

Bonhoeffer starts talking about The Day Alone by talking about community. He notes that there are those among us who come to community because we cannot be alone. Those who come to community because we need an outlet for the anxiety that lives in us. While Bonhoeffer notes that the community can be a place of mutual encouragement and support, the community cannot heal the deepest anxieties within us...only God can do that as we bring our whole selves to God in moments of solitude and silence facing our fears and anxieties.

Bonhoeffer notes that when insecure, anxious people come into the community looking for security from others that they can only find from God, the community becomes dysfunctional...filled with idle talk, gossip, and distraction. Have you ever felt that in your extended family, your workplace, or your church?

I think Psalm 139 is a perfect psalm to be prayed alone with God. You might want to make it your devotional psalm for this week. I invite you to spend at least 15 minutes alone with God each day. The writer of Psalm 139 is talking with God, savoring their identity in God, reminding themselves that nowhere they go is far from God.

Today I want us to focus on the end of Psalm 139. I have long struggled with the end of Psalm 139, so much so that sometimes I often skip right over it. The psalm writer seems to turn ugly, violent and self-righteous.

If only you, God, would slay the wicked!

Away from me, you who are bloodthirsty!

²⁰ They speak of you with evil intent;
your adversaries misuse your name.

²¹ Do I not hate those who hate you, LORD,
and abhor those who are in rebellion against you?

²² I have nothing but hatred for them;
I count them my enemies.

I wonder how many of those the writer has deemed enemies of God, are actually just people who have hurt, harmed, or angered the writer? Maybe the truth is they are enemies of the writer and not so much enemies of God. There is nothing wrong with being honest before God and bringing those who hurt us before God. We can even cry out for God to punish them. But the psalm writer is revealing his own dysfunction here when he cries out for God to kill them and confesses he hates them. For God doesn't hate...he loves and he calls us to love our enemies.

The good news is the psalm writer doesn't stop there. He seems to know where his problems come from and the psalm closes with this holy and noble prayer:

Search me, God, and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts.

²⁴ See if there is any offensive way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.

Too often, our identification of the wicked and evil ones....comes from our own struggles, our own insecurities, our own anxieties. And alone with God, we confess that. We own it. And we pray to God to lead us in the way everlasting....the way of love and life.

We live in a hugely divided and anxious world. We live in a hugely divided and anxious denomination. The bishop requested we read a book called the Anatomy of Peace. It is about having a heart of peace in a world of war. It was a heart of peace the psalmist prayed for when he said "test me and know my anxious thoughts". Bonhoeffer would say that this is the heart we find in our Day Alone with God.

I have been taking a training class within the denomination. It's called Tending the Fire: Wise, resilient leadership for a changing world. Two of the books we are reading are called Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times and The Anxious Organization. Each is in high demand. We are all, each and every one of us, struggling to navigate the rapid change and challenge of life in this 21st century global world.

The number one take away of the course is that more than anything else, leaders must know who they are – with all their strengths and weaknesses – and Whose they are – God's. Secondly they must know where they end and where other's begin. This process is called self-differentiation. It frees us to be who we are and grow into who God calls us to be, to lead and respond in strength, compassion, and authenticity. It is the essence of wholeness. This place of quiet peace with oneself and God is the place from which we can truly begin to love our neighbor as we love our self.

Bonhoeffer notes that in our quiet time with God we engage the Word of scripture differently. We engage it slowly, reverently, and personally....inviting it to stir us, challenge us, transform us. If our journey with scripture doesn't move us most of the time....we are not engaging scripture deeply enough.

Bonhoeffer calls us to respond to scripture with prayer; speaking confessions to God, asking God to lead and guide us, asking God to help us serve.

Finally we are to pray for others...all others in need – even those who trouble us or judge us or exclude us. When we pray for them, we are not to demand what we want for them or need from them, but simply to lift them into God's grace and mercy. By doing the hard work of love that is found in lifting another child of God into God's presence, we grow in love, we deepen the bonds of community, and we grow in grace and love toward the child of God we pray for.

Are you able to sit quietly with your God, knowing you are a beloved child of God? Do you engage scripture...letting it speak to you personally, transform you, and grow you in Christlikeness? Do you spend time in prayer asking God to help you bear the Word in your life? Do you earnestly do the hard work of lifting other brothers and sisters into God's presence in grace and mercy?

Only as we faithfully sit with God alone, can we join the community as healthy, whole, self-differentiated children of God. Let us go out this week committed and courageous enough to sit alone with God....knowing that there we will find healing, wholeness, and love. Amen.