

**“The Unnecessary Pastor”**

I probably respect Eugene Peterson as much as any man alive.

Peterson is a retired Presbyterian pastor and professor who translated the Bible into contemporary English, and has spent his vocational career coaching pastors on how to be pastors. I have mentioned him many times in my writing and preaching (possibly to the point of irritation) because more than any current Christian author, I think Peterson has gotten it right. And while there is no such thing as one, right way to be a pastor, there are plenty of ways to goof it up. In a similar vein, I have high regard for a Lutheran author and educator named Marva Davon who has written very perceptive and biblically solid books about worship – books like; **“Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down”**, **“Keeping the Sabbath Wholly”**, and one called **“A Royal ‘Waste’ of Time”**. She calls worship a royal “waste” of time not because she believes for a minute that it isn’t the most important thing we do, but because she wants to counter the cultural idea that if we are not making money or producing something to show for the time we spend, then it is time wasted. To the contrary, she

says, Christians are committed and pleased to give their precious time to worshipping their King, in part, to regularly remind themselves that making money is not the purpose for which we were created.

Thanks be to God, we have at least one day a week, in which we are invited to get off the treadmill, turn off our computers and televisions, and think for awhile (to quote a famous line) “about why we were born a human being and not a chair”. We lavish our time on Jesus because he reminds us why we’re alive in the first place.

That being said when Eugene Peterson and Marva Davon got together a few years back to write a book call “The Unnecessary Pastor” (subtitled) “Rediscovering The Call”, I had to buy it. Their basic premise is that, “Pastors are called to equip the people they serve with faith and skills for living the gospel way in the midst of a culture that is increasingly non-Christian. But various forces in that culture – forces both subtle and obvious – can domesticate pastors, too, and pressure them toward fulfilling false expectations for charisma and success, numbers and power. (And the question is) “How can pastors be strengthened for resisting those false goals, (and) for

**maintaining the freedom to be ‘unnecessary’ according to the world’s criteria?”**

**You see, here’s the deal. Pastors can start out with good and pure intentions to serve Jesus by equipping the saints for the work of ministry. Like shepherding, it is not meant to be a glamorous career for people with big ego needs. But pastors live in the same culture as the people they preach to. And they see the pastoral superstars on TV; perfectly coifed and expensively dressed men and women, who ooze with charisma and sparkle before stadium-sized congregations, complete with commercial breaks to hawk their latest best sellers on leadership, winning, and success. And, let’s be honest, parishioners see those people, too. So when they turn off their TV and come to church, they can’t help but notice, by comparison, that Pastor So – and – So, looks a little frumpy around the edges, and might lack what the media execs call “star power”. Plus, if you add to that, the fact that we have a membership of under five thousand, and a budget of less than a million; maybe we’re not doing so good.**

**And if pastors get too awfully distracted and bothered by all that, they might just be tempted to fiddle around with their image. Maybe they should wear Levis and Hawaiian shirts in worship. Maybe they should get a plexi-glass, see-through pulpit. They start to think of gimmicks and give-aways to get people in to church; and then once they've got them there, they start to think of ways to threaten or sweet-talk them into giving more money, so that they can buy a larger house, perhaps install a pastoral spa and tanning booth, and thus prove that they, too, are successful and absolutely indispensable for the future of the church. In short, pastors can get seduced by their own vanity to care more about charisma than counseling, more about inflating numbers than about informing parishioners, more about personal perks than about people's problems, and more about getting their egos stroked than about equipping the saints.**

**And I call all of that silliness to your attention because it is the polar opposite of Peter's agenda for those over whom he had been given spiritual charge. Peter's number one goal for the people over whom he had pastoral responsibility was that they would persevere in practicing their calling as disciples of Jesus Christ. It wasn't about**

**his ego. It wasn't about wielding power. It wasn't about building the largest church in town. And it wasn't about creating a financial empire in his name. It's about the people in the church growing stronger and deeper in their walk as intentional followers of Jesus.**

**“So” (he wrote, beginning at verse 12) “I will always remind you of these things, even though you know them and are firmly established in the truth you now have. I think it is right to refresh your memory as long as I live in the tent of this body, because I know that I will soon put it aside, as our Lord Jesus Christ has made clear to me. And I will make every effort to see that after my departure you will always be able to remember these things.”**

**What does he want them to remember? He wants them to remember – always remember – that content of the Scriptures, the truth and teachings of the Word of God, the gospel proclaimed to them in preaching, in writing and in person. “So I will always remind you of these things, even though you know them and are firmly established in the truth you now have. I think it is right to refresh your memory as long as I live in the tent of this body...”. Folks, that is why from the**

first Sunday I preached here we have been revisiting the truths of the Scriptures. In the first year we looked at every major doctrine in the Bible by working our way through the Scriptures on which the Heidelberg Catechism is based. Then, after the Easter of my second year here, we started a survey of the sixty-six books of the Bible, which we will conclude before this month is out. We wanted to get a sense of the sweep and flow of the entire breadth of the Bible. And as soon as Advent and Christmas have been duly celebrated, we will begin a focused and in-depth study of the entire gospel of Matthew. Why? Because Dr. Hildebrandt and Dr. Hendricks and Pastor Wilkewitz never taught you these things in roughly eighty-seven years of ministry? Of course they did! And because they did, I am confident I am not teaching you anything you haven't heard from better preachers. I know that most of you have been hearing these things from childhood. And I am delighted that you know all the things that you know. God forbid that I could show up here at the beginning of your one hundred and fifty-seventh year of worshiping Jesus Christ and surprise you with something from the Bible. If the content of the Word of God wasn't the central curriculum of this

**church from its very beginning until now, this church would have closed up shop long ago.**

**But folks, let me tell you something. Every preacher better know that he or she is on borrowed time. Even if they get to stay a long time, the day still comes when they either retire or die; and when that day comes they will have used up every chance they had to make sure their congregation was firmly established in the truth. I try to preach every sermon like it is the last one I will ever get to preach, because if something unforeseen happens, I don't want to die thinking of all the things I meant to tell you, but never did. I know I will never be the last word in preachers, but I also never want to be in the position of the Godfather when he says to his son Michael, "There were so many things I wanted to tell you, but there was never enough time."**

**Sometimes I lay in bed at night and can't sleep because I start to think of all the things I forgot to say or wished I'd said. Fortunately, of course, it's all in the Scriptures, and what I don't say, the next preacher will. But never forget that the Scriptures are the only tether we have that anchors us to this historic faith, and if we cut ties with**

**the Word of God, what remains might look like a church, but it won't be Christian.**

**And this is where you come in. The preacher can preach the Word of God until he or she is blue in the face but if you don't tune into it, if you don't discipline yourself to let its teachings shape the way you think and live, then its truth will be lost on you, and you could be lost to the truth. I am not talking about how many Scripture verses we can quote or even if we can recite all sixty-six books of the Bible in order. It is good if we can do those things, but Peter is trying to do more than turn us into Bible Quiz Team Champions. He wants our lives to be re-formed by the Word of God. He want our minds to be so shaped by the Scriptures, so renewed by a rigorous wrestling with the text, that we find ourselves thinking from a biblical frame of reference. If we don't actively participate in this discipling process, if we don't engage in this concerted effort to get God's Word inside of us – so that we can quite literally think God's thoughts after him, then we will have squandered a most remarkable gift of grace. "Remember", Paul says, "that you were at one time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise,**

having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ... How can we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?"

Now look, I know that some of you are not readers. That's okay. In this day and age that is not a problem. There are currently something like eight to ten versions of the Bible available on CD's. And if you don't like reading, or listening, you can literally watch the whole Bible on TV, complete with beautiful photography, music and sound effects – and all in the comfort of your Barko-lounger. And you can get it for about twenty bucks! Folks, I don't mean to sound like a broken record, but to neglect our opportunity to be formed by the Word of God when it is this available, calls to mind the accusation leveled by Auntie Mame when she insisted that "Life is a banquet (!) and most poor fools are starving to death". If you don't know the Word of God, don't waste a single moment feeling ashamed or embarrassed. The good news is, it is never too late to start. And I will do everything I can to help. My calling, if I am reading Peter right, is to make myself eventually dispensable, by helping you to increase your cover to cover groundedness in the Word of God.

**Peter goes on to insist in verses 16 to 18, “We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eye witnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.’ We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain.” Do you remember the event he is referring to? He is talking about what happened when Peter, James and John witnessed the Transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain. In other words, this is not the product of some Early Middle Eastern creative writing class. Peter is saying, “Look, I was there. I didn’t get this second hand! I am not embellishing a rumor I picked up somewhere. If you want the whole truth (which is recorded in the gospels) the three of us were dumb-founded, and I was the only one dumb enough to suggest a building project to memorialize the occasion because I couldn’t think of what else to say. We are telling you what we saw and heard.**

**And then listen to how Peter wraps this up in verses 19 through 21:**

**“And we have the world of the prophets made more certain, and you**

**will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but man spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.”**

**Can you see why we have such a high doctrine of Scripture? Why we rightly refer to the Bible as the Word of God? The Bible nowhere says that the Scriptures floated down out of heaven suspended from a parachute. It wasn't magic either. What we learn from Peter here is that (as the N.I.V. Study Bible says) “In the production of Scripture both God and man were active participants. God was the source of the content of Scripture, so that what it says is what God says. But the human author also actively spoke; he was more than a recorder. Yet what he said came from God. Although actively speaking, he was carried along by the Holy Spirit.”**

**Brothers and sisters in Christ; let me close with this. We are not book worshippers. We worship the One to Whom the Word of God points**

**us. We worship and follow the Word that became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth. We follow Jesus. But the only way to be life-long apprentices of Jesus is to be life-long students of his Word. It is not a style of life we can make up as we go along. The Word of God and the Way of Jesus is content specific. We either learn it and follow it, or we don't. Right? Amen.**