

June 30, 2019

“The Unselfing of America: Unself-Centered”

Psalm 110, Hebrews 4:14-5:6

Eugene Peterson wasn't the first person or pastor to notice that America had problems. When he started a church back in Maryland in the early 60's, there were already several disturbing trends in the larger culture. As a pastor, scholar and author, he was never one to point fingers at what everyone outside the church was doing wrong. Instead, he followed his unique calling as a Pentecostal-turned-Presbyterian Pastor, who was also part Prophet and Poet/Writer, and addressed the Church; specifically the American Church and its pastors. His translation of the Bible called *The Message* (which he started writing in the 80's and finally finished in 2002) was the only “popular” thing he ever did. Mostly, he preached and wrote and prayed and taught in relative humility and obscurity until his death last year. And, yet, he was very committed to turning our country around as a citizen of America AND a citizen of the Kingdom of God.

The book we are using for this summer's sermon series is one he wrote in the mid-80's called *Where Your Treasure Is: Psalms that Summon You From Self To Community*. We're using the title of the first chapter as the title for our sermon series: “The Unselfing of America.” Peterson suggests that 11 of the Psalms with a more nationalistic focus are a great resource to move us from being stuck on ourselves to becoming more engaged in our larger community. Chapter 3 is titled “Unself-Centered” and focuses on the Psalm you just heard. Peterson isn't suggesting we crush and remove self from the equation; but that we get the SELF out of the center.

PRAYER

I'm going to make a bunch of statements that most of us have probably heard and/or said. I want you to listen carefully to each statement. If you're okay with what I say – that is, if you would be comfortable hearing this said to you or saying it to a friend, family member, co-worker, or classmate – keep your hand down. If you think the statement wouldn't be helpful, would be bad advice, would be received harshly, or would bring undo pressure upon the recipient, put your hand up in the air and keep it there. Ready?

“Take the initiative.” “Don't be afraid to speak up.” “Let your voice be heard.” “Say what needs to be said.” “Get it off your chest.” “Be an advocate for others.” “Make and keep your promises.” “Share what you know.” “Point people in the right direction.” “Take care of yourself.” “You deserve to treat yourself.”

Nobody is uncomfortable with any of this, right? These are good things to say to one another.

The problem with all this good advice is that we are in danger of forgetting, acknowledging and responding to the reality that it is God who spoke up and spoke first; that it is God who makes unbreakable vows and perfect promises. The problem with all these good words and this good advice is that we can get self-centered pretty quickly; and not think there's anything wrong. Our larger consumer-culture wants nothing more than a bunch of self-focused and self-preoccupied people running around wondering what to do with their time and money. As we, once again, celebrate the birth of our nation we are reminded what was declared more than two centuries ago: that all people have a right to "Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness." It's a great foundation upon which to birth a nation, but it also plays in nicely to the most current marketing strategies that have been ratcheted up a notch or two since Peterson wrote this book.

Another example of how quickly we forget to keep God at the center. What do you think about the concept of "Self-esteem?" It's a great thing to shoot for in our kids and co-workers, friends and family members, isn't it? I want leaders to lead with confidence and a clear sense of who they are, don't you? But being "Selfish" and "Self-Centered" isn't helpful to anyone. How do we know when we've crossed the line?

We can see in a humorous way how obsession with self is manifested by looking no further than the "Selfie." Two researchers from the UK and India actually developed what they are calling a "Selfitis Behavior Scale" and specifically using a person's practice of taking selfies as a major indicator of an unhealthy location on the continuum.

But we don't need another evaluative tool to show us we are self-centered. And we don't need more examples of what self-centeredness leads to, do we?

Train wreck after train wreck is evidence that something is very wrong. Corpses are scattered across the landscape of our country. Countless messes can be seen in just about every direction – outside and inside the Church. All because, as they say, we've gotten too big for our britches; OR, if we want to be more accurate, we've gotten confined and confused by our smallness.

So what do we do? Eugene Peterson says that to get free from our small, self-centeredness – and the messes created by it – we must pray. "The only way to get out of the cramped world of the ego and into the large world of God without denying or suppressing or mutilating the ego is through prayer. The only way to escape from self-annihilating and society-destroying egotism and into self-enhancing community is through prayer. Only in prayer can we escape the distortions and constrictions of the self and enter the truth and expansiveness of God." (*Where Your Treasure Is*, p.5)

And he doesn't mean mostly private prayers; he means community prayers . . . POLITICAL prayers . . . that take into consideration the larger gathering of people in cities and countries and

continents – even churches. [Remember, he’s not talking about a political party or platform. He’s talking about figuring out together how we need to live in a world bigger than one individual.] The Israelites had a stack of political prayers with a focus on their larger nation, and the people surrounding Israel. Psalm 110 is one of their national prayers. It mentions kings, kingdoms, enemies, wars, enlisted soldiers, nations, and more. This is political because it has to do with more than little old ME.

What is it that makes this prayer so helpful in the quest to move us from self to community?

He says it is a “skillfully and vigorously written” prayer that focuses on what God has said and what God has sworn. First of all, this psalm centers on what God has said: “Sit at my right hand until I humble Your enemies, making them a footstool under Your feet.” Here God is talking about a king. (110:1) Secondly, Peterson shows us, this prayer helps focus us on what God has sworn (promised/vowed). “You are a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek.” (110:4) Psalm 110 is so important because it keeps God front and center . . . and **What God has said and sworn is that there is a King who will be Priest forever.**

We know that Psalm 110 was a very important Psalm to the Early Christian Church because it is the most quoted and alluded to Psalm in the entire New Testament. The Book of Hebrews is one of the places quoting from it and alluding to it several times. Here we learn more about our relationship to Jesus as our Great King and High Priest – as our Melchizedek. “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” (Hebrews 4:15-16) What a beautiful picture of Jesus!

A few chapters later we see Psalm 110 quoted again and a connection being made about the oath/covenant of God; what God has “sworn”: “This one became a priest with an oath, because of the One who said to him, ‘The Lord has sworn and will not change His mind, You are a priest forever’ – accordingly Jesus has also become the guarantee of a better covenant.” (Hebrews 7:21-22)

In Jesus, the true Melchizedek, we have a King to rule and Priest to pardon . . . all in one! And we need both. We need someone to direct our living – as citizens of a particular place (that’s what a king does) and as citizens of heaven. But we also need someone who can offer us forgiveness for the many times we choose to put ourselves at the center and ignore the king’s clear direction (that’s what a priest does).

Peterson points out that, “In antiquity (in the person of Melchizedek), the office of king and priest had been a single, organic function. But the functions had gotten separated so that instead

of being complimentary they were, more often than not, conflicting and competitive rather than coordinated parts of a whole . . . Then, before the eyes of a few Palestinians, it all came together in the life of Jesus. Psalm 110 describes the coming together in the making of Messiah.” (*Where Your Treasure Is*, p.44-45)

This psalm, this prayer, does have a national focus. These are Israelites praying for their country. But Psalm 110 has also become a prayer for those who follow the King of Kings. Who knew that King David’s prayer wasn’t only for Israel? Who knew it wasn’t just harkening back to a particular king-priest who shows up with no beginning or end in Genesis 14? Who knew that followers of Jesus would find the working out of what **God said and swore** in Psalm 110?

Tell me again, why does praying this prayer give us a better chance of turning our country around? Because this prayer is clear about who is at the CENTER of all things; and who we need to keep at the center.

Peterson reminds us that keeping the right One at the center is actually quite difficult. Why? Because “The self is persistent. Quietly, subtly, ingeniously, it works itself back to the center . . . At one point we found our center in ‘The Lord says,’ but an urgent concern distracted us, or a novel subject engrossed us. We are still, of course, religious, but the religion has gradually become a comforting, steady background to the center-stage self.” (*Where Your Treasure Is*, p.40) Therein lies the problem. When we’re at the center then that means the king and the priest end up being people like us. And who wants to take orders about how to live from someone just like me? And who thinks that someone like me or you can offer the forgiveness that everyone needs?

The good news is that it’s not up to us – to figure out how everyone should live or come up with the means of forgiveness. That’s the job of the One King-Priest who is worth listening to, believing in, trusting, and following. Psalm 110 tells us that people will willingly follow Him into battle, with renewed energy and enthusiasm. It reminds us that this King-Priest will be victorious and given the glory He is due.

This is a King-Priest who is worthy of keeping in the center. In Jesus, God has spoken and God has kept His promise!