

QUIETUDE

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The sermon subject is quietude — and it means not silence or stillness so much as an inner spiritual quality of serenity and tranquility. It is the spirit evoked by the Psalmist when he says, “Be still and know that I am God.” It refers to an inner communion with the spirit of God, an appropriate theme as we prepare to celebrate the Lord’s Supper. It is the spirit cultivated by Quakers; it is the mood found by mystics of all ages and all cultures. It is, I think, a more positive term for such experience that the term quietism which has been associated with mysticism. This term may suggest a negative inaction; quietude suggests the serenity of the creative spirit that finds its source in the inner sanctuary of the soul but flows outwardly in positive acts of love and concern. It is the spirit of Walter Rauschenbusch who led Baptists in the Social Gospel movement at the beginning of the century, a movement dedicated to building the kingdom of God on earth, a movement which was blunted by the disillusionment of two world wars, and gave way to Neo-orthodoxy and now the contemporary interest in personal salvation peddled so successfully by the electronic church of television evangelists. In Walter Rauschenbusch and in the Quaker testimony the inner quietude discovered in the depths of the spirit is the inspiration for the committed social concerns they felt so keenly, and which seem to be so lacking in the electronic church of today. Rauschenbusch was giving testimony to his own personal religious inspiration when he wrote:

In the castle of my soul

Is a little postern gate

Whereat, when I enter,

I am in the presence of God.

In a moment, in the turning of a thought,

I am where God is. This is a fact.

This inner spirit is what I call quietude and I think it is a fact experienced by all those who listen to the voice of the eternal — to those who are still and know that this is the experience of God.

Quietude implies a kind of solitude. It is evoked in the quest of the self for its deepest dimensions, in the flight of the alone to the alone, as one mystic has put it.

But it is important to know that this sense of solitude, of being alone, is not to be confused with loneliness. There is nothing good to say about loneliness unless it inspires us to seek another. We can sympathize with the Psalmist when he cries, “Turn thou to me and be gracious, for I am lonely and afflicted.” And Ecclesiastes gives a poignant picture of the person all alone in

loneliness, warning “Woe to him who is alone when he falls, and has not another to lift him up.” And even Jesus seemed to have his moments of loneliness, especially in the Garden of Gethsemane when He prayed in agony alone, and His disciples whom He had asked to watch and pray fell asleep. After the feeding of the 5,000 Jesus sent the multitudes away and went up into a mountain away from everyone to pray, and as Matthew reports, “when evening came he was there alone”.

And yet with Jesus we have a sense that He was alone in the sense of solitude, not loneliness, for in His life of prayer He was in the Presence of God, the Father. And this is the answer to the curse of loneliness: spiritual solitude brings us to a Presence. Quietude is this inner communion.

There is a basic sense in which all people are faced with an inevitable loneliness. This is the fact of physical separation which is consequent to existing as a body. For bodies are distinct and separate. God said, we know, “It is not good that the man should be alone, and He made woman out of Adam’s rib.” But the creation still implies another, a separation, even though it be as Adam said, “Bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh.” And in the most intimate relationships there remains a separation. It is this separation that is the symbol of and reason for our loneliness. We try to overcome it by being with others, by an eagerness for togetherness, group associations; but the basic loneliness of our beings cannot be overcome this way. There always remains the experience of the loneliness of our responsibility, our guilt, in being what we are. And there is the knowledge of the individualizing and isolating prospect of dying our death, which haunts our being.

Quietude suggests another way to heal the curse of loneliness.

It suggests that the self is not limited to or by the body. It suggests that the self is no thing, no mere object — that it is a consciousness of unlimited dimensions. As Aristotle said, the mind which he identified with the soul is nothing before it thinks, and it is potentially everything it thinks. The soul, or self, then has dimensions that far transcend the limits of the body. It has depths that reach into the ultimate source of our being. This is the reason for the strange paradox that every religious person knows; it is in denying the personal self that one finds a larger self in which the personal concerns and loneliness are lost. In denying the self and following Jesus — His example, His spirit — we come to a new self in God. And in this larger self we find a new relationship with our fellows. We are not shut up in loneliness or private fears; we want to reach out and touch others, to give expression to the creative love we found in the experience of the inner presence of God in the spiritual solitude of prayer and meditation.

There are various explanations of this experience. For the religious, it is a fact that needs no explanation. For the theologian, it is evidence of the community of the Holy Spirit, the presence of God in the life of the believer, and this presence extended in many is the life of the church. The psychologist Jung calls this experience an awareness of a collective unconscious, a recollection of a common spiritual origin and destiny, that all people sense in some way. It points to larger unity of ourselves in one cosmic spirit.

There are less arcane and more aesthetic ways of expressing the same experience. There is, for example, Thoreau at Walden Pond, exulting in the beauty of nature, finding each new day a dawn in his own spirit, and reality a fabulous experience. But he finds this in the depths — not on the surface — of experience. “When we are unhurried and wise,” he writes, “we perceive that only great and worthy things have any permanent and absolute existence, that petty fears and petty pleasures are but the shadow of reality. This is always exhilarating and sublime.” And whether it be in the beauty of nature, the imagery of great poetry, the sound of great music, most of us can catch a sense of a sublime reality to which we relate that far transcends our petty selves, that refreshes us, restores us.

Or, we can simply call attention to the remarkable depths of the human spirit — its resourcefulness, capacity for creative effort. This is how the humanist would explain the experience. We have these spiritual potentials within us at all times. But this does not account for the fact that what is experienced is larger than the self, a deeper self, a higher Being, what Emerson called the Over-Soul.

Perhaps it is best explained by Quaker theory and practice — probably because the theory is simple and it is put into practice. There is an inner light, a divine seed. This is the light that lighteth every man that comes into the world. This is the divine reason — the logos of Greek thought, The Word which John said was in the beginning and which was made flesh as the Light of men. Jesus is the Light — Jesus shows the Way through the darkness. And the darkness cannot destroy the light. And how is He the Way? For the Quaker — by showing us His own relationship to God by seeking the Father within in the spirit of meditation, by teaching that the kingdom of God is within, in the midst of us, by extending to us His own spirit of trust, serenity, joy in the beauties of creation, and sharing the wonder of God’s creative love. All of this comes with the quiet authority of one who was one with God.

This means we seek God as an intimate presence within — not as some great cosmic force in the external world. When ye pray, say our Father — not O great cosmic force. There is an inner experience — most all of us have had some sense of the guidance of the Spirit at some time — some ineffable sense of the beauty that surrounds us, some gratitude toward goodness we have experienced, some sense of what we ought to do because it feels right. The religious life is a cultivation of, a listening to, the creative spirit of God within.

“Be still, listen, look within — and know that I am God.” Then one will find a presence in this meditative solitude, and will never walk alone in loneliness of spirit. This is the spirit of quietude.

This does not mean that we flee the world of time and sense to live a life of cloistered meditation, or cultivate an inner emotional sense of being saved. The medieval world counseled this and neglected the concerns of the here and now to prepare for one’s eternal salvation in the life to come. Nor does it mean on the other hand that we direct our concerns to specific problems and measure the value of religion in terms of its usefulness in solving our personal problems, in making us feel better, or in relating to political or economic issues. There is a one-sidedness in the Here and Now and a one-sidedness of the World of the Eternal — neither of which is alone

the true life of the religious spirit. We cannot ignore a maimed and bleeding world while we bask on the sunny shores of the Eternal found within. In the experience of the Divine Presence, there is a retention of both time and the timeless. In the experience of the Eternal Now of the Divine Presence, we no longer live merely in time. A deeper reality quickens, stirs, energizes, breaks in upon us and embraces us in Himself. We live our daily lives, then, just as busy as before — but with a new sense of serenity, joy, peace, and love. This is the spirit of quietude — fruit of the cultivation of the spirit.

It is this practice of religion that lightens burdens, eases pain, comforts sorrow, because it reveals a presence, a Comforter, a spirit within — even the spirit of Christ. And we have this promise: “Lo, I am with you always even unto the end of the world.”

In this service of communion let us remember Jesus, truly seek His presence, and pray that we may go forth renewed in the inner depths of our being with His spirit in us to guide our lives.