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The Contemplative Pastor: Returning to the Art of Spiritual Direction

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In any event, I feel strongly that *whoever* reads "Places Along the Way", they will most certainly be enriched by travelling on this spiritual journey of faith.

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The Contemplative Pastor: Returning to the Art of Spiritual Direction

Eugene H. Peterson
Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1993
171pp.

"One of the things I fear most as your pastor is that out of fatigue or sloth I end up going through the motions, substituting professional smoothness for personal grappling with the life of the Spirit in our life together" (p. 145). So writes the author of this wonderful little book that speaks to the heart of every bona fide pastor. The author, a seasoned pastor himself, continues, "The demands of pastoral life are strenuous, and there is no respite from them. There are not many hours in the day when I am not faced with the struggle of faith in someone or another, the deep, central, eternal energies that make the difference between a life lived to the glory of God (sounds like Luther, doesn't it?) and a life wasted in self-indulgence or trivialized in diversions. I want to be ready for those encounters" (p. 146).

If you feel you are not as ready for "those encounters" as you would like to be, then this book may help you and me rediscover the sinew of pastoral work and what it really is all about.

Again, permit me, the reviewer, to let the author Eugene Peterson, a parish pastor of twenty-nine years and now a resident in Regent College, Vancouver, speak from his own experience. He writes, "I have been a pastor for thirty years to American Christians who do their best to fireproof themselves against crises and urgency. Is there any way that I can live with those people and love them without being shaped by the golden-calf culture? How can I keep from settling into the salary and benefits of a checkout clerk in a store for religious consumers? How can I avoid a metamorphosis from the holy vocation (another good Lutheran word that has fallen into unknown disuse and abuse among us, as Lutherans) of pastor into a promising career in religious sales?"

Have I, the reviewer, hooked you, the reader of this review, with these quotes? I hope so! This is not a "how to do it book". This book, written by a pastor, deals with the interior life of the pastor. By reflecting on his own

interiority, Peterson speaks to us. Listen to more of his words describing who we are as pastors... "When I observe the way the vocation of pastor is lived out in America and listen to the tone and context in which the word 'pastor' is spoken, I realize that what I hear in the word and what others hear is very different" (p. 15).

He continues, "... if I vainly crowd my day with conspicuous activity or let others fill my day with imperious demands, I don't have time to do my proper work, the work to which I have been called. How can I lead people into the quiet place beside the still waters if I am in perpetual motion?" (p. 19)

That's what this book is all about. Helping you and me step out of "the perpetual motion" of busyness and get direction in prayer and praying. The author reminds us of C. S. Lewis' theme that "only lazy people work hard" (p. 19). Peterson writes, "I know I can't be busy and pray at the same time." He continues, "I can be active and pray; I can work and pray; but I cannot be busy and pray." My favorite sentences in the whole book are "I cannot be inwardly rushed, distracted or dispersed. In order to pray, I have to be paying more attention to God than to what people are saying to me, to God than to my clamoring ego" (p. 20). Pastor Peterson served the same parish for twenty-nine years and sought to be a pastor who prayed.

He also sought to be a pastor who preaches. "I have no interest in delivering sermons, challenging people to face the needs of the day or giving bright, inspirational messages... I want the people who come to worship in my congregation each Sunday to hear the Word of God preached in such a way that they hear its distinctive note of authority as God's Word, and to know that their own lives are being addressed on their home territory. A sound outline and snapping illustrations don't make that happen" (p. 21).

Peterson has something to offer us. In a world where seminaries and congregations are getting caught-up in sociological and psychological insights, Peterson reminds us all who we are, where we come from, and what it is we are called to be and to do. He writes, "Pastors are in great danger of being undetected carriers of the very disease we are charged to diagnose and heal" (p. 49). He speaks for many of us when he says, "I don't want to live as a parasite on the first-hand spiritual life of others, but to be personally involved with all my senses, tasting and seeing that the Lord is good."

I highly recommend this book. It's easy to read but profoundly written for pastors, by a pastor who knows (really knows) what it is to be a pastor.

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