the challenge of modern life—that people’s schedules are so full. To which the psychologist replied: “No Greg, it’s not a problem of fullness; it’s a problem of emptiness. People’s lives are essentially empty and they’re frantically trying to fill them.

I’m not sure that summer in Minnesota is the right time to address the topic of fullness and emptiness in life! I’m guessing that a number of you, like I, have competing ideas of the perfect summer: a time to rest and relax, *and* a time to get lots of things done—particularly the outdoor variety!

I don’t share Greg’s psychologist story to suggest that everyone who is busy is seeking to fill an emptiness. As I look at our congregation I note many people who are living and enjoying an abundant, blessed life, using their gifts in service to society and our faith community. This does not mean that we don’t get tired and wish life were a bit less full sometimes, but at the end of the day we give thanks for the things that fill our days—children, jobs, gardens, bike paths, soup groups, hobbies...

Yet we would all do well to periodically examine our lives and ask: is the busyness essentially healthy, purposeful and sustainable? Or are we mindlessly filling an emptiness? And what if our lives *do feel empty*—work is not fulfilling, we live paycheck to paycheck and seem to be falling behind financially, we feel isolated and lonely.

In our gospel lesson this morning, Jesus models two contrasting yet complimentary practices that truly fill the emptiness in our lives. The story is bookended by Jesus’ practice of solitude—of seeking out a deserted place. In between the solitude we find a story of sharing in the midst of and through community. Solitude and community. These were essential practices for Jesus. They are essential practices for us who seek to live in the fullness of Christ.

Let us consider solitude. Jesus was an itinerant teacher and healer. He was a man on the move. He was a man who lived in community, who lived intimately with a group of 12 men, was intermittently joined by an expanded circle that included women who helped support him, and who always drew a crowd. Yet at important junctures in his life as well as times of crisis—such as the murder of his cousin John—he moved away from the crowd, from his intimate friends and sought solitude. He went to the mountain, to the deserted, lonely places.

Jesus sought solitude in order to be fully present with God. The church has proclaimed Jesus to be “true God and true man,” but never superman. Jesus healed with divine strength, taught with divine wisdom, yet he grew tired from human weakness, grew sad and lonely from human loss. As a fully human person, Jesus needed the solitude, for in solitude we become fully present with God and fully present to ourselves. In solitude we slow down and gain a right sense of our place in the world. In solitude we stop talking and begin listening. The voice of God comes in the gently babbling brook and soft wind through the pines. The voice of God comes in crackling lightning and crashing waves. The voice of God whispers and the voice of God shouts two important messages over and over: “I am” and “you are beloved.”

“I am” and “you are beloved.” This alone fills our deep spiritual emptiness. The “I-am” God is ultimate reality. “I-am” created the universe and continues to sustain the universe. “I am” created in and

through love and reaches out to each of us and says “you are beloved.” If you haven’t heard this voice recently, I encourage you to seek solitude.

Solitude is different than simply being alone. Solitude is intentional. It can be as simple as a walk in the neighborhood, or sitting in a familiar, calming place. Or it can be a time of retreat in a wilderness, such as our beloved Boundary Waters. Most important, it is a mental space away. It is a conscious calming of the mind, stopping the run-away, circular thoughts that make us anxious, and focusing on one thought as we breathe: God/I am... God is love... I am beloved. It is nurturing a practice of listening rather than blathering. It is becoming quiet before God.

Our story today began and ended in solitude: *Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself (v. 13).... And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray (v. 23).*

It was this practice of solitude that allowed Jesus to respond with calm while his disciples began to panic. It was this practice of solitude that instilled a trust that God is sufficient for every circumstance. The disciples began to get uneasy. It was a big crowd... out in the deserted place Jesus had tried to escape to. No little shops or cafes nearby and people evidently hadn’t brought their own picnic baskets. I know well their reaction. “Okay, Jesus, time to tell these folks to move on before they start getting hungry.” I know their reaction because I know the knot that forms in my stomach when the doorbell rings at the church office and I see someone who I suspect is coming to ask for money. I know their reaction because I know the unease I feel every time I come to a stop at an intersection where a person holds a sign “Homeless, anything will help, God bless.” I know their reaction because I know how I can recoil when I feel that people want more of me than I can give on a particular day.

Jesus doesn’t let the disciples stay long in this place of panic and fear, in their feeling of helplessness. He leads them in the second practice: that of finding sufficiency in community. “They don’t need to leave,” he says. “You need to feed them.” “Sure, Jesus, sure; all we have are 5 loaves and 2 pieces of fish—hardly enough for you and the 12 of us,” they no doubt thought. But Jesus remained calm. He told the crowd to sit down, to be at ease. And then he blessed what they had. He gave thanks and blessed the little, knowing that in God, and in sharing, there’s always enough.

We often refer to this story as Jesus feeding the 5,000 or Jesus multiplying the loaves. But look again. The text says that Jesus broke and gave the loaves to the disciples and *they* gave it to the crowd. The bread multiplied in the very act of sharing. This is not just a story of Jesus performing a miracle. This is a story of the miracle that takes place each time we trust that the little we have is enough, if we share it. This is a story of the miracle that takes place when we join together to tackle a problem and not think it is ours alone to solve.

I may have shared this story sometime in the past: Jeanette Kraybill, a Mennonite mission worker in Africa in the 1980s, tells of watching her children play with the children of the Ivory Coast village where they lived. Her child had left the house with a cookie and as soon as he reached a group of children he began breaking off bits of the cookie to share with the group. Jeanette said she began to cry, with gratitude and shame as she watched. Gratitude flowed from realizing her children had taken on the practice of sharing that was at the heart of the Ivory Coast culture of hospitality. At the same time she felt shame, knowing her instinct would have been to hold back and eat the whole cookie before joining the group.

I’ve been somewhat removed from the day-to-day activities of hospitality our church has offered to the Edha family from Somalia as they have begun to get settled here the past couple months. But I’m copied on the emails that go out, nearly daily, and I watch how people respond to the requests for transportation, or other needs of this family. I see an image similar to the dividing of the bread. One person takes them to one appointment; another to a different appointment. Different ones of us have expertise in different areas and know of different services available in the community. It’s been a community engagement that no one person could have done alone, and each day this family becomes more able to find their way around and connect with opportunities.

Solitude and community. These are the interwoven threads of the fabric of Christian spirituality and life in the Spirit. May we attend to and be sustained by both. Taste and see!