

August 11, 2019

“The Unselfing of America: Unself-Pity”

Psalm 77

I’ve been asked a lot of questions by our foster kids in the year they have been with us. They are new to church in general and First Pres. in particular. One question this summer is “Why do I keep showing a picture of that old guy?” And I say, “That’s Eugene Peterson. He’s one of my pastoral heroes who has inspired me to keep being a pastor instead of a church manager. I’m so glad he decided to scrap his Ph.D work in Old Testament and become a local church pastor – starting a church from scratch and serving 29 years before retiring to finish *The Message*, continue writing, and teach at the seminary level.” Well, I don’t really tell them all that but I’m telling you instead. We’re using his book to help us pray 11 Psalms meant to pull us out of our self-absorbed orbits so we can actually be a blessing to our nation and world – instead of adding to our many problems. Peterson wrote this book to invite his fellow American citizens to immerse themselves in these nationalistic prayers of Israel with the hope that such an immersion would lead to *The Unselfing of America*. Every chapter in *Where Your Treasure Is* has the goal of unselfing us. Self-Assertion needs to become Unself-Assertion and so on. Self-Made. Self-Help. Self-Government. Self-Centered. We all need to be Unselfed. Chapter 7 calls us to Unself-Pity. But Self-Pity comes pretty naturally, so this might be harder than it sounds.

Shelly and I spent a blissful week up in the Northwest while I was speaking at our favorite camp in the world. Our former Presbytery camp is located on 400+ forested acres that spill into a beautiful lake. We had all our food prepared, enjoyed hotel like accommodations in a beautiful lodge, and watched bald eagles and osprey every day. And it gets better. Andrew was there as a guest counselor and we got to watch him in action. Plus, we were with our friend and his wife who have directed and developed this camp over the last 30 years in amazing ways. And as a camp developer, Andy had this great idea to invite friends of ours to come up during the week to hang out with us and listen to him pitch some new projects the camp is fundraising for. So we got to see a dozen friends from our former church, including my former senior pastor and his family. Who could ask for more?

I also cannot remember a better week of ministry up there. 180 high school students and 45 staff, mostly college students and recent graduates. The way they cared for each other and the students was remarkable. And the struggle of a number of students was both challenging and heart-breaking. My compassion and concern meter was on high as, every morning, we circled up to share stories of conversations with students and prayer requests for those hurting, questioning, and filled with pain. I chose to lead them through Peter’s relationship with Jesus, from beginning to end. All the emotions and ups and downs, the bold steps and statements, the misunderstandings and betrayal. There was something for everyone to connect with and I found myself connecting with them . . . and deeply with God as I prepared the twice-daily talks. When we got on a plane last Sunday morning and headed to Denver, I couldn’t imagine anything raining on my joy parade.

Shortly after we landed, we got ready for our nephew's wedding in the foothills around Evergreen. And as we drove into the mountains to meet the rest of our family at the wedding, it appeared we were headed for some stormy weather. And stormy it was. The rain fell, lightning blew out the power all over town, and we sat at a wedding in which we couldn't see or hear the bride, groom or pastor. All we could hear was the roar of I-70. Oh well, on to the reception. We heard there were 20 different mac-n-cheese dishes waiting for us.

We headed back down I-70 and headed up the 285 into the foothills. When we arrived at the reception I was immediately struck by how bad the parking situation was. There was barely room for our little car and our son-in-law was right behind us in his big truck. Another truck was coming in behind him and I went into parking lot director mode and waved him off. When that truck finally pulled back onto a space on the side of the busy road, I realized it was one of our nephews and his wife and little girl. I'll come back to what I said to them in a minute. I'm embarrassed to say it, and I wish I were just acting this way to procure a sermon illustration, but I really had a bad attitude about the parking situation . . . for way too long. And all this after such a great week.

We've all had moments of Self-Pity. You know, that internal and external groaning and whining, when life becomes all about us and our disappointments (big and small); all about the real and perceived slights hurled upon us; all about what did or didn't happen that we felt should or shouldn't have if the world were truly tipped in our direction. By poking at Self-Pity I'm not suggesting we should minimize or hide or gloss over our real pain. This is not a call to hide our pain or pretend we're fine when we're not. We know Self-Pity. But we've also had moments when we were filled with heartfelt Pity for others who were bruised and battered. Moments when we expressed compassion for those slighted in significant ways. Moments when our deep concern for a co-worker, friend, or family member (even for a stranger) bubbled up into action. Moments when we actually joined God in caring for those who needed help and hope. There's Pity . . . and there is Self-Pity.

Eugene Peterson differentiates the two like this: "Pity is adrenaline for acts of mercy; self-pity is a narcotic that leaves its addicts wasted and derelict . . ." Do you see and feel the difference? So here is what I said to our nephew and his wife, who were married several years ago. Their reception was high up in a downtown Denver skyscraper. I could have asked Julie if she needed me to carry anything for their daughter, or offer to help her walk along the side of the road while Kurt carried their daughter. But that's not what I said. Do you know what I said? "Your wedding venue parking was better." It was at that point that our 20-year old son, came up to me and said, "Dad, get over it."

Do you see more Pity or Self-Pity in America (and American pastors)? Remember, this book was written 35 years ago, before Reality TV and "tell all" books. And even back then Peterson said, "Feeling sorry for yourself has been developed into an art form . . ." And then he tells us why Self-Pity is so damaging: "The great social evil of self-pity is that it takes energies that in their healthy state motivate healing, liberation, and enlightenment, and spills them in the sand of

the self.” (*Where Your Treasure Is*, p.99-100) Self-Pity doesn’t go anywhere, do anything, or bring about any change; for us or others.

This Psalmist knows Self-Pity. “My soul refuses to be comforted.” (Psalm 77:2) In other words, I don’t want God or anyone else to do anything about this. I just want to whine and have a pity party. What a terrible way to live. But Self-Pity creeps up all the time, in unexpected and undeniable ways, doesn’t it? The good news is that even our Self-Pity can become a prayer.

Peterson suggests that “Dead-ended as self-pity is, prayer does not forbid it. Any place is the right place to begin to pray. But we must not be afraid of ending up some place quite different from where we start.” (*Where Your Treasure Is*, p.108)

The Psalmist starts in a quite pathetic and self-absorbed posture. He’s worn out before he starts and not really looking for any help from anyone outside himself. “I commune with my heart in the night; I meditate and search my spirit.” (Psalm 77:6) He doesn’t seek wise counsel from a friend, or make an appointment with a therapist, or ask his church to put him on the prayer chain. Instead he asks rhetorical questions. He doesn’t want answers from anyone else; just agreement

Will the Lord spurn forever, and never again be favorable? (Sure looks like it.)

Has His steadfast love ceased forever? (Yep!)

Are His promises at an end for all time? (It’s looking that way.)

Has God forgotten to be gracious? (Clearly.)

Has He in anger shut up His compassion? (That’s how I feel.)

(Psalm 77:7-9)

Can’t you just see God, listening in? “Go on buddy. Get it out. But don’t stay there. Nobody’s going to want you at the wedding reception if you’re going to go one like this.”

How do we get unstuck? How do we go from Self-Pity to actual compassion and concern that translates into doing something on behalf of others – including being present with and simply listening to them? Do you remember what Peterson said in chapter one? “Prayer is the source action.” Here in chapter seven he says, “The change comes not when we learn to meditate but when we learn on *whom* to meditate.” (*Where Your Treasure Is*, p.104)

There’s a note in the Psalm right after verse 10. It says “Interlude.” I think we have to imagine a long pause – maybe days – before the switch in focus occurs for the Pray-er.

“I will call to mind the deeds of the LORD; I will remember your wonders of old. I will meditate on all your work, and muse on your mighty deeds. Your way, O God, is holy. What god is so great as our God?” (Psalm 77:11-13)

Suddenly, our whiner is off and running, not down the rabbit hole of Self-Pity but into a wide-open world filled with the wonder and power of a God who has compassion for people and rescues them from their messes and mistakes and parking lot meltdowns.

What's your strategy for ending a Self-Pity party and getting back to living and praying for things that matter to God, and matter most? Do you take a deep breath? Phone a friend? Do you pretend like you aren't upset or bothered about anything and show up to church with a smile on your face? Or do you whine to God in prayer until it starts dawning on you that the God you are praying to has done marvelous things?

SELF-Anything is a recipe for disaster because it shrinks everything down to our very miniscule view of life until we forget what is true about our very big God. Self-Pity is especially toxic because it makes us bitter and forgetful. Bitter about what is happening or not happening to us, and forgetful of all that God has done in us and around us throughout the years.

What's amazing about prayer – which is essentially a conversation with God – is that it gets us proximate to God. Close. And the closer we get to God, the closer we are to the One who “with His strong arm” parts the waters, makes a way where there is no way, and redeems people who are certain they are doomed. The closer we are to God the more our heart breaks for the things and people that God's heart breaks for. The closer we get to God, the less filled we are with Self-Pity.

So let's not act like Self-Pity doesn't exist in us. Let's just bring it to God in prayer and see what happens when He gets next to us and helps us to stop fixating on our little ‘parking issues’ so we can start recalling His rescue missions of the past, and anticipate the ones right around the corner for our families, communities, schools, churches, and nations.

Peterson ends his chapter with this bit of encouragement to be honest and start praying where we are: “It is not when we suppress our self-pity, when we still its cry, but when we offer it to God that our whimpering gets gathered into the thunder of His action and becomes a spirit-renewing meditation on God's might, a compassion-exciting participation in God's help.” (*Where Your Treasure Is*, p.109)

I don't want to leave you with that picture of me whining in the parking lot. After I snapped out of it I had this great conversation with a guy in his early 20's who was talking with his girlfriend and another one of our nephews. We talked about his life in an immigrant family and his hopes for the future, his education and goals, and his faith in Christ. When I met his girlfriend and played a little Dutch-bingo (as they call it) I discovered her mom actually sang at our wedding 30 years ago and was inside at the reception. And that led to more great conversation with Shelly and her mom. Those conversations were so life giving and so much better than talking about my parking problems.

May God Unself us in every situation so that we can experience the life He longs for us to have.