

Learning in the Wilderness

## **Learning the Difference between Loneliness and Aloneness**

Sermon: First Sunday of Lent, February 18, 2018

In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

Good morning.

It has been a very painful week for us to watch the horrific events which unfolded in a southern Florida high school. A young man aged 19, who had been expelled from the school the previous year, somehow managed to get inside the school building with an assault rifle and kill 17 students, while wounding many others.

Our hearts break for the souls of those students, for their families and friends, for the community and for our entire nation, because we know that such an act of violence could have happened at any other high school in any other community such as this one.

As we mourn this tragedy and pray for healing, those of us here, who have come to church on this First Sunday of Lent, hear a gospel story about Jesus being driven into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit, where he was tempted by Satan.

As I pondered the tragic news of this past week, I learned more about the life of the shooter. Then I saw some connections between the lessons Jesus went into the wilderness to learn and lessons this young man never learned in his deeply troubled upbringing.

One of the most important lessons Jesus went into the wilderness to learn is the difference between aloneness and loneliness, between being alone and being lonely. Aloneness means you have relationships with others and you are taking time away from those relationships. Loneliness means you are afraid you have no relationships with others. Being alone means you have a relationship with God and with others. When Jesus was alone he was alone with God. Being lonely means you feel isolated and out of relationship with others.

We know that when Nicholas Cruz was a student at that high school, he was very isolated from the other students. In fact, he was so isolated that he did not fit in with those students who also had trouble relating to their peers. We also learned that this young man had been rejected by his natural parents and then adopted by another couple. Recently both of his adopted parents had died. The teachers and students who knew him, understood him to be troubled and it was known he had a reputation for indulging in very violent fantasies.

This young, deeply troubled young man lived in a wilderness of his own. He never learned one of the lessons, Jesus went into the wilderness to learn, which was the difference between being alone and being lonely.

Jesus went into the wilderness to learn how to be alone with himself. He went to be alone with God and he went to be alone, so he could return and have healthy relationships with others.

Jesus had to learn how to be ALONE with himself! That is an essential life skill. Clearly this young man in Florida spent much of his time by himself. When he was alone he was isolated and disconnected. He had very few friends. We know he was alone much of his life, either when he was by himself or even when he was in gatherings with his peers. He did not have a healthy relationship with himself and he had few if any relationships with others.

Jesus went into the wilderness to learn how to be alone with God; the God who at Jesus' baptism said the words, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with whom I am well pleased. In the wilderness, Jesus had the opportunity to learn that even when he was alone, he was always alone with God. It certainly would appear that this young man never learned how to have peace of mind when he was by himself. And it certainly would seem that he never heard the words that he was beloved.

One of the most important lessons we need to learn in life is that a healthy life includes *both* times when we are comfortable being by ourselves and times when we are around other people.

Clearly, this young man did not have a relationship with God, he did not have a relationship with any friends and he did not have a healthy relationship with himself.

Jesus went into the wilderness to be alone with God, he went into the wilderness to learn how to be by himself and he went into the wilderness to grow in his identity so that he could relate to other people on a very deep level.

Jesus also went into the wilderness to be tested by Satan, God's enemy. That was a very important part of his growth in his identity. There would be many opportunities when he would question his vocation, his purpose or his mission in life. This questioning and temptation began in the early part of his ministry. But it would continue. He needed to toughen up, to be confident in his relationship with his Father and to contend with the enemy who would do everything in his power to seduce Jesus into renouncing his vocation.

It is no wonder that Jesus spent so much time in prayer throughout his three-year ministry, learning to trust God to guide and protect him in the mission he was sent to accomplish. Consider Jesus' temptation in the

Garden of Gethsemane the night before his crucifixion. He was certainly alone while his disciples slept and was in agony asking his Father to 'let this cup pass from me' only to gather his senses and pray, 'not my will but thine be done.'

But he was alone at that crucial time and resisted the temptation to renounce his vocation, in part because he had learned from the beginning of his ministry how to trust God when he was alone.

Each of us needs to learn how to be alone and stay healthy. Each of us has to learn how to enjoy solitude and to find things to enjoy by ourselves. Think of what wonderful things there are to enjoy when you are alone. Yes, there is television or movies. There are books and music. There can be practicing an instrument or being passionate about learning a hobby. Think of the Olympic athletes we have been watching. How much time did they practice in the early hours of the morning when most of their peers were asleep? They had a relationship with the sport they loved.

I remember reading an article about famous women, women who accomplished great things in their life. One of the examples was Eleanor Roosevelt. A theory of the journalist was that a number of famous women were not particularly popular when they were young girls or adolescents. They did not spend most of their time with other relationships, with their peers or with boys. Instead, they learned how to be alone with themselves, to cultivate several interests and to grow in their identity without relying as much on other relationships.

Learning to enjoy being alone is essential to being in relationship with other people. A healthy life is about both being in relationship with other people and being alone. Jesus went into the wilderness, not to stay there, but to be there for forty days, and then return to a life *with* others and a life *for* others. He showed us a pattern of living in healthy relationships with others while maintaining a healthy relationship with himself. You could call this pattern 'withdrawal and return'.

This is an essential pattern of life that this terribly troubled young man in Florida did not learn. His life seems to have been one of rejection, abandonment, isolation and an inability to relate to other people. No one seems to have gotten through to him. No one seems to have mentored him, befriended him or companioned him in any of the good things this life has to offer.

You have heard me say this before and you will hear me say it again, that one of the most important lessons I ever learned is that 'life is relationship'

#### LIFE IS RELATIONSHIP

I first heard that simple lesson years ago in my first year of seminary when I was a student chaplain serving in a state mental hospital. A wise man gave

us a lecture on just that subject, pointing out to us that one of the reasons why people were in this institution was because they had such a difficult time relating to other people. The causes might be many, but the results were isolation and an inability to relate to other people.

Jesus taught us that 'Life is Relationship'. He went into the wilderness to be alone with God so that he could return to his life with others and love them with the greatest love ever seen. In the climax of that life he walked the way of the cross alone, once for all, so that he could save humankind from their sins and show them a life of human flourishing.

On this first Sunday of Lent, as we ponder our Lord's temptation in the wilderness, may we be reminded of the importance of both being alone and living in relationship with others, so that our lives may grow and our relationships flourish, for the well being of all. Amen

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