

September 8, 2019

“The Unselfing of America: Unself-Love

Psalm 45, 1 Corinthians 13:1-7

1 John 4:7-12 (Call To Worship)

I shared last week that talking about Eugene Peterson at the beginning of each sermon was partly to connect you more deeply with him. I always carry the hope that some of you would want more of his teaching/writing poured into your life of discipleship. He really is a unique voice for the Church. I know that, for one particular person, Peterson’s book *Where Your Treasure Is* was very helpful. And the reason I know this is she wrote a little poem about Eugene’s book a few weeks back that I have permission to share.

“He has in nine chapters:
Confounded and astounded me,
Frightened and enlightened me,
Confused and amused me,
Admonished and astonished me.

He has, on occasion, disrupted my sleep,
And now his tenth chapter has caused me to weep.
Thank You, Lord!”

I hope some of our summer series and these 11 Psalms have also disrupted your sleep; and that, together, we’ve been Unselfed. When Peterson called for The Unselfing of America, he wasn’t pointing a finger at the culture ‘out there.’ He was talking to the Church and asking “What can WE be doing to help move people from SELF to community? How is it that WE might be Unselfed?” For this last chapter and Psalm, he calls us to Unself-Love.

[Prayer]

This is a really weird Psalm. It doesn’t seem like a prayer. Peterson explains, it wasn’t originally. It was a wedding song, celebrating a royal couple of sorts. But as it was included in the Psalter it became, over time, a prayer of praise and blessing over a couple. My sermon won’t focus on marriage. I don’t want to leave anyone out of this call to Unself-Love. But I do want to highlight the difference marriage can and should make in our communities and nation. I love the quote from Wendell Berry which Peterson includes. “A couple who make a good marriage and raise healthy, morally competent children, are serving the world’s future more directly and surely than any political leader, though they never utter a public word.” (from Wendell Berry’s *A Continuous Harmony*) So husbands and wives with kids/grandkids of any age, keep going to the polls; but never underestimate the difference you make as moms and dads, grandmas and grandpas. But for all of us – married or single of any age, the call to Unself-Love applies to all

relationships. All relationships matter; and put together, all of our loving relationships (or lack thereof) are what shape communities/nations.

Now, if anyone should have a leg up on love that blesses and makes a positive impact, it should be the Church. But not if we keep Christ's love to ourselves. In the same way that a married couple needs to recognize the public dimensions of their union, we must all remember that – when it comes to relationships – our love for one another should be intentionally public. In Peterson's words, "Love that withdraws from the public into the private is irresponsible to the nation. It cultivates private delight and abandons community responsibility." (*Where Your Treasure Is*, p.168-9)

So we harm our nation when we receive the unconditional love of God in Christ and keep it to ourselves. But we also do great harm when we embrace or settle for Self-Love. Peterson is adamant about this: "Of all the hyphenations of the self, self-love is the most destructive. Love is our primary relational mode, just as it is God's in whose image we are made. If we use love nonrelationally, that is, selfishly, it is an abomination that corrupts society and ruins the self." (*Where Your Treasure Is*, p.169) How do we make sure we're loving well?

There are two specific components of loving relationships that Peterson notices in Psalm 45. Again, the words of the Psalm are in the context of a man and a woman getting married, but these two components are necessary and must be in place for love to flourish in any relationship.

The first component is Admiration; appreciation that is spoken out loud to be heard by the beloved and any others in earshot. Peterson calls it "cascading adoration." "You are the most handsome of men; grace is poured upon your lips . . . O mighty one . . . your arrows are sharp . . . God has anointed you . . . your robes are fragrant . . ." (from Psalm 45) Psalm 45 is full of over-the-top praise from one person (or group of people) to another. And it's not from a googly-eyed bride who refuses to see what's really true about her very flawed husband-to-be. We often say "love is blind" and mean that nobody who loves another sees clearly, Peterson says this slogan we are so fond of reciting is flat-out wrong. "It is hate that is blind. Love opens eyes. Love enables the eyes to see what has been there all along but was overlooked in haste or indifference. Love corrects astigmatism so that what was distorted in selfishness is now perceived accurately and appreciatively." (*Where Your Treasure Is*, p.171) Oh how we need more Unself-Love and the genuine admiration and affirmation that flow from it!

Unfortunately, there's a lot more self-love out there; and "Self-love twists the spontaneities of admiration into calculations of envy." (*Where Your Treasure Is*, p.172) ENVY, that green-eyed monster, keeps us from adoring others. It actually leads to the opposite of admiration and appreciation: picking on, criticizing, gossiping about, ridiculing, and putting down.

Doesn't it seem like envy is on the rise? Competitiveness is up; social media adds exponentially to the climate of comparison; there are so many products and options to clothe ourselves in and compare with others. How do we turn this around? Peterson's answer to that question throughout the entire book is: we pray. "Nothing less than prayer is personal and powerful enough to counter these omnipresent, envy-inciting stimuli and redirect toward the adoration of God and others the enormous energies of love that curve in on the self." (*Where Your Treasure Is*, p.172) Let's learn to honestly and lovingly affirm, applaud, admire, and adore the people in our lives, and turn our country around in the process. I want you to take a moment to think of one person in your circle of relationships who you could affirm more intentionally. Who would that be? And what can you honestly say to show your admiration? Admiration is one essential part of loving unselfishly.

The second component of love Peterson notices in Psalm 45 is Detachment. This may seem counter-intuitive but it plays out pretty clearly in all of our relationships. Too connect, we have to detach. "Hear, O daughter, consider and incline your ear; forget your people and your father's house, and the king will desire your beauty." (Psalm 45:10-11a) Forget is probably a strong word. Leave behind is the gist of it; detach. It's what we ask couples to do when they get married, but it goes deeper than starting a new home apart from mom and dad. This is necessary in any relationship, if it is to grow in love. And that's because, as Peterson says, "Love launches us into new territory. To explore the new, the old must be left. It means leaving earlier levels of accomplishment and relationship and growing into new ones. Every act of love is a risk of self." (*Where Your Treasure Is*, p.174) Unself-Love risks leaving behind the familiar and letting go of the established.

On the other hand, he says, "Self-love is obsessed with keeping what it has and adding a little more of the same There are periods of my life that are immensely valuable and enjoyable and useful but which by their very nature cannot be perpetuated." (*Where Your Treasure Is*, p.175) To grow in love we have to let go of something, someone(s). Even growing deeper in love with the same person requires that we leave behind, old patterns of communication, ways of relating with, hiding from, and understanding each other. Intimacy doesn't deepen if we keep things the same. For love to flourish we must learn how to detach from what was. And we will only be able to do this if we remember what Peterson says, "Detachment is not disloyalty." (*Where Your Treasure Is*, p.175) What makes it difficult to detach from "what once was" is that we often feel guilty – as if moving forward and changing directions signals we are ungrateful or highly critical for our past and our relationships.

This unwillingness or inability to detach is so ingrained in us. We need more than a pep talk to snap us out of it. And this is where prayer comes in; and by prayer we aren't talking about simply listing off our requests. Prayer is about listening, being still, rehearsing God's faithfulness, paying attention to the prompting of God's Spirit, and paying attention to what's

going on in our own spirits (feelings, yearnings, hopes, fears). The kind of praying Peterson is encouraging us to do asks us to take chunks of scripture and spend time reading/re-reading, discussing, and sitting in silence with the passage for long periods of time. It means making space in our busy lives and too-packed schedules. He says, “Prayer creates the space that allows us to be detached from what we were convinced was necessary but in fact is only restrictive. We can then be free to receive love, for love can only be experienced as a free act.” (*Where Your Treasure Is*, p.177)

And if we get better at receiving love, we’ll have a better chance of loving others in return; admiring/adoring appropriately and detaching wisely so that love can grow and fill our storehouses. And if we have more love to give and receive that means there will be more “Patience, kindness . . . less envy, boasting, arrogance, and rudeness; less insistence on our own way, irritability, and resentment; less rejoicing in the wrong and more rejoicing in the truth.” (1 Corinthians 13:4-6) Can you imagine a nation like that?

Peterson said we should pray these 11 Psalms the nation of Israel prayed and were shaped by so that we would be reshaped and help reshape our own nation. As an American speaking with other Americans, I think it’s safe to say we’re not loving well here in the good ‘ol USA. There’s very little mutual admiration and a lot of hate. We’re not detaching from our own little opinion groups to find out if there are ways to connect and grow in love across our cultural, racial, socio-economic, and generational comfort zones. And what’s happening in our nation is a reflection of what’s happening in smaller groupings: communities, schools, businesses, neighborhoods, families, friendships, marriages . . . and even **churches**.

If First Presbyterian Church is doing mission and ministry in exciting and collaborative ways . . . if we have the best choir in the Valley . . . are growing in attendees and square footage . . . give generously to Kingdom endeavors . . . have ample parking and young families . . . **but do not love** . . . then none of this matters.