

Solitude, Community & Ministry: Three Ways to Create Space for God by Henri Nouwen

There is a very beautiful story about Jesus that tells us He went up to the mountain to pray and He spent the whole night in solitude with God. In the morning, He came down from the mountain and created a small community around Him, giving each one His name and calling them apostles. In the afternoon with that community, He went to a stretch of level ground and there spoke to the crowds about the Good News of God and healed all the sick (Luke 6:12-19).

What I find so moving here is that Jesus went from solitude to community to ministry. I would like to talk to you about solitude, community and ministry as three ways to create space for God. Let me start talking to you about solitude.

I wonder if solitude is important for you. I think for anyone who wants to live a spiritual life, solitude is essential. Solitude is the place where we can listen to the Voice who calls us the "the beloved." That is what solitude is. It is being alone with God and hearing a Voice there that says, "You are my beloved, on you my favor rests" (Matthew 6:6-7). I think we really have to keep hearing that Voice, because there is a constant temptation to say we are no good; we are useless. If people really knew how I feel, they wouldn't like me.

I live in a community of people with severe handicaps. The problem is not so much that they have handicaps, but that they think they are not loved. That is true for every human person. We are always tempted to say that we are no good; people really don't like us. We are always filled with feelings of guilt, feelings of shame, with many worries. In that way, we really lose touch with the truths about ourselves. The truth is that God loves us, has loved us from all eternity and holds us safe. God has molded us in the depths of the earth, has knitted us together in our mother's womb, and we really belong in God's arms. In that embrace, we can hear again and again, "You are my beloved daughter. You are my beloved son. You are my beloved child."

I think that is why we have to create some solitude in our life so we don't lose touch with that Voice. Otherwise, we keep begging, going around and saying, "Do you love me? Do you care for me?" We become very restless, anxious people who are never sure that we are really safe, that we are really well loved.

Solitude is creating a little space for God in your life where God can speak to you and where in the midst of all the other voices that ask you do this, to go there, and to be involved to death, you can hear that very Gentle Person saying, "I love you. You are safe. I embrace you. You don't have to beg for love. You are mine and I am yours."

I think that is why Jesus spent the night in prayer, the night in solitude (Mark 1:35; Luke 6:12). Sometimes it is hard, because it is night. It is dark and we are not always sure if we are going to hear that Voice, but we have to trust. Once we know that we are the beloved and once we know that we are well held, we can go down from the mountain and start creating community. Every time we live solitude well, we will find ourselves called out of solitude to create community.

There are two qualities of community that I want to talk to you about. They are forgiveness and celebration. That is what makes community, whether it is a formal community, whether it is family community, whether it is a parish community, or whether it is an intentional community. These things— forgiveness and celebration—are essential.

Forgiveness means the willingness to always forgive people for not being able to fulfill all your needs (Ephesians 4:32). I feel that constantly. I expect people to fulfill all my needs. I expect people to love me unconditionally, and they can't. My father cannot, my mother cannot, my brothers and sisters, my church, the people around me cannot. In a way, I always bump into the reality that people are limited and I want them to be unlimited lovers.

Well, I'm disappointed again and again and again. That disappointment should lead me to forgive my fellow human beings for not being God, for not being able to give me all I need and all I desire. I should also ask forgiveness constantly, again and again, that I cannot offer people that unconditional love I would like to offer. People are disappointed in me, also, because I am not being for them what they hoped I could be.

Forgiveness is really essential. If you want to live in community, you have to forgive, not once in a while, but every day. I think that before breakfast you have had ten chances to forgive, just the way you think, the way you feel. You have so much anger, so much jealousy, so much resentment. We have to keep forgiving. Once we forgive, we can celebrate.

Celebration means to lift up the gifts of the people with whom we live (1 Corinthians 12:26; Philippians 4:4; Colossians 3:15-16). To lift them up and say, "Hey, brother, hey, sister, I see something beautiful in you and I want to lift it up. I want to celebrate it. I want you to recognize your goodness. You have a gift, a gift of welcome. You have a gift of hospitality; you have a gift of gentleness; you have a gift of humor. I want you to recognize it."

When we forgive people that they cannot give it all, we can celebrate what they have to give us. They can recognize that their gifts are a limited expression of God's

unconditional love and a reflection of that. We can rejoice in it and say, “You and you and you all have gifts that make me think of God’s unconditional love. If I see you all together, then I start seeing more and more of God right among the people I’m living with” (1 John 4:11-12).

I discovered that in my community with mentally handicapped people. They have incredible gifts and I rejoice in these gifts more every day. Once we have a community of forgiveness and celebration, then we can go out and do ministry together. We can go out to people and announce Good News.

What is ministry? Well, ministry is very simple. It is to lay down your life for your friends (John 15:13), to let the way you live your life be a source of hope for others (1 Peter 2:12). Every human being is called to do ministry—you and I, wherever we are (John 15:15-17). It is not actually a thing we do. It happens wherever we go, when we are living in the spirit of Christ. I want to give you two words that express ministry—the word “compassion” and the word “gratitude.”

Ministry is to be compassionate. In the midst of a very competitive world where we are always comparing ourselves with others and are always fighting—there is so much rivalry—we are called to be compassionate (Philippians 4:5). True ministry means, “I am with you. Even though I can’t solve your problems, I am with you. Even though I can’t fix all the problems, I am with you. I love you” (Romans 12:9-12, 15; 1 Corinthians 12:24b-26). Compassion means to be with people where they are hurting; be with people where they are suffering; be with people who don’t know what to do. Just be there and say, “I am your brother. I am your sister. I am not going to leave you alone. I am going to enter in the place of pain with you and that is where you will find healing.”

The second quality of ministry is gratitude (Hebrews 12:28). We live in a world that is filled with resentment and cold anger (Galatians 5:19-21a; James 4:1-3). There is so much resentment in this world and we have to move from resentment to gratitude. Real ministry is to say, “I am grateful for you. There is something beautiful in you and I am going to say thank you to you.”

Ministry is not just giving, but first of all, it is receiving the gifts of others and being joyful about it. We can do that every moment of our life. We can say, “There is something beautiful in you and I thank you. I thank you for your goodness, for your gentleness, for your smile, for inviting me, but I thank you for just being you and it is good.” When you are grateful, then gradually people can let go of their resentment and anger and discover their own beauty. Through compassion and through gratitude, we can really be people who are a gift to the world and be people of joy.

Let me conclude. I want to ask you very simply to give a little time in your life for solitude, a few moments a day to be alone with God and hear the Voice that calls you “the beloved” that says, “You are my beloved daughter. You are my beloved son.” Can you develop a little community in your family, among your friends, in your parish, with people who love you and who care for you in a limited way and live a life of forgiveness and live a life of celebration together? Can you keep going out to the places of hurt, where there are people who are in pain? Sometimes they are right around you. You don’t have to go far. You can just look around in your family, among your friends. Go to people and say, “How are you doing? I see there is some pain there. Can I be with you for a moment?” As you do that, you will discover you will enter into a life of compassion and a life of gratitude. That is the life that Jesus calls us to. That is the life that Jesus lived and He asks us to live with Him, compassionate and always grateful.

Scripture references were added for you to have for further meditation.