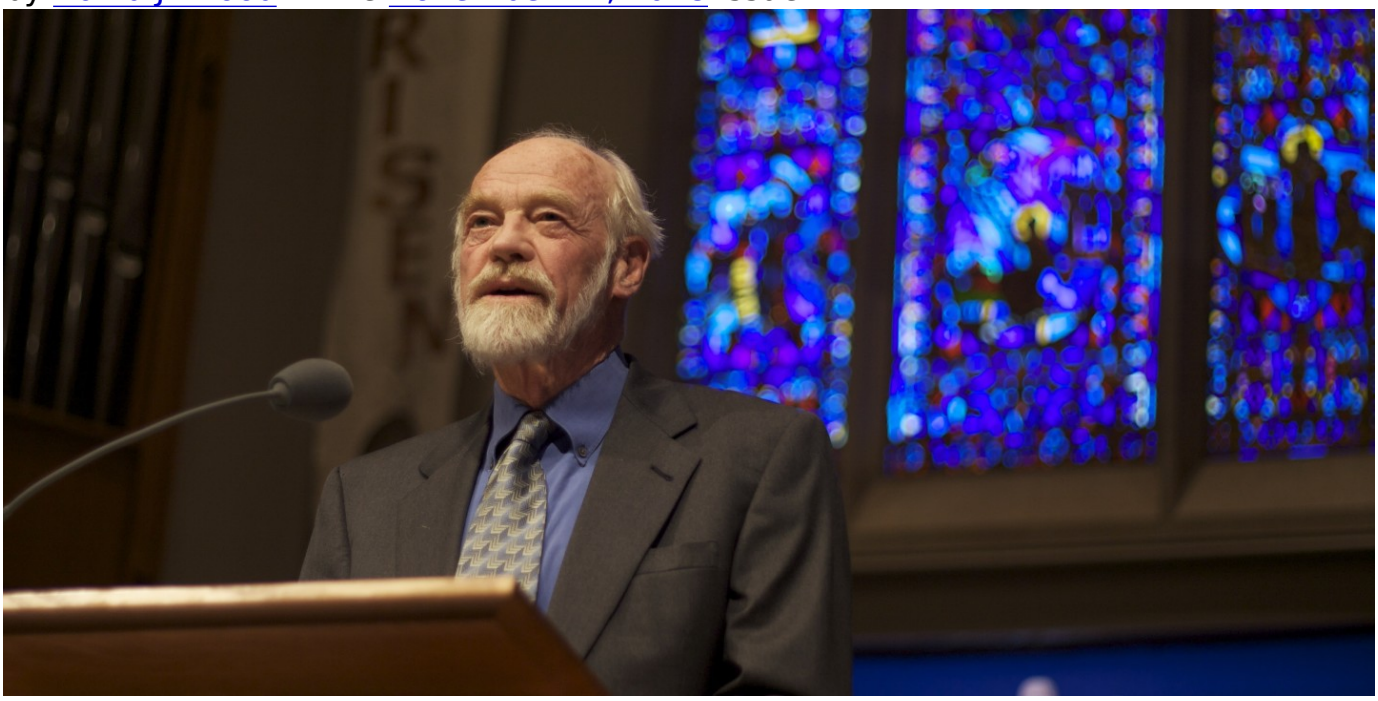
The witness of Eugene Peterson

Peterson never delivered a formula for success. He just wrote about pastoral work and how to live it.

by David J. Wood in the November 21, 2018 issue



Eugene Peterson lecturing at University Presbyterian Church in Seattle in 2009. Some rights reserved by Clappstar.

In one of his early books on pastoral ministry, Eugene Peterson referred to his experience of being a pastor in “soggy suburbia.”

> The people who gathered to worship God under my leadership were rootless and culture-less. They were marginally Christian. They didn’t read books. They didn’t discuss ideas. All spirit seemed to have leaked out of their lives and been replaced by a garage-sale clutter of clichés and stereotypes, securities and fashions . . . It was a marshmallow culture, spongy and without substance. No hard ideas to push against. No fiery

spirit to excite. (*Under the Unpredictable Plant*)

But Peterson's response to this marshmallow culture was not to spurn it; he chose, instead, to dig into it. He sought to reclaim the spiritual disciplines that had been trivialized and marginalized by consumer-driven culture with its love of technological efficiency and its market-driven notions of success. It was in the crucible of congregational life, he contended, that a spirituality could be forged, and it was there that ministry could be done with integrity and even "holiness."

With his eyes and heart wide open, Eugene called pastors to pay attention, carefully, prayerfully, patiently, to the givens of congregational life—the people, the surroundings, and the cultural forces at play. He saw congregational life as holy ground to be cultivated:

> Congregation is the topsoil in pastoral work. This is the material substance in which all the Spirit's work takes place—these people, assembled in worship, dispersed in blessing. They are so ordinary, so unobtrusively there; it is easy to take them for granted, quit seeing the interactive energies, and become so preoccupied in building my theological roads, mission constructs, and parking lot curricula that I start treating this precious congregational topsoil as something dead and inert, to be rearranged to suit my vision, and then to bulldoze whatever isn't immediately useful to the sidelines where it won't interfere with my projects. (*Under the Unpredictable Plant*)

Peterson never delivered a set of instructions or a formula for success in ministry. Instead, he talked about his understanding of pastoral work and how he sought to live it out. His own ministry, he said, was undergirded by two convictions. The first is that "everything in the gospel is livable and that my pastoral task was to get it lived."

> It is not enough that I announce the gospel, explain it or whip up enthusiasm for it. I wanted it lived—in detail, lived on the streets and on the job, lived in the bedrooms and kitchens, lived through dance and divorce, lived with children and in marriage. Along the way I found that this also meant living it myself, which turned out to be a far more formidable assignment. (*A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*)

His second conviction was that his primary work as pastor had to do with scripture and prayer.

Peterson's first call as pastor would be his last. For 29 years he labored in the vineyard of Christ the King Presbyterian Church in Bel Air, Maryland, the congregation he founded. This life required the tenacity of a marathoner, not the speed of a sprinter. (It was no accident that he became a marathon runner during those years.)

Most of that period he was unknown in the wider world. The first of his many books did not appear until 1980, 18 years after he and his wife, Jan, had settled in Bel Air. His break-out book, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society*, was rejected by 17 publishers before getting into print. What gave his words authority to the rest of us was the sense that they were describing a pastoral life that was actually lived.

I met Eugene for the first time in 2001 when I had volunteered to be his chauffeur when he spoke at Louisville Theological Seminary, where I worked at the time. Running late, I ran into the baggage claim area frantically scanning the crowd for my prestigious guest. I found him standing beside the baggage carousel, luggage at his feet, reading a book as the world churned around him. "Dr. Peterson?" He looked up and smiled, "Hello, David."

That was the beginning of what for me was an important friendship, which included visits to his home in Lakeside, Montana, on a bluff overlooking Flathead Lake. It was a home built by his father and where he, Jan, and their three children made an annual summer pilgrimage from Maryland. It was where Jan and Eugene moved permanently after his time as professor at Regent College in Vancouver. It was where he cultivated his sense for and his love of the local. Fittingly, it was where Eugene would spend his final days and breathe his last.

Guests at his Montana home encountered a hospitality made up of rest, relaxed conversation, laughter, leisurely and carefully prepared meals, and space for writing, reading, contemplation, and prayer. There was no television, and no sense that anyone needed to be entertained. Guests were received into the daily life of the household. With Eugene, there was always a measured pace to the conversation. One learned to appreciate the pause that almost always preceded his words.

Perhaps best known for *The Message*, his rendition of the Bible in a modern idiom, Eugene insisted that the work was a translation, not a paraphrase. What he meant by that claim was not just that he had worked from the Greek and the Hebrew texts, but that the work had been distilled from years of having preached and prayed and loved these texts. Paraphrase was too trite a term for how he had tried to translate years of pastoral life under the tutelage of the sacred stories, narratives, prayers, and songs.

Eugene carried the Christ light for countless pastors into the caverns of their shared yet particular realities. He was utterly convinced (and convincing) that such light does not dispel the particularities of our circumstances but enables us to behold in them a beauty, a possibility, that would otherwise be unavailable. The transcendent is to be discovered in the immanent. Incarnation, the story of Word become flesh, he insisted, should remove from us all fear of or disdain for the flesh of our existence.

In the preface to his last book, *As Kingfishers Catch Fire*, Eugene recalls hearing a lecture by the Swiss theologian Paul Tournier and getting the sense that Tournier "wrote what he lived and he lived what he wrote." The man giving the lecture "was the same man as in his books written in Switzerland. A life of congruence, with no slippage between what he was saying and the way he was living."

Congruence was a favorite word and concept for Eugene. In encountering the congruence of words and deeds in his life, many who knew him or read his books were awakened to that possibility for themselves.

Elsewhere in that book, Peterson reflects on the poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins from which the book gets its title. "Hopkins piles up a dazzling assemblage of images to fix our attention on this sense of rightness, of wholeness, that comes together when we realize the utter congruence between what a thing is and what it does: kingfisher and dragonfly catching and reflecting sun brightness."

But the poem's final image, he notes, is of Christ, "who lives and acts in us in such ways that our lives express the congruence of inside and outside, this congruence of ends and means, Christ as both the means and the end playing through our limbs and eyes to the Father through the features of our faces so that we find ourselves living, almost in spite of ourselves, the Christ life in the Christ way." Eugene Peterson was and remains a brilliant witness to that kind of life and that kind of ministry.

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