THE SPIRITUALITY OF SOLITUDE
Rev. Scott W. Alexander, Preaching
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UUFVB

Time for All Ages

“Thoreau at Walden Pond” – Harvard University video
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THE SERMON

Henry David Thoreau...a Harvard-educated Unitarian Transcendentalist was an active part of the “enlightenment intellegencia” that had established itself in Concord after the American revolution...even living a charmed and easy life under Ralph Waldo Emerson’s roof for a period of years as a sort of handyman and “live-in philosopher”! But in the Summer of 1845, he took a bold personal step, and retired to the deeply-wooded shores of crystal-clear Walden Pond (which was about a mile from the town) where he lived an austere life (for more than two years) in a rustic hut of his own construction. He called this solitary adventure “an experiment in essential living.” As one biographer put it, living alone in his little cabin on the pristine pond,
“He read, wrote, and made friends of beasts, birds and fish, recording his fascinating woodland life in the book Walden (or “Life in the Woods”) published in 1854.

“I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately...” Henry David Thoreau

In perhaps the most famous quotation from that famous journal, Thoreau explains his purpose of seeking out the SOLITUDE of Walden Pond:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms...

So it was primarily SOLITUDE -- the subject which is my spiritual focus this morning -- which Thoreau (more than anything else) was seeking at Walden. His nearest neighbor was a mile distant, and Thoreau was the sole inhabitant of the Walden woods. “I have, as it were, my own sun and moon and stars, and a little world all to myself...I love to be alone,” he wrote, “I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude.” While he was at Walden, Thoreau “would often sit alone (for hours on end) in the doorway of his cabin, and simply watch and listen as the sun moved across the sky and the light and shadows changed almost imperceptibly.” [Barry Andrews: from his book Thoreau as Spiritual Guide] He described it this way:

Sometimes, on a summer morning, having taken my accustomed bath, I sat in my sunny doorway from sunrise till noon...amidst the pines and hickories and sumacs, in undisturbed solitude and stillness, while the birds sang around or flitted noiseless through the house, until by the sun falling on my west window...I was reminded of the lapse of time...I grew in those seasons like corn in the night, and they were far better than any work of the hands would have been. They were not time subtracted from my life, but so much over and above my usual allowance.
What Thoreau was seeking (by retreating alone to the woods) was to more fully “awaken” himself to both the world around him, and the present moment, Sounding every bit the Buddhist on a quest for mindfulness, he wrote: “We must live in the present...launch ourselves on every wave...find our eternity in each moment...we must learn to reawaken, and keep ourselves awake, by an infinite expectation of the dawn...only that day dawns to which we are awake.”

[PHOTO AND QUOTE OF JONATHAN KABAT-ZINN ARE PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREEN]

American Buddhist teacher Jonathan Kabat-Zinn observes that

Jonathan Kabat-Zinn:

Thoreau’s two years at Walden Pond were, above all else, a personal experiment in mindfulness. He chose to put his life on the line in order to revel in the wonder and simplicity of present moments.

And then Kabat-Zinn reminds us that – almost 200 years later Thoreau’s mindfulness practice is available to us all, whether or not we ever “retreat to the woods”:

But you don’t have to go out of your way to find somewhere special to practice mindfulness. It is sufficient to make a little time in your life for stillness [and solitude], and what we call “non-doing” and then tune into your breathing. All of Walden Pond is within your breath. This miracle of the changing seasons is within your breath; your parents and your children are within the breath; your body and your mind are within the breath. It is the current of life...There are nothing but golden fish in this stream. All we need to see them clearly is the lens of awareness.

[PICTURE OF HENRY DAVID THOREAU AND HIS CABIN IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]
So Thoreau employed the solitude of Walden pond to help himself experience soul-satisfying mindfulness and awareness of the world around him...and shared what he discovered with all of us in his journal which remains, to this day, a classic best-seller, still read (importantly) by almost every high school student in America! And if you haven’t read this classic recently, I urge you to get a copy and read it again, Thoreau’s essential message never gets old.

But...it is very important to note here that (even though he purposefully built abundant solitude around himself while at Walden, Thoreau was NOT some sort of a pure hermit (or lonely ascetic) during this period of his life. While living alone those 26 months in the woods, he would regularly venture back into Concord for social contact, supplies and to conduct business matters. He also had a regular stream of visitors out to his little cabin in the woods. As he wrote, “I am naturally no hermit”... [in my little cabin] I had three chairs, “one for solitude, two for friendship, three for society.” So Thoreau – while seeking real, sustained solitude -- was not advocating that one “drop out” of society entirely, but rather find “a healthy balance between solitude and society... nature and civilization...materialism and a life of voluntary poverty.”

[Barry Andrews]

But, what Thoreau is clearly advocating in his Walden journals is for each of us (as human beings) build a regular and healthy amount of SOLITUDE into our lives, in order the cultivate to the kind of everyday MINDFULNESS (and attentive calm) that saves us from the jangle and distraction of routine human life. My guess is that most of us, day-in-and-day-out, do not have nearly enough of the kind of rich and nurturing solitude in our lives that Thoreau experienced on Walden Pond...which is why I want to talk about “The Spirituality of Solitude” this morning.

[PICTURES OF “WALDEN” BOOK JACKET COMES DOWN OFF THE CHANCEL SCREENS]

And what better time of the year -- my dear friends – to talk about THE SPIRITUALITY OF SOLITUDE (and the mindfulness and focus that can come with it) than this particular Sunday? In case you haven’t noticed, summer officially begins a week from Friday (on June 21st)...but here in sunny Florida, the meteorological season is already fully under way. Summer – with its unmistakable warmer temperatures (and markedly slower -- and easier -- natural rhythms) -- is everywhere around us. So what better time to reexamine our lives...and consider our relationship with one of life’s most precious and essential spiritual commodities – SOLITUDE?

[THE DICTIONARY DEFINITION IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]

SOLITUDE
Let’s begin by taking a look at the dictionary definition of “Solitude”.

You will notice that this matter-of-fact definition of “SOLITUDE” is essentially spiritually and emotionally NEUTRAL. It doesn’t indicate (except for the word “enjoy” being included in the first definition) whether SOLITUDE should be viewed by us as a positive or negative (joyful or melancholy) thing...solitude (as a word) simply has to do with the state of human “ALONENESS.” But it seems to me that – as we think more deeply about it -- there are (at least spiritually speaking) two polar (and opposite) kinds of solitude:

**[THE FOLLOWING IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]**

**THERE ARE TWO POLAR-OPPOSITE KINDS OF SOLITUDE:**

- **Spiritually empty and unsatisfying solitude** – which is boring (or lonely) “time alone” that is time unutilized, unfocussed, and unrewarding...and there is..
- **Spiritually full and satisfying solitude** – which is rich (or enlivening) “time alone” that is utilized, focused and rewarding...time used to deepen the quality and texture of our relationships with the world around us.

Let me – if I might -- give two simple examples from my own life that should make this distinction clear.

Periodically, here in Vero, I find myself alone at home with an evening (on my hands) when Collins is up in Washington DC working. When this is the case – when I’ve got the whole house and the whole evening to myself -- I face a decision as to how I will “spend” or “utilize” or “pass” that “alone” time. Honestly, If I’m not intentional or purposeful about it, I can easily fritter the evening away in SPIRITUALLY EMPTY AND UNSATISFYING SOLITUDE by plopping myself down front to the TV and watching several hours of uninspiring television (which I must admit I sometimes do). But if I’m spiritually wise, I can choose to spend at least a part of the evening in SPIRITUALLY FULL AND SATISFYING SOLITUDE...by simply turning off the TV (after the evening news) getting myself off the sofa and taking myself out on the back patio (perhaps with something cold to drink) and permit my senses to take in the rich (and comforting) sights, sounds, and smells of the evening. Most times I do this, I will admit it takes me a few minutes to settle down into rhythms of the solitude of the evening. But once I relax (and promise myself to stay put for a while) I find that I “awaken” to the richness that is all around me...the colors of the setting sun...the sound of what Collins and I call “the chirpie-derpies” that sing to you from the tropical trees...and of the nearby traffic and planes passing overhead (which remind me that I share this whirling planet with billions of other human beings). When I am wise enough to sit outside on such an evening in solitude, I find that I am pretty good company...
for myself! I don’t really need the distracting “jingle/jangle” of the TV...out on the patio, I go to my own quieter thoughts...think about the day that has been...and gather myself spiritually up (in simplicity and comfort) before I turn into bed.

[PAUSE...]

Similarly, I find a rich and satisfying solitude many mornings when (over these coming summer months) I wake up at our home on the Schroon River in the Adirondacks of upstate New York. It may not surprise those of you who know Collins and me as a couple, that I am a habitual “morning person” (who shoots out of bed ready to go as soon as the sun comes up)...whereas Collins is a perennial “night owl” (who often sleeps in a couple hours past my wake-up time). Now...some might assume that this would be a logistical “inconvenience” or “irritation” in our relationship...but in fact (for my spiritual life, anyway) it is a blessing in disguise! Because those hours when Collins remains conked out in bed liberate and empower me to spend some quality time alone with myself (and my world). One of my favourite morning “solitude rituals” is that I drive myself to get the morning papers at the country store down the road, then take myself, a cup of coffee, and the papers out to our screened in “tea house” down by the river and settle myself into the sun-lit silence and peace of that beautiful spot. As I slowly digest the papers (and think about my life and my world) I take time to watch the sun-dappled river roll by in its steady calm...hear the rising morning wind rustle through the pine boughs...listen to the abundant birds...and smell the pure mountain air that pours in through the screens. By the time Collins is finally up, I have already spent hours enjoying my companionship with myself...and my world...what a gift!

[PAUSE...]

Writer Dean Griffiths wisely points out that there is a huge (and important) difference between:

- Empty and meaningless alone-time -- which is loneliness and
- Rich and robust alone-time -- which is solitude

[THE FOLLOWING TEXT IS PROJECTED ON THREE SEPARATE, SEQUENTIAL SLIDES]

[SLIDE ONE]

Dean Griffiths:

Loneliness is a negative state, marked by a sense of isolation. One feels that something is missing. It is possible to be with people and still feel lonely – perhaps the most bitter form of loneliness.

[SLIDE TWO]

Solitude is the state of being alone without being lonely. It’s being comfortable within your own skin; becoming intimate with our own minds; laying claim to that power that flows through us when we accept and express our true self. It is a positive and constructive state of
engagement with oneself. Solitude is desirable, a state of being alone where you provide yourself wonderful and sufficient company.

Griffiths then goes on to point out:

**[SLIDE THREE]**

Solitude isn't about avoiding being with other people, its about [the positive choice of] being with yourself. Solitude is a place where the creative mind can happily and eagerly express itself because when you’re able to disengage from the demands of other people and the world around you, you suddenly free up the mental space to focus on those things that have been seeking your attention for so long.

Another writer on this subject, Mateo Sol, draws a similar distinction between:

- Empty/unfulfilling LONELINESS (which he calls life-robbing) and...
- rich/robust solitude (which he calls) ALONENESS.

I quote him:

**Loneliness and aloneness are completely different [from one another].**

**Loneliness occurs when we haven’t accepted our natural aloneness in life. Instead, we are still desperately trying to fill that fear of being existentially alone with external distractions and comforts.**

**Aloneness, unlike loneliness, is chosen...it can be described as the beautiful [solitary] feeling of being alone without being lonely. Aloneness brings the marvelous constructive state of engagement with yourself, where in you provide yourself wonderful and sufficient company. Aloneness helps us practice introspection and reflecting inside ourselves to discover our true natures...it feeds us from a well of inner wealth. Without aloneness (the virtue of solitude) it would be virtually impossible to find internal peace, direction, insight, and interpersonal harmony.**

[PAUSE...]

Alright...all of this is by way of my affirming this morning that there is a profound spiritual benefit (for all of us) not to simply “being alone” but to intentionally structuring REAL, NURTURING, RICH “SOLITUDE-TIME” into your daily life. So, I pray you, dear friends, this summer (and in all the seasons that follow) make a “contract” with yourself to PLAN AND STRUCTURE REAL SOLITUDE into your life. Make room not empty aloneness...but for rich, full, satisfying solitude...solitude that opens the door to a deeper self, and a more beautiful world.

Whether you do so by walking quietly alone through your neighborhood (first thing in the morning or last thing before bed)...getting on a bike and taking in the jungle Trail all by yourself...sitting in your favorite living room chair after dinner and listening to classical music...reading poetry alone with yourself in bed...or spending part of the afternoon down at the beach with just yourself and a bit of sunscreen. Set time aside with yourself for the SWEET
AND HEALING SOLITUDE that invites you to go deeper with yourself, and everything that is around you. Visit Walden Pond in your heart and be blessed.

Amen.

Another place where I personally find soul-satisfying solitude (and mindfulness) – when I “visit the Walden Pond in my heart” -- is when I am out (by myself) riding my bike – whether it is out in the country or here in the city. Perhaps some of you experience the same rich solitude of being when you go for a walk by yourself – whether it is in a park, or on the beach, or on city streets. Solitude (of a spiritual or enriching sort) does not require the absolute tranquility of a
“Walden Pond,” just a heart and mind ready to deeply “go into itself” to see what treasures it can find there.

[PAUSE...]

The kind of solitude I hope you have in your life is not just “time alone” (solitary time) but time to “go deeper into your own being and soul” to see the depths you can discover there.

The spirituality of solitude is to USE aloneness for personal