

Loneliness and Solitude

Isaiah 49:14-15
Psalm 62
1 Corinthians 4:1-5
Matthew 6:24-34

During a marriage preparation conversation with a bride-to-be, the young woman told me that she would kill herself if her marriage plans fell through. From the expression on her face and the tone of her voice, I knew she wasn't joking. As you can imagine, I was more than a little alarmed by the comment and it led to several long conversations. During those conversations, it became obvious that the woman feared and hated being alone and that she saw marriage as the solution.

That young woman is not alone in her hate and fear of loneliness. Most of us spend a large part of our lives running from loneliness. While some people eventually realize that they cannot outrun loneliness, others continue to run. For those of us who choose to stop running, we come to realize that loneliness is a fundamental human experience and that there are important lessons to be learned from it. While loneliness is often painful, it can also be glorious. The German philosopher, Paul Tillich, explained this, writing, "Language... has created the word 'loneliness' to express the *pain* of being alone. And it has created the word 'solitude' to express the *glory* of being alone" (*emphasis mine*). Being alone is both a painful and a glorious reality! And, in order to grow and mature in our vocation, we must willingly experience the pain and the glory of loneliness.

Coming to Know God

Pope John Paul II, in his Theology of the Body, explains the importance of loneliness, which he often refers to as "original solitude." He directs our attention to the second creation story, in chapter two of Genesis, which states that God created man first and that he was alone. The importance of this loneliness, or solitude, can be understood in two ways. First, it helped Adam to get to know God.

In the beginning, God was the only other being in creation, so Adam relied on Him for everything. Genesis 2:8-14 explains how God lavished Adam with everything he needed. Such an intimate experience of God's love and care is an important stage in every person's life. Before we can truly love another person, we must first know God's unconditional love for us.¹ The author of the first letter of John expressed this fundamental truth in these words, "We love because [God] first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

When we don't have a fundamental experience and knowledge of God's unconditional love for us *through the pain and glory of loneliness*, we will struggle in our relationships with other people. Usually, we will expect and demand that another human beings love us unconditionally, which is impossible. Such expectations and demands will usually manifest themselves in such things as clinginess, quick and unhealthy re-bounds from failed relationships, promiscuity, anxiety or depression. Ultimately, such expectations lead to very dysfunctional marriages and families.

¹ Saint Ignatius of Loyola called this experience the "principle and foundation," because it is so essential.

Coming to Know Ourselves

In addition to inviting us to know God more intimately, loneliness helps us to know ourselves better; it's an important part of our personal growth. Genesis 2:20 indicates that it was only when Adam named the other animals that he came to the self-awareness that none of them was a "suitable partner" for him. Adam could only know that the animals were not suitable partners if, through his solitude and relationship with God, he had come to understand who *he* was! In his solitude, he came to a greater self-awareness and noticed the fundamental difference between himself and the rest of creation.

Loneliness helps each of us to differentiate ourselves from others; it gives us the time and space we need to look interiorly, letting God's love define us, rather than letting the "outside world" define us. In this place of solitude, we begin to understand that there is no in the world who can fully identify with us except God, in whose image and likeness we are created.²

In a recent Arkansas Catholic article by Fr. Ronald Rolheiser entitled, "The Lesson within Loneliness," the author explains how we come to know our true selves through loneliness in this way—

What loneliness does for us, especially very intense loneliness, is destabilize the ego and make it too fragile to sustain us in the normal way. What happens then is that we begin to unravel, feel ourselves become unglued, become aware of our smallness, and know in the roots of our being that we need to connect to something larger than ourselves to survive.³

Father Rolheiser then connects this intense experience of loneliness with the first creation story in the book of Genesis, writing, "Because it destabilizes the ego and disorients us, loneliness puts us in touch with what lays below the ego, namely, the soul, our deepest self. The *image and likeness* of God lies in there as do our most noble and divine energies"⁴ (*emphasis mine*).

Every authentic vocation requires these "noble and divine energies"! When we run from loneliness, we rob ourselves of them. We rob ourselves of a deeper self-awareness and relationship with God. Father Timothy O'Conner, who used to work with Mother Teresa of Calcutta, recently shared that Mother Teresa once told him that the greatest sign of spiritual hunger is loneliness. If we try to run from that loneliness by filling it with idols then we will eventually spiritually starve. If however, we understand our loneliness and solitude as a spiritual hunger inviting us to experience God in a new way, then we will be transformed! Instead of seeing loneliness as an enemy, we must embrace the *pain and glory of loneliness* as an invitation by God to know ourselves and His love more deeply.

SUGGESTED PRAYER EXERCISE:

✚ Read Psalm 25:16-22. It is a person's expression of loneliness and distress. Have you ever experienced these things? What does the author do in his loneliness and despair? What does he hope for? Who does he trust in? How has your own experience of the pain and glory of loneliness helped you to know God and yourself better?

² As a side note, I have noticed that most of the couples who come to marriage preparation today are already living together. They don't realize that living together can mask their fear of loneliness and rob them of the maturity and growth in their relationship with God and other people that comes through the pain and glory of solitude. In fact, I would not be surprised if a significant part of the reason why couples who cohabit have a significantly higher divorce rate than couples who don't isn't connected to lack of maturity that comes from the avoidance of loneliness.

³ Arkansas Catholic, January 22, 2011, pg. 12.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pg. 12.