

June 16, 2019

“The Unselfing of America”

Psalm 2, Philippians 2:1-11

During my three years at Princeton Seminary, I kept discovering how different things were in the Northeast. Until 1989, the only time I'd been east of the Rockies was on my way back from Africa the year before. But those 4-5 days in Princeton and New York City with my lifelong friend weren't enough time to notice the many differences between Southern California and the Northeast – except they had really old buildings. One of the first differences I remember noticing was the absence of fences; at least the kind of fences I knew.

And it wasn't just in the Northeast. All the way across the country people's fences seemed so short and unobtrusive. Across the entire Midwest, I rarely saw what had become so normative for me: 6-foot, solid fences running the entire length of everyone's backyard property. On my first visit to Denver to meet Shelly's parents, I immediately noticed their backyard fence was only 4-feet high. You could see right into the neighbor's backyard. Why would you go to the trouble of building a fence if you could still see your neighbor?

What I came to realize is that the culture I grew up in was more about individual families and homes and less about a larger neighborhood or community. And I think in many ways that impacted the church culture I grew up in as well. Faith was more individualistic than it was communal; more private than public; more about ‘me and Jesus’ than it was Jesus, all of us, and the larger community. Eugene Peterson knew that it wasn't only those of us who grew up in Southern California's well-fenced suburbs that were confused about true community. He knew it was an issue for all Americans. So he wrote a book.

Our summer sermon series through 11 specific Nation-of-Israel-Focused Psalms was inspired by his book called *Where Your Treasure Is*. The first chapter of this book is what we're using for the title of the summer sermon series (SLIDE) “The Unselfing of America.” The actual subtitle of the book states Peterson's hope more clearly: “Psalms That Summon You From Self to Community.” Nobody has influenced me more as a disciple and pastor than Eugene Peterson. My hope is that his love for God's Word, the Church, and our country will be a blessing to you as well.

The book starts out with a statement nobody would argue today; nor was anybody arguing 30+ years ago when he wrote it. What he says in a nutshell is: ‘Here is America, we've got a problem. Selfism and selfishness are wreaking havoc on our country. Virtually everyone agrees with his assessment. What we can't agree on is how to best go about solving the problems which our fixation on self has created.’ In other words, there is a discrepancy on how to turn our country (and world) around. Educators, psychologists, economists, politicians, and activists – Christian and secular – all have different ideas about what can be done. Peterson says the

solution is prayer; that those who pray in the Biblical tradition of the Psalms are making more of a difference than anyone or anything else, even though there is little public acknowledgment. On page 6 he says, “Prayer is the source action” of all transformation.

For Peterson, “the power of prayer” isn’t a cliché he would ever use, but he believes prayer is deeply powerful. He also doesn’t believe that prayer should be done individualistically, behind 6-foot fences. After declaring that prayer is the only way to bring true transformation to a country or continent, he goes for the American Christian’s jugular: “The single most widespread American misunderstanding of prayer is that it is private. Strictly and biblically speaking, there is no private prayer.” (*Where Your Treasure Is*, p.6) But because America has become more and more fragmented into niches/groups of people all fenced off from one another . . . because we tend to emphasize individual need and preference to help us sell more products . . . and because personal rights supersede everything these days, we tend to read the Bible and pray as if it’s all between me and God. Later in the chapter he writes, “We often imagine, wrongly, that the psalms are private compositions prayed by a shepherd, traveler, or fugitive. Close study shows that all of them [the Psalms] are corporate: all were prayed by and in the community. If they were composed in solitude, they were prayed in the congregation; if they originated in the congregation they were continued in solitude. But there were not two kinds of prayer, public and private.” (*Where Your Treasure Is*, p.10)

The praying life of the Hebrews didn’t include 6-foot fences, separating my life from your life or my private life from the city/community/country of which I am a citizen. Jesus, whose prayer life was shaped by every single one of these Psalms made this perfectly clear when He taught us to pray. “Our Father . . . Give us this day our daily bread . . . Forgive us our sins . . . ”

Now if prayer is more about US and OUR and less about me and mine, then we must factor in more people and systems and society as a whole when we pray. We’ll have to pray beyond the people we know and like. Prayer, Peterson says, must spill into the larger communities and countries around us. In the truest sense of the word, he says prayer must be both personal and **“political.”**

He knew the word **“political”** was loaded in the mid-80’s when he wrote this. When he died last year he was as aware as the rest of us that the word “political” is more of a lightning rod than ever. And yet, by the second entry of this ancient prayer book we call the Psalms, it’s clear that some of these prayers are highly political. Kings and rulers and entire nations are called on the carpet in the very first verse. Those in power are put in their place before the One who rules in heaven. Earthly leaders are warned that refusing to serve the Lord with fear and trembling will bring about their demise. These are not the prayers I was taught to pray. How about you?

At this point you may be wondering, “Are we going to spend the summer mixing politics and religion?” Anyone who knows me at all is aware of my refusal to bring political issues to the forefront of our discipleship and worship. And I stand by that in regard to specific political

parties and their platforms. But Peterson reminds us that the root of our word for “politics” is the word “polis” – which means “city.” [Indianapolis.] What “politics” are really about is how people “live with some intention in community, as they work toward some common purpose, as they carry out responsibilities for the way society develops.” (*Where Your Treasure Is*, p.8-9) And that, Peterson says, is worthy of our heartfelt and hopeful prayers.

How good are you and I at being political and prayerful? I know some prayer warriors who stay out of politics and some political junkies who only pray for the demise of the opposing party. I also know plenty of people who use prayer as a political tool. But prayerful and political in the way Eugene Peterson is inviting us to be?

What would that even look like?

Let’s say you’re watching your favorite, unbiased news channel, hearing about all that’s wrong and selfish in our country, given enough sound bites and tweets to make you want to throw up, exposed to another scandal in Washington D.C. or Denver. At that point is your impulse to get down on your knees and open up to Psalm 2? Or is it to pull out G.K. Chesterton’s poem/hymn “O God of Earth and Altar” and use it as a prayer of confession as we did this morning?

That’s not your first impulse, is it? Of course not. Your first impulse is probably one of two things: to either curse or applaud those Democrats or Republicans OR to throw up your hands and say it’s all useless and doesn’t matter what anyone says or does – so why not go back to just praying for Aunt Betty and her gallstones or an increase in my year-end bonus. Too often, our first impulse has little to do with the raw, honest, and engaged praying of the Psalms, which is what Peterson is inviting us to experience.

He says, “Prayer is the action that integrates the inside and the outside of life, that correlates the personal and the public, and that addresses individual needs and national interest. No other thing that we do is as simultaneously beneficial to society and to the soul as the act of prayer.” (*Where Your Treasure Is*, p.14)

For the last few years you have been hearing more and more about International Justice Mission, the world’s largest anti-slavery organization in the world. IJM is both unapologetically Christian, and unashamedly prayerful. And they pray for government leaders and police chiefs to soften their hearts toward the abuses of slavery and human trafficking. They pray for teenage girls in Southeast Asia who are preyed upon daily. They pray that laws already on the books would be honored. They declare that the God of heaven is in charge and ask Him to “smash [the unjust plans of the wicked] like clay pots.” (Psalm 2:9)

There is so much anxiety right now in our nation; and plenty of it in the Church too. There are so many bloated rulers and individuals. What we see on a regular basis in a hundred varieties are people wanting to “break their chains and free [them]selves from slavery to God.” (Psalm 2:3) So many people do not acknowledge God as King. And therein lies the problem.

But let's not be too quick to point our fingers at those tyrants and rebels, as if we've never rebelled or blown God off ; and let's not be too quick to get on the latest bandwagon/fad to "solve" the problem . . . on our own and apart from God. If what Eugene is reminding us about prayer (and praying the Psalms) is true, then that should be our first impulse and ongoing instinct. We are invited to pray – not to isolate and fence ourselves from what is wrong and broken – but to better enter into our neighborhoods/communities/country. We're not just to pray that souls would be saved OR just fight for a worthy cause. God calls us to be SOULFUL and PRAYERFUL as we enter into the CAUSES that matter to Him.

And that is what IJM does every morning as an organization before they DO anything. They are intense about praying these kinds of political prayers, but they are not anxious. And neither should we be anxious about America and our larger global community.

Paul says as much in his letter to the Philippians. "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:6-7)

It is in Christ Jesus, the One who died upon a hill on the outskirts of God's holy city called Zion, that we are freed from anxiety so we can spend our best energies praying. It is in Jesus – the "only begotten Son" Psalm 2:7 points us to – that we can be faithful citizens of heaven who are also deeply prayerful for the nation we find ourselves in. And it is because of the King of Kings who defeated sin and death that we can wholeheartedly pray for the kings and rulers of this world, that they would bow and acknowledge Him as Lord one day.

And they will bow to Him one day.

After describing how humbled Jesus was to the point of death – even death on the Cross, Paul says, "Therefore God also highly exalted Him and gave Him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." (Philippians 2:9-11)

As you will remember, Jesus didn't win any elections. Even His own followers stopped backing Him when things got difficult. To make matters worse, He was unjustly tried and sentenced to death. Both the powerful Romans and His own religious leaders appeared to be in control. They got rid of their problem. How could they have known . . . how could anyone have known that the death of Jesus would actually lead to victory? How could the kings and the rulers know that the criminal who died on the Cross would become the Great High Priest who prays for us at the right hand of the Father? (Romans 8:34) So . . . let us PRAY.