

Solitude Teaching 02:

Encounter With Our Self

Intro hook:

- 21 days.
- In an isolated cabin in a Pacific Northwest forest.
- All alone.
- No phone. No computer. You literally turn over your devices when you check in.
- No books.
- The Bible is “allowed,” but with a gentle warning not to use it as a distraction.
- No alcohol.
- No more than one cup of coffee a day.
- No exercise — nothing to “discharge anxiety from your body.”
- And no contact with the outside world; you pack in your own food.
- Your one point of human contact is the clinical psychologist and spiritual director who oversees the program.
- This program is over 50 years old, but it has no name, no website, it’s all word of mouth.
- But a few of my friends have been through the program and said it was one of the most transformative experiences of their life, so on my sabbatical, I went for it.
- Now, in all honesty, I thought I would crush it. I mean, I’m an introvert, I love to be in the quiet. And I have a lot of solitude in my Rule of Life. It thought it would be easy.
- It was one of the most harrowing, difficult, emotionally painful things I have ever done.
- I realized I had developed a way of being in solitude with props — a stack of books to read, my laptop to do a little writing and calendar planning.

- This was my first time going into solitude with nothing to distract me from the reality of my life.
- I asked the director of the program, why no books? And he said, “This program was designed to re-create the experience of Jesus in the desert or Elijah in the desert or Moses in the desert.” And then he said, “And the desert teaches by taking away.”
- I’m used to learning by addition — by hearing a teaching or listening to a podcast or reading a book — by adding new information. But the desert teaches by subtraction, by taking away all our props ... and leaving our soul naked, exposed, and raw.
- Until you go into the desert, you don’t truly know what’s in you ...
- Now, 21 days was a one-time event; I don’t plan on doing that ever again. But whether your time in solitude is 21 days in the wild ... or 21 minutes with a cup of tea on your couch, the point is the same ... you have to face yourself.

Encounter:

- Henri Nouwen, in his book *The Way of the Heart*, writes:
 - “Solitude is not a private therapeutic place. Rather, it is the place of conversion, the place where the old self dies and the new self is born, the place where the emergence of the new man and the new woman occurs. ... In solitude I get rid of my scaffolding. I have no friends to talk with, no telephone calls to make, no meetings to attend, no music to entertain, no books to distract, just me — naked, vulnerable, weak, sinful, deprived, broken — nothing. It is this nothingness that I have to face in my solitude, a nothingness so dreadful that everything in me wants to run to my friends, my work, my distractions ... Solitude is the furnace of transformation ... the place of the great struggle and the great encounter — the struggle against the compulsions of the false self, and the encounter with the loving God who offers himself as the substance of the new self.”
- Notice that for Nouwen, solitude is not a kind of day spa for the soul. Rather, it is what he called the place of encounter.
- Over the next three sessions, the plan is to cover the three primary encounters we must face in solitude:
 1. An encounter with our self
 2. An encounter with our enemy
 3. An encounter with our God

Seam: *First up, an encounter with our self.*

The first thing:

- When you go into solitude, rather than feeling happy or at peace, the first thing that often happens is what Father Thomas Keating called “the unloading of the unconscious.”
- Which is a way of saying whatever is down in you comes up, from the substrata to the surface of your heart.
- And you begin to feel...
- Let me name a few of the most common feelings that come up in solitude:
 1. Exhaustion
 - Often, the first thing we feel is just tired.
 - I call it “the crash.” It’s like our body has been running on adrenaline, and all of the sudden it just goes out. We feel a bone-deep weariness.
 - I think of the story of Elijah in 1 Kings 19: When he goes into the eremos, he’s so exhausted that all he can do for the first three days is sleep, eat, and drink.
 - That’s often all you can do at first — rest.
 - Rest is an essential component to discipleship to Jesus.
 - Imagine your tiredness on a spectrum:
 - On one side is good tired — the feeling at the end of a long week, where you made the world a better place, you gave your life away, and you’re ready to Sabbath and rest.
 - Then there’s unhealthy tired — where you’re not sleeping enough, low on margin, high on stress. It’s manageable, but you’re on edge.
 - Then there’s dangerous tired — where you’ve lost touch with your soul and your God, and you’re easy prey for temptation.
 - Where would you plot your soul on the spectrum of good tired to dangerous tired?
 - If you’re in good tired, rest can keep you healthy; if you’re in unhealthy tired; rest can get you back to healthy; and if you’re in dangerous tired; rest can expose your need for serious change.

- Another feeling that comes up in solitude is...

2. Fear

- Often, I go in expecting peace and tranquility. But instead, my mind can't stop racing, and I find myself less praying and more worrying in God's general direction.
- I'm trying to focus on God, but my mind is a ping pong ball, just jumping from what if to what if.
- In solitude, all our fears come up.
- Third...

3. Sadness

- Underneath everything in this life is a kind of sadness.
- Even our happiest moments — a wedding or graduation or the birth of a child ... all come tinged with a faint note of sorrow.
- Sorrow and joy intermix in this life, while we wait for Jesus' return.
- And when you go into solitude, often, you begin to feel sadness well up inside you. It's like your soul tells you what you need to grieve, to sit in before God and let pass through you.
- The upside is, it's almost like your body has happiness antibodies. When you let yourself really feel your sadness, often, it gives way to joy. But it takes time.
- Another emotion we often feel is...

4. Anger

- All the contemplatives write about this; about how in quiet prayer, one of the major challenges we face is anger. All your hurts come up, all the people who you feel have wounded you or wronged you. And you feel mad or bitter.
- I'll occasionally find myself ruminating on how infuriated I am, or replaying the wrong done to me, or rehearsing a speech against my enemy...
- Anger comes up. And finally...

5. Shame

- When we are stripped down, naked, exposed ... who we really are comes through. With other people, we can perform, project an image, attempt to control other people's

perception of us. We can even fool ourselves to an extent! We can hide.

- But in solitude, there's nowhere to hide. Who we are — the good, the bad, and the ugly — is all laid bare before God.
- And we often feel a profound sense of just how broken and in need of salvation we are.

Seam: *One word for all these feelings is - pain...*

Pain:

- In solitude, we encounter our pain.
- The existential philosopher Søren Kierkegaard said there are two types of people in the world — those who are in despair and know it, and those who are in despair and don't know it.
- Inside all of us is a deep well of pain. No matter how sunny your disposition, or robust your faith — we all have pain in our heart.
- And when we go into solitude, what is down, comes up.
- Now, I know what you're thinking: Why in the world would I ever go into solitude?! This is like the opposite of a sales pitch!
- Why? Because all of this stuff is in you ... it's leaking out like toxic pollution, to the people closest around you, the people you love.
- To get free of it, we have to face it.

Distraction:

- The problem is, our culture has become incredibly sophisticated at not feeling our pain. Not just physical pain, but emotional pain as well.
- Primarily through the medium of distraction.
- A thousand different cultural narcotics offer us a quick way to anesthetize emotional pain with our distraction of choice — food, alcohol, work, shopping, travel, entertainment, social media, the internet, porn, and more.
 - The smartphone is most people's portable coping mechanism of choice.

- I read one article in a medical journal entitled “The Smartphone as a Pacifier” that argued adults use smartphones the way toddlers use pacifiers, as an emotional crutch to distract them from painful feelings ... but as long as you use a pacifier, you never grow up.
- And not only are we Christians prone to the same myriad of distractions as everyone else, but we can easily use God as just another distraction from our pain.
- The psychologist John Welwood called this “spiritual bypassing,” which he defined as a “tendency to use spiritual ideas and practices to sidestep or avoid facing unresolved emotional issues, psychological wounds, and unfinished developmental tasks.”
- An entire cottage industry outside and inside the church has grown up around staying positive.
- Not all bad. But so few people are telling the truth.
- Life is deeply beautiful, but it’s also full of pain.
- We must learn to face our pain.

Seam: *How do we do this?*

- As always, we apprentice under Jesus.
- And follow him to Gethsemane.
- Turn in your Bibles to Matthew 26.
- The story we are about to read takes place just a few hours before Jesus’ betrayal, arrest, illegal trial, torture, and murder ...
- Jesus knows what’s coming, and we read this ...

Matthew 26³⁶⁻³⁹

Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane ...

- In Luke’s version of the story, he writes, “Jesus went out as usual” or that can be translated, “As was his custom.”

- Meaning, it seems like Jesus had all sorts of hiding places around Israel where he would slip away to be alone; Gethsemane was one, a park just outside the city.
- ... and he said to them, "Sit here while I go over there and pray."
- ... and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me."
- Notice, "he began to be sorrowful and troubled."
- Not, he began to feel happy and at peace.
- No, he began to touch his pain.
- And he was overwhelmed by it. "To the point of death!"
- Do you ever feel that way? Like your pain is just too much to face; you'd rather die?
- He calls on his friends: stay here, I need community. But then ...
- *Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."*

Seam: *Jesus goes to the place of pain ...*

The place of pain:

- He doesn't distract himself from his pain.
 - He meets God in his pain.
 - How? He follows three movements of the soul. First ...
1. He gives God his feelings
 - "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death!"
 - He just tells the Father how he feels: no filter, no edit, just his raw, uncut self, laid bare before God in lament.
 - Then ...

2. He gives God his desires

- “Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me.”
- The cup here is a metaphor for his coming suffering on the cross.
- Let the gravity of that prayer sink in: Please, Father, I don’t want to go.
- Again, no filter. He’s just offering his desires to God. And finally ...

3. He gives God his trust

- “Yet not as I will, but as you will.”
- He comes to the place of surrender.

Seam: *This is the pattern laid down by Jesus for his apprentices to follow ...*

The pattern:

- Go into solitude. Get away from the noise and distraction of ordinary life.
- Let yourself feel.
- Let whatever is in you come up.
- It may be joy or gratitude or exuberance! Or it may be exhaustion or fear or grief ...
- Whatever it is, let yourself feel it.
- Don’t run away to your distraction of choice. Stay with the pain; follow it all the way down to God.
- Just this simple act of noticing and naming your emotions before God can do wonders for your soul.
- Psychologists talk a lot about how important it is not only to “feel your feelings,” for your body to process and discharge emotion, but also to name your feelings. Because when you name your feelings:
 1. You realize you are not your feelings. Your feelings are a part of you, but not the

whole. You get a little distance from them and, with it, freedom. Secondly ...

2. You realize you have a lot of feelings — you often feel anxiety, but also excitement; melancholy, but also joy ...
- But for us as followers of Jesus, once we notice and name our inner life — which is a key task in the spiritual life and a key function of the Practices, to create space for this to happen — but once we notice and name, then we can offer our feelings up to God for our transformation.

Seam: *How? By following the same three movements as Jesus. First, we ...*

1. Give God our feelings

- We pray whatever is in us.
- As the saying goes, “Pray what you got!”
- If you’ve got bitterness, pray that! Hurt, pray that! Worry? Pray that!
- With no filter.
- I’m convinced that one of the reasons so many people find prayer boring is they don’t really pray, they perform! They hold back from God all the ugly stuff.
- But prayer isn’t a place to be good, it’s a place to be real ...
- Read the Psalms! Two-thirds of the Psalms are what scholars call lament!
- Lament is different than complaining. Complaining is just griping about your life, and it tends to make a bad problem worse.
- Lament is complaining to God. It has a U-shape to it; you go down into your pain, but then you offer it up to God.
- We give God our feelings. Then we ...

2. Give God our desires

- Our desires drive our feelings.
- We feel happy when we get what we want. We feel sad when we don’t get what we want. We feel anxious when we’re scared what we want might be torn away. And we feel angry when someone or something is standing in the way of what we want.

- It all comes back to desire ...
- The problem is, many of our desires are complex and confused — we want to follow God’s call on our life, but we don’t want to go to the cross!
- We want to be holy, but we also want to sin!
- What do we do with our desires?! We offer them to God.
- Same pattern: no filter, just “God, here. I want ____.” Whether that desire is good, bad, or straight up ugly — we offer to God. And then we ...

3. Give God our trust

- We surrender. We let go of the illusion of control. We give up trying to engineer our life to the perfect outcome.
- God, your will be done.
- And that moment of surrender, when you feel your heart yield, that is the fulcrum point. From there, your emotions start to get healthy. You start to move through all the inner chaos and come to peace.

Summary: *This is the pattern: Go to the place of pain and meet God there.*

- The great lie is that we heal by moving away from our pain, when in reality, we heal by moving toward it and meeting God and our community in it.

Seam: *But this means learning to face our pain.*

Facing our pain:

- There’s a saying in the therapy world: “Do the work.”
- You’ll hear people in therapy say, “Oh, she’s done the work.” Or, “He’s not done the work.”
- That language can sound off-putting to Christians, especially those from a church tradition where there’s a high emphasis on Christ’s finished work on the cross.
- But when you listen carefully, you realize what people basically mean by “do the work” is just face your pain, sit in it, and wait there for Jesus to come and heal you.

- My wife — who is about as extroverted as they come — has come to love solitude. But when we were younger, she would avoid solitude at all costs, because she used to say, “I don’t want to look under the surface because I’m scared of what I’ll find in my shadow.”
- She’s not wrong. All sorts of teachers of spiritual formation from Ruth Haley Barton to Pete and Geri Scazzerro and many others have used the metaphor of an iceberg for the soul.
- Like an iceberg, most of our soul’s life is below the surface.
- And there seems to be some dynamic to spiritual formation where, if we’re not willing to face what is below the surface, we never experience the depth of healing God has for us.

Seam: *The Christian psychologist Dr. Larry Crabb has this paradigm based on the iceberg analogy...*

The iceberg:

- Above the surface is what Crabb calls “the managed life,” where our focus is on living by a set of principles to be successful. Our driving question is: How do I look and feel good?
- But inevitably, we get hurt, betrayed, rejected, let down, and we slip down to what he calls “the wounded life,” where our driving question is: What can I do to get back to looking and feeling good?
- But the invitation of Jesus is not to go up and out of our pain, but down and into it ... to meet God there, in what Crabb calls “the formed life,” where our question becomes: What is God doing through this and in me?
- That, that is the question of transformation.
- And if you are willing to go down and in ... rather than up and out ... you’ll discover a whole new level of peace.

Ending:

- In closing, many people fear the quiet. They fear being alone. They are terrified of what’s under the surface and what may come up in solitude.
- But to quote Jesus’ often repeated command: “Do not be afraid.”

- What you find waiting for you, deep in the dark of your soul, is love.
- The Jesus of the Trinity is there waiting to welcome you, love you, heal you, burn you clean, and set you free.
- In solitude, we experience being totally exposed, totally seen, totally known, and completely forgiven and accepted and loved by God ... just as we are. This is an experience few people ever realize is possible ...
- So do not be afraid. Jesus is waiting for you in the quiet.