Solitude, Community and Leadership
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“Let him who cannot be alone beware of community. He will only do harm to himself and to the community...But the reverse is also true: Let him who is not in community beware of being alone. Only in the fellowship do we learn to be rightly alone and only in aloneness do we learn to live rightly in the fellowship.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

In this statement from his book, *Life Together*, the great German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer makes the startling and very sobering observation that if we do not take time regularly to be alone in God’s presence, we become dangerous or harmful in the human community. Why? Because we will unconsciously attempt to get from other human beings what only God can provide. We will demand that the community meet our needs for love, approval, identity and self worth—which is too heavy a weight for any community to bear. As significant as Christian community is, no human community can ever fully meet the needs that can only be satisfied by a rich and vibrant relationship with God.

The Danger of Community without Solitude

Bonhoeffer’s statement offers an important corrective to a one-sided spirituality that values community and activism without a commensurate emphasis on solitude. If people who are seeking community together are not clear on the need for both solitude and community and are not being guided to practice solitude in fruitful ways, the “harm” that can be done is incalculable. When the community fails to meet our needs or refuses our demands, we may become frustrated and take out our frustration on those around us.
through gossip, manipulation, attempts at controlling others, or simply leaving. We may accuse the community of failing us and even start projecting our inner lacks onto the leader(s) of the community—blaming them for not meeting needs that are God’s to meet anyway.

This is exactly what happened to the Israelites when they became disillusioned with their journey in community in Exodus 16. The people blamed Moses and Aaron for the lack of provision and even begin to question their motives; however, Moses refused to take the place of God in their lives—as gratifying to the ego as that might have been. Instead, he took the focus off himself and directed them back to their own relationship with God. He pointed out that providing at this level is really God’s to do and they need to take it up with him. “For what are we that you should complain against us? Your complaint is not against us but against the Lord.” (Exodus 16:8)

**The Danger of Leadership Without Solitude**

Even more disturbing than the harm that comes to communities when *individuals* are not cultivating solitude is what happens when *leaders* are not consistently seeking God in solitude. Shepherds (pastors and spiritual leaders) who do not spend time in solitude, receiving their soul’s nourishment from God, may start to feed on the sheep—the very flock or community they are supposed to be caring for. The result is a leader or leaders who are trying to get their basic human needs for identity, love, approval and belonging met *by the community* rather than seeking to have these needs satisfied in their relationship with God.
Many leaders are not even aware of their own unmet needs, let alone their unconscious patterns for trying to get other human beings to meet those needs—even in a ministry setting. So we have leaders whose profound emptiness results in the narcissistic tendency to always need to be in the limelight. Or whose need for love and approval result in performance-oriented driven-ness and perfectionism that they constantly inflict on themselves and others. Or whose sense of self is so fragile that they can’t live without a steady stream of applause and approval from others.

If our very real and legitimate needs for unconditional love, inner fullness, basic self-worth and sense of “being o.k.” are unmet, due to a lack of solitude in which God is the one who meets these needs, spiritual starvation sets in and the shepherd eventually begins to devour the sheep.

Where Real Service Begins

Henri Nouwen says, “In order to be of service to others, we have to die to them.” While this might seem like another fairly radical statement, what Nouwen is saying here is that we must die to needing those we serve for our own survival. We can love the sheep and serve them and be committed to them. We can be vulnerable with them and receive from them the gifts that God is giving to us through them. But our ability to survive spiritually and emotionally—to have our human needs for identity, self-worth, calling, love and approval met—must come from the richness of our own intimacy with God which can only be cultivated in a balanced rhythm of solitude and community.

“Each by itself (solitude and community) has profound pitfalls and perils,” Bonhoeffer goes on to say. “One who wants fellowship without solitude plunges into the
void of words and feeling, and one who seeks solitude without fellowship perishes in the
abyss of vanity, self-infatuation and despair.”

The real beauty and effectiveness of solitude and community is not in either one
by itself but in a balanced rhythm between the two. Let him who cannot be alone beware
of community…let him who is not in community beware of being alone.

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