

August 4, 2019

The Unselfing of America: Unself-assertion

Psalm 62

This morning we resume our regularly scheduled programming picking back up in our summer series in the Psalms called: "The Unselfing of America."

It was over 30 years ago when Eugene Peterson (best known for his Message Translation of the bible) chose 11 Psalms that shaped the national and political life of Israel and wrote about them in his book called *Where Your Treasure Is: Psalms that Summon You From Self to Community*.

His reason for writing and choosing these particular Psalms or payers came out of a problem he identified then and is just as much of one now, and that is the "self."

In his introduction he writes:

I have written to encourage Christians to pray them [the psalms] both as children of God with eternal destinies and as American citizens with daily responsibilities in caring for our nation.

Prayer as Peterson states is the "source action for this change." It the source action for transformation from the inside out.

He goes on to say:

Prayer is political action. Prayer is social energy. Prayer is public good... Prayer is a sustained and intricate act of patriotism in the largest sense of that word— far more precise and loving and preserving than any patriotism served up in slogans. (p.6)

And just so we don't get hung up on the "P" word, that being politics. What Peterson means and what we are trying to communicate in saying praying is political is that praying is not just a private affair but has to do with life in community.

It is prayer and the power of prayer that unites what is usually separated, self and society, personal and public.

This morning we are looking at Psalm 62 and the unselfing of assertiveness.

Just like with Self-Help we talked about a few weeks ago, self-assertion is another one of those ingrained American values and virtues.

The line of thought goes that if you don't assert yourself then you will just be walked all over. If you want something or if want to be recognized you need to take action. You need to assert yourself, and express yourself. Take what is your right, or you will be overlooked, and continually feel frustrated, misunderstood, and unfulfilled.

And what makes these American values and virtues of self-help and self-assertion so attractive is there is just enough truth and enough good in there that draws us in to it.

Not only that, but we have been inundated with the gospel of self-assertion since birth.

As Peterson plainly puts it, "The sacred scriptures of psychology, economics, and political science serve up no end of texts for sermons on self-assertion." (p85)

But lucky for you this a sermon on unself-assertion.

The thing about assertion (confident action) is it's not bad nor sinful in it of itself. The problem once again that rises to the surface is when it becomes overrun and consumed by "self." It is that sneaky "self" part that distorts and distracts us from God and His will.

In fact Psalm 62 is all about assertiveness, but... it begins with God and not self. It is a prayer that moves us from self-assertion to God-assertion. A prayer that invites us into participating in God-assertiveness already at work.

And so for us, as followers of Jesus, seeking to not be conformed to the worlds values and virtues but to be transformed... the way forward in unselfing-assertion begins in waiting. Prayerful, silent, waiting.

For God alone my soul waits in silence (NRSV); I wait quietly before God (NLT) (62:1, 5)

Waiting... Ugh. Silence.. Double ughh. It's the worst right? We do not like waiting. And anyone who has kids or been around kids has a front row seat to the unfiltered raw and honest expression of our disdain for waiting .

And to think of all the wait we face in our lives. The wait for school to start, the wait for school to end, the wait for Friday, the wait for vacation, the wait for this event or that.

Then there is the anxiety and worry filled wait. The wait for that test result, or the wait for that meeting with your boss. The wait for the conversation we'd rather not have. Or the unwanted weight from too many late night taco bell runs. Just seeing if you are paying attention:)

And when it comes to waiting, we especially don't like waiting when others are getting ahead, especially if it is by deceptive and false means. We do not like waiting!

But even in our dislike of waiting ... there is a type of waiting that we have come to learn and practice. To discipline ourselves in. That is, there are times we lie in wait ... like a predator. We wait for the right moment move and act, to seize the upper hand in some way so that we can stay in control.

Our little Penny is a “predatory waiter.” Just waiting for that opportune time to pounce and seize what is hers. Just the other day our girls were playing “Hide-N-Go Seek”... Talk about a game of waiting.

Penny is it and she begins counting, “1...2...3...4....10” Ready or not here I come. And then she’s waits. She waits for the moment her sisters can’t be quiet and hide anymore. And then she yells “Hey are you guys already?” Our girls can’t help but answer and giggling erupts from another room or closet. And with that Penny is off and finds them in record time. Waiting for that perfect moment to pounce.

In all of these forms of waiting though, our standard operating system, our go to, is we assert ourselves into the place of primacy. Self above all else: Our needs, our wants, our concerns. MY will, my purpose, my words, my hopes.

This is not the type of prayer-waiting in which God calls us too. The waiting we discover in prayer is different. The waiting we see in the prayer of Psalm 62 makes it clear, we don’t come first ... God does.

Psalm 62 helps us center and focus ourselves on God and wait for His timing and action. We are not to assert ourselves, but to wait (silently) in God alone. The one who is our rock and our salvation, a fortress that cannot be shaken.

And by engaging in this type of prayer-waiting we are declaring there is a will greater than our own. We are unself our assertion as we trust in God alone .That His will is more important, more essential than my own.

I love what Peterson says about this type of prayer waiting:

“In prayer we are aware that God is in action and that when the circumstances are ready, when others are in the right place and when my heart is prepared, he will call me into action. Waiting in prayer is a disciplined refusal to act before God acts. Waiting is our anticipation in the process that results in the “time fulfilled.” (p.87)

God’s timing. God’s Will. God assertion.

It is the same truth from Psalm 46 we looked at a few weeks ago. “Be still, and know God is God.” Be still, and wait on God. God is at work!

And so we prayerfully wait. And we wait in stillness and silence. Another word for this prayerful, silent, waiting is solitude.

Henri Nowen says, “**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. **Solitude is the place of the great struggle and the great encounter**—the struggle against the compulsions of the false self, and the encounter with the loving God

who offers himself as the substance of the new self.” (*Henri Nouwen, The Way of the Heart*)

Prayerful, Silent, Waiting. That is where we hear God. Our hearts are transformed. Our will conforms to His will. It is where we hear the voice of truth. The voice of Love telling us we are His beloved.

Eugene Peterson is wonderful on this point: “Silence is prerequisite to hearing. If we reject silence, our words are reduced to puffing our own shriveled selves. If we talk all the time, or let others talk all the time, our ears and mouths are filled with clichés and platitudes, mindless chatter and pretentious gibberish. In silence language is renewed. In the absence of human sound it becomes possible to hear the logos, the word of God that gives shape and meaning to our words.” (p.88)

Now If you are like me or just human in general, it can be difficult to be persuaded to wait, right?

But as we reflect on history. On His word. We see that God is faithful. Time and time again He delivers, He restores. He can be trusted. As Psalm 62 reminds us again and again

“My hope is from him. He only is my rock and salvation, my fortress. On God rests my deliverance and my honor; my mighty rock, my refuge is God. From him comes salvation. He only is my rock and my salvation!”

It is in prayerful silent waiting we discover this. We remember His salvation and we hope for His promises that will come to be.

Peterson makes a great point here:

“Without prayer the past becomes nostalgia and the future fantasy. Self-assertion plunders the past to gratify whims and in so doing destroys the uniqueness, or it greedily mortgages the future to pay for immediate indulgence regardless of the consequence to the coming generations.” (p.89)

Are we beginning to see and understand the problem of self-assertion? Are we beginning to see how it can easily distort and destroy. Are we beginning to see the pressing need for us to unself-assertion?

Peterson adds, “Prayer, is not just restricted to the way in which we nurture our relationship with God. It is also the way in which we maintain an undistorted, unillusioned view of the prayer less world that is always trying to pressure us into its mold.” (p.90)

So as the Psalmist declares, “we need trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us.” (62:8)

When we quit pushing our self-assertive agenda and praise and seek the God who asserts Himself we again find another one of the paradox of Christian faith. We will not be walked over, we will not be cast aside.

It's God who provides stability, escape from danger, and protection. Self-assertion and self-reliance are only a smokescreen. It's prayerful-waiting on God that provides a truly secure sense of self. As a result, In Christ we can say with boldness, " I shall not be greatly moved."

And so we prayerfully wait and we trust.

In prayer we are invited to pour out our hearts before the one who created us, loves us, knows us, and holds us. We trust in the one who is the source of our identity and significance.

And we want to be significant, right? To have peace and happiness. And when we our silent and listen to God and Hear him call us His beloved. We find our true significance in Him

There is a great illustration from this Psalm and this chapter that involves the image of a balance scale.

Say you wanted to get a pound of corn or grain. On one side you would place a pound weight. On the other you would weigh the grain out until it equaled out. Balanced.

So with that in mind rake the true self, the God created, image bearer, human person. The true self as God sees them and place them on one side. On the other, think of the wealthiest most accomplished person you may know of.

Elon Musk, Bill Gates, John Howard, Tom Brady. The scales go up.

Now think of the people that go through most tragedy. And don't get me wrong. God has a heart for the broken hearted and marginalized but this isn't about injustice but instead is about our self-assertiveness and looking for significance in all the wrong places.

Even with that the scales go up. All of that is just a disillusion, or breath compared to true significance in God alone.

Peterson points out this is a type of self assertion is putting our trust in ourselves and finding significance in the wrong thing.

He says:

"Self-assertion is futile either way. We do not gain significance by flaunting our victimization or parading our trophies. Tragedy is not proof of significance; accomplishment is not proof of significance. Glorification of victims is as much out of

place as adulation of winners. We are only ourselves when we are in a trust relationship with God, defined and commanded by his Word, participating in his power.” (p.92)

And the word for this is “humility.” As Peterson puts it, "Humility- is the old name for unself-assertion. The problem he identifies is now more than ever in our history humility is the least sought after virtue in America.

Not only that but we are bombarded with some many counterfeits that true humility is difficult to attain or discover. But there is hope because. There is one guy out there and let me tell you it's me. I'm the most humble guy I know:)

Of course not. But there is one who was the perfect example and life here on this earth of humility. Jesus... True humility. Jesus, being God did not consider equality but humbled himself as a servant. Humbles himself to His death on the cross for our sins for our salvation. Communion reminds of this.

So where do we go from here? What is our next step in change and transformation. Of being a light and witness in our communities.

Reflecting on this, Peterson suggests that a frontal attack on the established culture is probably unwise. “But through the prayer of Psalm 62 we flank the enemy and practice a life that is lived lightly and cheerfully, without the enormous baggage of bluff and bravado that the self-assertive lug around to mask their weakness... the issue is not whether things get done but who gets them done, God or me.” (p.95)

And let me tell you, it is better when God get's it done and we faithfully, obediently follow.

So we wait prayerfully as God is already asserting himself, and we wait prayerfully, and silently listening to the Father who loves us and leads us.

It all comes back to prayer. The source action for change and transformation.

Peterson concludes the chapter with this:

“Prayer is action that builds a bridge across the chasm of self-assertion to a life of humility, which means getting interested in and excited about what God is doing than in figuring our what I can do to express myself or improve the world.”

Are we more excited and more interested in what God is doing then asserting ourselves?

Do we trust and believe “power belongs to God”, and He is already asserting a far better will than you and I could ever imagine or assert ourselves?