

Sermon: A 30-Day Advance: Part 1

Scripture: Psalm 16 and Mark 1

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As many of you know I am just returning from 7 weeks of my sabbatical within which I flew out to Colorado and did a 30-Day silent retreat in a process developed by St Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits, called the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises. It was such a privilege to do this. I realize that some people high on the extrovert scale might say “no thank you” to 30 days of not talking or doing much of anything but prayer and contemplation, but I imagine for others of a more introvert type it sounds dreamy to cut out of a jam packed, relentlessly scheduled life, press pause for a full month, and slow waaaaay way down. And let me tell you, it was dreamy.

Actually, I’m not sure dreamy is an accurate description of it. If anything as the days wore on, it dawned on me that there is a level of sleep-walking/dream-state that makes up my day to day life. And in the quiet of that setting, the silent meals, the prayer times, the slow walks, the daily watching of the sunrise over the valley from my hermitage and the sunset over the Rockies from a wooden chair swing, the absence of screens and texts and emails and scrolling, I think I saw more of what surrounds me, more subtleties, I heard the life around me in a sharper way, I felt things in my own heart and soul more fully, with less distraction. Rather than dreaming it was like coming awake. And though I was alone out there and for the most part not engaged in keeping up and keeping tabs and keeping track, I was connected in thought and prayer to my family, my friends, this community, just at a deeper frequency. Tracy and I spoke every 4 or 5 days

during my time and had a few experiences that amazed us with how connected we realized we were despite the distance and separation.

So that's my claim - that it wasn't a dreamy time of other-worldly disconnected spiritual experience, but an immersion deeper into reality. It wasn't the physical world being shed to reach for some higher spiritual plane but the physical world becoming more sharply and distinctly spiritual, which, I think, is the truth of the matter. Let me say, it really helped to have the Rocky Mountains as the backdrop and that great sky and the wide expanses everywhere you turned, to help me experience the sacredness of the earth. And it made me wonder, and I wonder now poignantly so, as I re-enter my day to day how much of what we do with and in our modern world actually separates us from truer life and reality. The pace we keep. How much we engage what is virtually reality but not really reality. How many of our solutions to save time devours our time in the end. How what we do to make ourselves comfortable and address our pain saps us of joy as well. And so on and so forth.

So if you, for a moment, accept my premise that my 30 days of retreat was not a retreat from reality but an advance into it, an immersion into it, then let me share a few more things I discovered in there. And as you see from my sermon title, I'm just going to share part of today in this sermon and then another part in my sermon next week.

So first of all I'm thinking about prayer itself, communication with God, that it too when we do it here in worship or in a quiet moment in our day is not retreating from reality but a practice of deeper immersion into reality. Prayer, done appropriately, is not shutting our eyes to the outside world but opening our inner eyes more fully to the truth of the outside world. Jesus is often witnessed,

as in our scripture for today, retreating into solitary or deserted places for prayer not to avoid what he had to do but to do all he had to do with an open spirit, a deeper heart, and a steady commitment to stay aligned to God's direction and purpose for his life. There's nothing magic in prayer, except that it can be magical at times to trust and lean into the fact that a Higher Mind, a Deeper Heart is backing us up, leading us on.

So throughout the 30-days I would have 4 times set aside for about an hour of prayer each day along with the general prayerful state that such a time of quiet – in such a setting - allows. My Spiritual Director who I met with for 30 minutes each day, that was the only time I talked, would offer prayer guidance and prompts to direct each days' prayers, a lot of times that involved imaginative engagement with scripture, sometimes other themes and approaches.

The first of these I mentioned in my letter that I wrote to you for the Annual Meeting early on in the retreat and that was to be open to and receive God's love for me and reflect on what that has meant in my life. And there were 3 focus areas in particular for these prayers – what have been God's gifts to you, how has God labored for you, been at work in your life, and what does God's gift of Godself in Jesus Christ mean for your life. Those each constituted at least 1 hour of prayer and since I returned to those over again, it was much more than that in the end.

To take the first one, it was remarkable to give a significant block of time to ponder thoroughly, list out and meditate simply on the concrete gifts God has given me in my life. I mean there aren't just a handful of gifts that we have been given by God but rather large buckets full of gifts each of which can be unpacked and reflected on for a while. There's the bucket of the gift of our physicality and physical health to start... for all of us, fully health, sick or even for the dying there

is enough in that bucket alone to keep you going for a while in a reverie of gratitude for the miracles of our sight and our breath and our hearing and our taste and our touch and all that those individual gifts open up to us in this existence. Then there's the relationship bucket, holy moly, there's a ton in that bucket when you sit down to think about it and unpack the relationships that 1. fill your life right now, 2. to all those over the course of your life you have loved, 3. Consider all those who have taught you or been a mentor to you, 4. All those who you've struggled with! Think about that. – they could be in your bucket of gratitude too, those you haven't liked, your enemies and what blessing God brought you through them. That's just two buckets, physical health and relationships, right?! Then there's the bucket of gratitude for the places that have been gifts to you, places of retreat and vacation, places of great beauty, places of education that have supported you, places of work that have kept you occupied and used your gifts. That's what I mean, those are just 3 buckets of gratitude that you have been given, I have been given, because we are and we are loved!

As I was doing this deep dive into gratitude, the line from the hymn that we just sang– Great is Thy Faithfulness – came to me: “All I have needed thy hand hath provided”. And it struck me so deeply “God, all I have needed, ALL I have needed across 54 years, ALL I HAVE NEEDED thy hand hath provided!” What do you do but stand in awe and say thanks?!

So this what I'm saying – I did a massive amount of downloading of all there is in my life to be grateful for, which is not fantasy or a retreat from reality but a greater glimpse into the truth of the matter? Don't you agree?!

And that was just the first of the 3 focal points – St Ignatius called them – consider specifically and fully God's gifts to me, given out of love for me – buckets

and buckets, dump trucks full of gifts. Geez. Then, when you're done with that exercise, consider the second prompt - how God has labored for you. This is the prompt from St Ignatius – "God loves me so much that God enters into the very struggle of life, like a potter with clay, like a mother in childbirth and God labors us into life." How is that true in your life, how has God been active and at work in your life as you can best guess and imagine and then also write it all down point by point what come to you.

I found it amazing the things that dawned on me. Among other things, a significant awareness that came through this focal point of prayer was how much God was not just active in my life but PROACTIVE and I mean, so often WAAAAAY ahead of me! Before I even knew what I was going to need the Spirit was workin' it! And I realized how much in my prayer life even though I should know better I tend to approach God as though I am trying to GET His attention – HEY GOD, DOWN HERE, I'VE GOT THIS ISSUE COULD YOU HELP OUT?! YOOHOO, GOD, WE'VE GOTTA PROBLEM HERE! – when the truth of the matter is that God was already well at work at whatever point at which I was finally turning to Him for help.

I could give examples of this over the course of my life, but I'll just give you the quickest and most obvious – my 30-Day retreat. It was what I needed more than I could have imagined, well before I knew that My father would begin declining and eventually die I set up to do the retreat. It turned out that a day and a half after his funeral in Richmond, VA, was when I was first sitting on that wooden bench swing in Sedalia, Colorado watching the sunset over the Rockies and grieving his death but in a context that gave me incredible breadth and depth and comfort to do that – and a broken open heart then for those 30-days of prayer which made the experience all the deeper. God was well at work in and

through me long before I had any idea how much I would need those 30 days. And that was just the most recent and obvious example. But once you take time to reflect back on your life like that and you find that such moments begin to pop and shine, you see the fingerprints of God all over the place! And what can you do but say thank you to such love and such presence?

Again, I'd ask, is it fantasy and retreat to believe there's a higher presence and deeper heart at work in even the minutia of our lives or is the greater fantasy to suggest that we are alone and make of our lives what they are and it's all just random happenstance. I'm putting my money on God, the Higher Power!

And here's where I want to begin drawing this first half of my 2-part sermon to a close, on this note. Pressing pause and quieting down all the chatter and relinquishing the schedule and the stimulation and the grasping and the virtual world and retreating or advancing does for you is that it becomes evident not just that there's a Higher Mind and a Higher Purpose but what the Christian faith holds out for and what also becomes evidently true when the dust settles is that this Higher Presence is FULL OF LOVE. And when you relax into that reality even for a time it all makes so much more sense. All the tender delicateness of this existence, all the tragic beauty, all the artfulness, all the everything around us that is so magnificent and fascinating and touches the heart and brings tears to the eyes. How do you explain it except that it all derives from a Heart of Love. I'll give you another story and another image next week but here's one image that for me proclaimed the truth of a Loving Creator behind it all.

There was a little man-made stream that the retreat center had created where the water came pouring out from beneath the statue of the Sacred Heart of Jesus that was there on the property. It's the name of the Jesuit retreat house

where I was staying - The Sacred Heart Retreat Center. It's a dry region and at pretty high altitude and so they created this stream that gently wound its way around the property to eventually land in a little pond with a fountain and lily pads. AS you sat or walked beside it, it made the sweetest little lapping of water sound as it washed over the rocks in the bed of the stream. And at the end of it there was a little babbling waterfall where the water would finally reach one large rock and pour over the side of it and fall into the pond.

One afternoon as the day was waning and the clouds of a passing thunderstorm rolled into the distance and the blue sky was sharp and bright in the afternoon and the wet ground was sparkling, I was sitting right about there near that spot of the little waterfall just listening and looking and breathing. And suddenly out of nowhere a little hummingbird – so beautiful and delicate with stunning colors flew over and hovered right there above the rock where the water was falling and I watch as it paused, fluttering its wings, holding it's little beautiful body absolutely still, inches from the water, and then in the most delicate fashion like the whole scene could just shatter to pieces it lowered itself onto the rock, it's wings stopped moving and for however many seconds it raised it's little head and beak and allow the water to just rush against its chest. It gave what seemed to me a little shudder of bliss – or it could have been the world around it that shuddered in bliss beholding this moment - and then it lifted off again and was gone in a split second.

Now you tell me. Does the beauty of that bird and that light and the way it somehow grabbed hold of my heart, is that just the random occurrence of molecules and matter or does the art of that moment not suggest to you an Artist behind it all? Doesn't the story of that bird, however brief its life may be,

however tiny it's little body in the scope of the universe, suggests a Storyteller behind it all? And not just any storyteller but One who would create a world where a tiny creature shudders in bliss at the sheer pleasure of life and one where the cosmos shudders to witness her experience of bliss?

I got up after that and walked quietly to the main house where with that image still hovering delicately in my mind and heart I gathered with the other retreatants and we ate our dinner in silence, each of us having our own encounters with the holy there on that hilltop in the foothills of the Rockies.

There's more I'd like to share, but I'll pause there for now and allow the choir to remind us – as the Deacons collect the offering - how in this world sound can be organized into song and how that can move us, another reminder that behind it all is a Composer who loves us and desires for that love to flow through us and out to others!