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PMN- Personal Spiritual Formation

Dr. Ron and Wanda Walborn

April 17, 2020,

Silent Retreat

All semester long, I had been hearing about this Weekend Retreat that was mandatory to my successful completion Personal Spiritual Formation. Initially, I was skeptical about the retreat and had reservations- no pun intended- about going. It would mean that I would be declining a speaking engagement in front of a sizable crowd that I was earnestly looking forward- perhaps, as I reflect on it now, I can admit that I was looking forward to it for all the wrong reasons. After receiving an email from Dr. Ron Walborn, encouraging me to cancel the appointment because it would impact my grade and I would be blessed by it, I reluctantly did so. I couldn't have made a better decision. Personal Spiritual Formation has had a huge impact in my spiritual life in the short time I had been attending class. You can therefore imagine my great despair at learning that we were no longer going to take our weekend retreat, one of the results of the COVID-19 Pandemic that hit the United States toward the end of January. What would I do?

Prior to the weekend of April 4, 2020, I had never even heard of a Silent Retreat, much less had taken one. Even though Heather Garcia and our Spiritual Directors were kind enough to explain to us how we should plan to spend our day, I still couldn't make heads or tails as to if I were doing things right. I spent more time worrying over whether the Silent Retreat meant taking a vow of silence or keeping my home quiet. I should have just reached out to our instructors for further clarity, I still don't understand why I didn't. I think it was because I was rushing to finish up as many assignments as possible before beginning my retreat. I was under the impression that

the retreat was to take place on Saturday, and it was only after meeting up in our small group that I realized it could've taken place within any 24 hour time-block over that weekend.

I honestly was looking forward to being AWAY from it all during this weekend retreat. I looked forward to escaping my apartment and dare I say, even my children, family and church responsibilities (Sunday School, Worship Leader, Facilitator) all to just be in the presence of God surrounded by His holy creation in its purest and untapped form. I am a lover of mountains, streams, forests- the great outdoors. Being in nature brings a deeper worship out of me for some reason. The idea that I was being deprived of so great an escape made it that much harder for me to mentally prep for my home retreat. "What am I retreating from? We are on lockdown, I am going to retreat while in the same environment that I have been for the last 2-3 weeks!", these are the thoughts I would mutter out loud to myself- and sometimes within earshot of my children.

I considered sending my children away for the week, but since I had been quarantined with symptoms of COVID-19, no one wanted to take my children in. I served my children notice the entire week, "Do NOT talk to me, call me, text me, or slip notes under my door from Midnight Friday until Sunday morning. I am on a Silent Retreat. That means, make your OWN food, keep your entertainment devices on low and use earbuds- I don't want to hear your music, game shows, cartoons, etc." Getting ready for this spiritual retreat was putting me a bad mood. I wondered how this could be possible. How could I be taking journey to be with the Lord that suddenly made me so angry about being in the presence of my children? My sister finally agreed to take my youngest daughter (who surprisingly stayed healthy throughout my illness), but my oldest daughter would have to remain home with me, as my mom was also ill and wary of bringing her by. This made me more angry. It was bad enough that I wouldn't be retreating from

my day-to-day to be with God in the mountains somewhere, but now I wouldn't even know the joy of being ALONE with Him in my own home.

I felt the anxiety building the closer I got to Friday, assignments still weren't completed, and I worked on them straight til Midnight Saturday morning. My children called and kissed me goodnight, and I shut my bedroom door, shut my mouth and shut myself in for the evening, dreading what the morning would bring.

My body naturally woke up at 6am, normally, I am inclined to pray at this time, but for some reason, I felt sad. I was disappointed to spend the retreat at home, not alone. So I thanked the Lord for a new day and promptly rolled over, ignoring cues to wake up and start my day with worship. In my spirit, I wanted to rise and praise God, but my flesh wanted to sulk, and unfortunately I gave in to my flesh... I laid there... unable to sleep yet trying anyhow, tossing and turning, murmuring and complaining, hungry- knowing I wouldn't be eating, but I laid there. I laid there until almost 10 am. And then suddenly, I sat up with lightening speed. Why was I allowing myself to be defeated in this. I wanted to pray and give God thanks, but then realized I wasn't sure if I was supposed to be saying anything at all to the Lord, after all this was my silent retreat, wasn't the whole idea that I should be waiting for Him to say something to me? I puzzled over this for hours. I wanted to play worship "mood" music. I wanted to play that music and sing and bow, and yet some part of me kept telling me if I did those things, then I would be defeating the purpose of silence- because I be distracting my thoughts with noise. Meanwhile, my mind was already greatly distracted over these worries that over the fact that I did not know how to personally retreat in silence with God. "Do I talk to Him or not?" I felt like an utter failure from the start.

I realized that I would really defeat the purpose of this retreat if I stayed in bed any longer, so I got up, picked up my bible and did my normal reading for the morning and a silent prayer as I read. I think I started with a Psalm, can from there went back into the book of Acts, I believe I was reading the closing chapters and then I started the book of Romans and may have concluded around chapters 3 and 4 again. I felt better as I took my time to reading, jotting down my thoughts and then reflecting the practical application. I recalled that there was a book Marilyn, one of my Spiritual Directors asked our group to read, so I downloaded the booklet, *The Steps to Freedom in Christ*, and I began to read. As I began to read the booklet and affirm the confessions and renunciations over my life- yes, I finally realized at this point that it would be okay for me to confess out loud- I found myself experiencing greater freedom. Even though I felt pretty sure of the scriptures Anderson referred to in the booklet, I looked up just about everyone one of his references, just for the benefit of reading the word with my own eyes and affirming it with my own lips after I read it. This back and forth between the booklet and my bible- and all the in-between prayers- ended with me completing the booklet 7 hours after I began it. I learned something though, from reading it. I recorded it in my journal that day. I learned about the power of confession, below, I am sharing an excerpt from my journal entry that day. I tell myself to go back to it as a reminder at least once a week.

“ I am reading *The Steps to Freedom in Christ* Booklet. I realized something- not only will unconfessed sins eat us up and keep us condemned and guilty in our minds. The bible says confess your sins to one another and pray so that you may be healed. I believe it is important to say out loud to another believer the things that Satan is tempting us with, holding over our heads and what we struggle with. When we bring it to the light a burden is lifted, we are no longer harboring secrets **with** the devil, he can no longer play on our minds, but he is exposed to the congregation for the enemy, tempter, trier and accuser that he is. When we confess our sins, he gets exposed and we get the prayers and help we need from our brethren through the prayers of the righteous. Our minds should be put at ease because true brethren don't hear your struggle and condemn you for them, but pray you through them and mourn with them that mourn. We share the load and don't shame one another, but we consider our OWN selves and realize we have more in common than what we may have cared to admit. NO MORE SECRETS. It is in keeping secrets and hiding sins that Satan is glorified in our minds

and gets the upper hand over our lives. He turns everyone and every eye against us in our own mind, isolates us and then does the work of mentally picking us apart and making us feel unworthy, unloved, unforgiven and unforgivable. He will have us believing His lie over God's truth and we run in shame and hide not only from the brethren, but from God. This is a primitive response ingrained in our DNA by our first Parents who sinned, ran, and hid and tried to cover in the garden. This is nothing new. It has since been the emotional response of every human being at the experience of fear, shame, guilt, nakedness and exposure. I was AFRAID, for I KNEW, I was NAKED (without God), so I HID (AFRAID of EXPOSURE). I command by the Spirit of the living God that the body of believers in Christ Jesus "TAKE THE CLOAK OFF" in the name of JESUS "And be HEALED". Oh, God, I see this thing so clear and I feel it in the pit of my stomach- like my soul- this is what has been hindering us for so long from being free. We have kept silence on satan out of shame, if we tell on him, we tell on ourselves. CONFESS YOUR SINS- don't go to the grave with them, don't go another DAY holding onto them, these unconfessed sins are killing us. They are keeping us from relationship with our FATHER GOD. CONFESS YOUR SINS, CONFESS MY SINS, CONFESS OUR SINS AND BE HEALED!!!! This is the part Satan doesn't want us to read, to get to, or to know or to believe (because it is the part where he loses his grip on our conscience). Confession is good for the soul, but bad for the reputation. The lie: "if you confess, everyone is going to be looking at you funny"; "if you confess about this, folks will never believe you're telling the truth about anything else", "everybody gonna think you ain't saved now", "you gonna lose **your pedestal**", "you gonna lose the **praises** of people", "people not gonna call you a good girl anymore", "people gonna **see** you for who you really are (which is a sinner who has been saved by grace- just like them! That's the way we should ALL see ourselves!)", "people gonna call you a hypocrite (no, they only do that when you **don't** confess and get caught)"; "if you confess, everybody's gonna know you sinned- its gonna spread like wildfire, these "saints" can't handle the truth (maybe not, but it's been proven that **Satan also cannot be trusted with the truth**- he's proven that by his constant accusing and shaming of you and I before God and in our own minds for our failures)"; "if you confess you might lose your position"; "if you confess you might lose your relationship"; "if you confess you gonna destroy your own marriage or someone elses"; "if you confess, you'll be taking others down with you"; "if you confess your friends who were doing it with you are gonna shame you, leave you, discredit you to save their skin", "if you confess people will NEVER trust you again", "if you confess you're going to lose your **following**", "if you confess you're going to cause other people to leave the church; to leave God..." I can go on and on.. The lies don't stop coming. And you know I am telling you the truth. How do I know these things, because I was a sinner, I have sinned since receiving grace- I have experienced this kind of assault firsthand? I know what I am talking about and I know about this enemy we face- I have seen his tactics. I have seen how he destroys lives...with lies. LIES! NO MORE DEALS WITH THE DEVIL!!! BELIEVE GOD! [It's time to] Expose satan's lies of darkness- cause he will talk to you loudest in the darkness, in the darkest nights of our souls, and during the darkest times of our lives. Expose his lies to the Light of Christ, the Light of the Gospel that tells us that Jesus Christ came to save sinners- just like me. The light of truth, The light of the Gospels That reminds us "For God so loved the World...", that light that tells us that if we confess our sins, He is faithful and Just to forgive us of our sins and to purge us from all unrighteousness. That is the renewal of the the mind that the scriptures refer to. That is how we take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ.

Yes, these were revelatory statements and thoughts for me. I never considered how powerful confession is, but man, since I learned it, I am doing my best to confess before God and others and receive His grace and their prayers every single day. I am learning to take the shame off. I am talking to God about my fears and confessing His truth over my life, and I am encouraging my family members to do the same. I even referred one of my cousins to Neil T. Anderson's booklet.

After reading Anderson's booklet, I opened up the book of John, which I happened to be fresh out of reading, and so I was pretty ok about not finishing chapters 13-20, as prescribed in our assignment. The gospel of John is my favorite gospel, I had just completed it for the umpteenth time the previous week. I think I read chapter 13 through 14, but started to feel restless, as it was now evening, and I realized aside from 2 or 3 bathroom visits, I had literally been in my room all day. I wanted OUT! I wanted the freedom of walking through the rest of my apartment and talking out loud to the Lord or just worshipping Him and praising Him along to loud worship music, but my daughter was there, and again, I felt deprived of true alone-time with God. By the time I left my room again, it was after 10:30pm, I made a vow to fast for 24 hours, my last "snack" was about 10:17pm Friday evening. Before I left my room, I prayed and thanked God for keeping me during the fast. I didn't necessarily feel hungry throughout the day- it may sound strange, but reading the bible is very filling to me. It fills me up and takes away my hunger for natural food. Because I had been submerged in the Word for most of the day, the hunger pangs I started the day with eventually subsided.

I remembered at the last moment that I was supposed to end the retreat with communion. I wanted to kick myself for waiting to read our instructional email the very evening before our

retreat. If I had thoroughly read it sooner, I could have picked up communion essentials. I was going to “opt out” of communion, I had actually forgotten all about it, but when I opened the refrigerator and looked down, what should my eyes behold but bottle of white grape juice- “it doesn’t have to be dark”, I reasoned and so I took it out. I remembered having a box of Matzos in my cupboard, I thought sure I had gotten rid of them the month before. It turned out that my memory served me correctly, but where the Matzos would have been was a box of graham crackers. I was out of bread, so the crackers would have to do. I opened up the communion scriptures in Matthew, Mark and Luke. I read them and brake and drank at the same points that Jesus did in those passages- giving thanks and blessing them as he did. I actually felt in communion with Jesus at that point. I felt very grateful and finally one with Him in that moment, even though that moment took place at the close of the day. I was grateful to tap into Him during that moment and spent the rest of that evening preparing my Sunday School lesson for the following day.

It wasn’t until my reflections the following day that I was able to process what I actually learned during my retreat. I began to think over my day and regretted letting the devil trip me up in my own mind for so much of it. I confessed that I spent so much of the day worrying over whether I was doing things right or wrong, being frustrated that my daughter was there, worried over homework assignments that still were incomplete, the time I was “wasting”, my responsibilities for Sunday that I truly gave him my peace and for a while missed God’s presence. I realized very clearly the following day how much of a thief and a robber the devil really is, and I realized I let him rob me of my joy and my peace when I took all those worries into my quiet time with God instead of turning them over to Him. I spent too much time with misery during my silent retreat.

I learned that my spirit requires rest in God's presence on a regular basis. I realized that there is a space that I must purposely create for God and I to commune. I realized the significance of pouring my heart out to God in confession. I also realized the importance of verbally combatting lies with the Truth. God's word is Truth, but I have to know it and say it and cling to it if I am to live in freedom. I learned that my worries made me more like Martha and less like the Mary I always prided myself in being. I need to choose the "good part" again. I also realized that I can take a silent spiritual retreat whenever I need to. I am learning that to be silent and still in God's presence requires practice and patience. I recently heard a pastor talk about lingering in God's presence. I think Dr. Wanda also alluded to it in one of her lessons- when we don't hear from God right away, we tend to get up, when really, we should stay there and let the Spirit intercede and groan for us. I'll conclude with the plea of my heart today, "Lord, teach me how to 'linger in your presence'".