



Stripped

Monday, February 19, 2007

More thoughts from the wilderness...


Can you find me here in this shot? Not unless you're really looking for the tiny shadow at the bottom of the frame. One of the consistent themes that haunted me in the desert is how small I really am. Out in the middle of nowhere I was dwarfed by the majesty of creation and utterly exposed to the elements. There were days where I felt like I was being chased by a bitter wind. Every rock I hid behind was an insufficient shield from the discomfort of an icy breeze, every ridge I tried to hunker down in failed me miserably. I was stripped of all the creature comforts I depend on in my "real" life that mask my vulnerable humanity.

With each passing day, more of my true self (and all of its accompanying fears) was exposed. Again, in his book *The Way of the Heart*, Nouwen explains that this is precisely the point of solitude: "Solitude is the furnace of transformation. Without solitude we remain victims of our society and continue to be entangled in the illusions of the false self. ... "Compulsive" is indeed the best adjective for the false self. It points to the need for ongoing and increasing affirmation. Who am I? I am the one who is liked, praised, admired, disliked, hated or despised. Whether I am a pianist, a businessman or a minister, what matters is how I am perceived in my world. ... The compulsion manifests itself in the lurking fear of failing and the steady urge to prevent this by

gathering more of the same—more work, more money, more friends.” (Nouwen, 23, 25)

Indeed, my fear of failure leads me into all sorts of random compulsions, habits, addictions. Yours probably does too. The advantage of time in the wild is that one is stripped of every opportunity to engage in our escapist behaviors. More work? There’s nothing to do. More money? There’s none to earn, nowhere to spend it. More friends? There’s no one around. In fact, there were days where you wanted to say “Welcome to the Desert, where no one can hear you scream,” because in truth, there was no human ear to hear your frustrations and concerns. I’m not saying that every dark corner in my life got cleaned up after eight days in southern California. What I am saying is that at least now I’ve got a clearer view of how my pursuit of the false self manifests itself in my life. It may not have been fully exorcised from my being, but at least now I know what it looks like and can address it when it rears its ugly head.

Sure an ongoing need for praise and affirmation is natural, but it’s a hollow pursuit. After a while it can be quite annoying, because we run the risk of putting undue pressure on our personal and professional relationships with our neediness. In solitude, if we can slow down our heart rate and still our souls, we allow God to strip away all the faux identities we’ve wrapped ourselves in. In the quiet of the desert or an empty corner of our basement or behind the wheel of our parked car, in moments of perfect stillness of the heart, we can hear God speak our names and be truly reminded that who He says we are, beloved children, is all we need to seek to be.

4 Comments 

rk

makes me wish i would have gone to the desert. all that stuff (pursuit of false identities) becomes so natural since our culture has been swallowing that as truth for years and years... it is a part of who i am. it is a constant battle to push away from it - to not be identified with it - and like you say, steve, to recognize it as "hollow pursuit."

good thoughts.

Tuesday, February 20, 2007 - 07:34 AM

steve

thanks rk. i think the challenge is to fight for windows of clarity in the midst of our madness, without having to fly 2000 miles away and spend 8 days in the wilderness!

Tuesday, February 20, 2007 - 11:12 AM

[JIMMY h](#)

this conversation reminds me of something i heard at a leadership conference - the thought that the majority of the time i want *to be used* by Jesus more than i want Jesus... i guess it goes to show that i'd rather have the praise of men than the praise of my Creator.

maybe some time in solitude can reverse my thinking... thanks for the challenge, Steve!

Tuesday, February 20, 2007 - 11:22 AM

Rebecca

That is a really beautiful thought. Our world is so noisy. People, phones, media, etc. It is hard to hear our hearts, and what God is saying to our hearts. I often find that I can't let myself slow down enough to listen to the messages that GOD is sending to me, but when I do I am rewarded by peace, in both having slowed down, and connecting to God.

Wednesday, February 21, 2007 - 02:07 PM

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