



May 1, 2024

A Note from Pastor Jon

Dear Friends,

As I write this Letter of Encouragement I am just over a month from having been appointed the Associate Pastor here at HUMC for five years. In that time we endured a global pandemic, became an official Reconciling Congregation, grieved the loss of dear friends through death or who moved on from this faith community, and relaunched worship in Warehouse 839, among MANY other things.

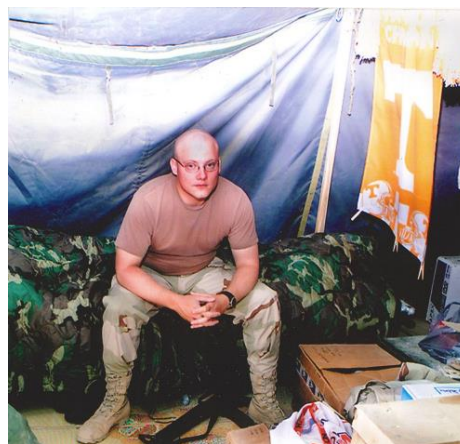
These five years have been some of the busiest seasons of ministry that I can remember in quite some time.

Add the busyness of the work of ministry along with the increased busyness of my family (I thought it got less busy when your kids move to adulthood), and I was feeling worn.

Now, in the spirit of authentic vulnerability, I will add that in addition to the busyness of work life and family life, over the last year I have also been confronting my own struggles with mental health and other health concerns, most of which are directly related to my military service nearly twenty years ago.

Again, in the spirit of authentic vulnerability, I was feeling more than worn.

I have been engaging with the Veterans Administration to assist with my mental and physical health concerns over this last year. To date I have been diagnosed with bilateral hearing loss and tinnitus (severe ringing in my ears), as well as working with mental health professionals for undiagnosed (to date) and untreated PTSD and other concerns.



I offer this in full transparency, not seeking sympathy or any plea for attention or help. I am

getting all the assistance that is available to me. I offer this because it sets the context for the rest of this letter.

With all that has occurred I realized when I was away for some time off at the beginning of January that I needed to tend to my own soul, beyond my current practices. I knew that to do so would require some intention.

I was not seeking more time for vacation or recreation but seeking retreat for the express purpose of allowing my mind, body, and soul the space to disconnect from the daily distractions and regular routines of life. I couldn't even begin to recall the last time I had taken time to be away for retreat in which I was not leading or assisting in some way.

Dallas Willard, theologian and teacher of Christian spiritual formation, once wrote, **"If you don't come apart for a while, you will come apart after a while."**

To be the spiritual leader I am called to be, the spouse I am called to be, the father I am called to be, the human being God created me to be, I needed to be apart if only for a week, so I did not risk coming apart on myself, my family, or this beloved community I have been appointed to serve.



In January I found an opportunity for just such an experience. The retreat would take place in the small community of Jemez (HAY-meez) Springs, New Mexico. It was designed for a limited number of participants, all who must be clergy, and with a particular focus on clergy mental health. All facilitators were licensed therapists, and most of the facilitators happened to be clergy members as well.



I departed in the wee hours of the morning the day after Easter. My flights, surprisingly these days, were all on time, and despite some bumpy skies due to weather, I arrived in Albuquerque to meet other participants for our ride to Jemez.

That first afternoon and evening were spent just getting to know where others were serving and hearing about our various ministry contexts.

The next morning, we began some of the programming. One of our facilitators walked us through a meditative prayer practice. **After some teaching he encouraged us to find a place of quiet on the grounds where for ten full minutes we were called to engage in this silent meditative prayer.**

I begrudgingly made the walk from our gathering area. **Since my tinnitus has become so pronounced, I have struggled with silent practices.** Silence is uncomfortable, as all I focus upon is the ringing in my ears and lack of quiet in my mind.

Like a pouting child, but one too proud to tell this “stranger” I didn’t want to participate, I began to walk down a winding pathway that was behind the building where we were staying. I walked toward the edge of the property line that was marked by the Jemez River. There I found a chair that was right on the edge of the water. I decided to sit myself down and attempt to engage in this exercise of quiet meditation.



I set a ten-minute timer on my phone and closed my eyes, but that incessant ringing was still so distracting. I thought for a moment about opening my eyes and enjoying the visual beauty of the nature around me. Yet, I chose to continue in my meditative prayer, “Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.”

I silently repeated the prayer over and over.

I’m still not sure when, but at some point during those ten minutes I realized that my mind and spirit settled, and the only “noise” I heard was coming from the rushing waters as they passed over the rocks and continued their flow downstream.

I just continued to pray, “Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.”

My breathing slowed, my heart rate slowed, and my mind settled. As I felt the warming of the morning sun on my neck mix with the cool morning breeze, I prayed.

“Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.”

I truly felt God's mercy and grace upon me as I experienced a peace and a settling in my soul that I had not experienced in quite some time, even to the point where for a few moments in the silence I heard nothing.

The ringing that has plagued me off and on for years, and more consistently over the last two years or so, wasn't gone, wasn't "healed," but was silent, even if only for a few short moments.

In fact, as I write this, I struggle to think of the last time I had a similar spiritual encounter. One in which I felt myself held and in such peace. But that moment, that experience on retreat set the tone for me for the remainder of my retreat, of which there are far more stories to recount than I have space or that you would likely care to read about.

Yet, as I knew I would be writing to you about my experience in New Mexico, I was recently reflecting upon those few days. I looked back through my journaling from that week, and I looked back at the pictures on my phone to help me focus on what I wanted to write.



Later that evening on a social media feed I saw this quote.

“Retreat is for those who desire to deeply encounter God in a sacred environment away from the normal distractions of life.”

~ Ruth Haley Barton

It happens that for me the sacred environment away from distractions that helped me to have that deep encounter with God was to be found in Jemez Springs, New Mexico.

I know that I won't always be able to or need to be by the Jemez River to have such an encounter.

I know that you don't have to go across the country to experience a sacred environment away from distractions.

I do know, however, that if we don't take time to be apart with God, we will continue to come apart until we are unraveled.

After returning home I made a commitment that retreat would become an annual and intentional spiritual practice. **I share this with you in hopes that you too may seek times of retreat with God. Retreat is NOT just for clergy or “spiritual professionals.”** Retreat is for anyone who desires to deeply encounter God in a sacred environment away from the normal distractions of life.

If you don't know how or where, I'm here to help you find that sacred environment for your deep encounter with God.

Be well!

Pastor Jon



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