

As a little boy, summer evenings were a time for running around our neighborhood in Pendleton, Oregon with my pack of friends. Summer in Eastern Oregon is hot and dry and so our uniform in this play was simply a pair of shorts – no shoes or shirt. We would play tag, wrestle, etc., all with incredible energy. But my brothers and I had a set bedtime. I forget exactly when that was – probably around 8:00. Shortly before that my Dad – prompted, probably, by Mom -- would step out on the front porch and give a piercing whistle, audible throughout the neighborhood. That was the signal for the Nagel boys to head home – home we would troop, slowly, because we knew what waited us – bed.

We would sometimes hopelessly protest, “It’s too early!” My back would be itching. If you play on the grass without a shirt, that is what happens – an itchy back. There may or may not have been a bath waiting. But all too soon we were put in our beds. But it was horrible. It was still light outside! And I was supposed to sleep? I can

remember just lying there on top of the covers in the late sunlight, itching, until I eventually fell asleep.

“After he had fed the people, Jesus made the disciples get into a boat and precede him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. After doing so, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray.” Today I want to preach about our spiritual need for solitary silence, and I want to begin with Jesus’ own habit of prayer.

Remember the context of today’s Gospel from Matthew 14. Earlier in the chapter Jesus had heard the news of the execution of John the Baptist. He had withdrawn to a deserted place to pray. But the people found out and followed Him. Jesus (last week) eventually feeds those five thousand. That brings us to today’s gospel. Once again, after satisfying the 5,000, Jesus goes up the mountain by Himself to pray.

Two things: first, notice how Jesus is not put out by the demands of those around Him. He is a very busy man. But precisely

because He is tugged in many directions, Jesus repeatedly seeks out solitude and silence. Including even getting away from His Disciples. “Jesus made the disciples get into a boat.” He sends them away. Jesus teaches us by example. Sometimes we need silent solitude – away even from those closest to us.

We suffer in our society from a “silence famine.” We are bombarded by stimuli and exterior and interior noise. And that means being silent is really hard for us. Here I want to go back to my boyhood play. I see in my own long-ago struggles with going to bed as the personification of the way all my inward faculties and desires rebelled against that thought of becoming silent – of going to bed. My mental distractions seem to say, “There is so much more to do, say, yell, play! Don’t shut us down!” But just as with little boys, there is the need for quiet, sleep, silence – periodic stillness for the faculties, if they – we -- are to grow.

Why? In our first reading Elijah the Prophet goes up Mount Horeb to encounter God, who would be passing by. First came the fierce wind, then an earthquake, third a raging fire. But God was in none of these. But then Elijah heard a “tiny whispering sound.” That whisper was the voice of the Lord! How can we hear Him if we’re never silent, alone, listening, as Elijah was?

As I said, we live in a time of constant media noise and images. We are surrounded by signs, sounds, screens. Not all of these are bad. Again, I think of my thoughts stirred by this media noise as being like those little boys running, jumping – full of life and energy – but also at some point, needing to be called to bed for a while – to silence.

We need silent solitude in our lives if we are to hear and know God. Elijah knew that. Jesus knew that – and they sought the quiet. How are we to do that? Because it is hard.

Here is one concrete idea about how we can begin to experience significant silence in our lives. Whenever I am by myself driving somewhere I always remain in silence. It's simple, but a challenge. We want to listen to our playlist, our podcasts, our audio books. Those are all good in their place. But silence is even more important – and if you have not yet formed a discipline in your life for achieving silence – here is the chance that we all have.

I'm not talking about when others are in the car, of course. But when alone, stay alone – with God. The challenge is that music, audio books and other talks give immediate pleasure and stimulation. Our minds can play with them. The silence of solitude takes time to appreciate. We're not used to them yet. Again, Elijah doesn't hear the whisper of God right away. First, he must sit still through the storm, the earthquake, and the fire. But eventually things settle to a new level of openness.

Silence at first is experienced as mere emptiness and loss.

(Think of that young me lying on that bed in summer, wide awake, wanting to be running.) But eventually silent solitude brings its own rest. In time, we will miss the silence when others in the car require us to be attentive to their presence.

Try this practice – try it long enough to get used to it. The wonderful thing about silent driving is that everybody can do it. We all drive alone sometimes. Make your I-405 experience fruitful – not frustrating. We all need to withdraw to pray periodically, especially if we're busy and harried. Discover in that silent solitude what Jesus knew. Join Him there!