

ASHLAND THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

A REFLECTION PAPER ON
UNDER THE UNPREDICTABLE PLANT
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OLD TESTAMENT 2: THE PROPHETS

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In our individualistic and entrepreneurial nation, it is no wonder that pastors often get caught up in the drive to “succeed” at the business of religion. Christian bookstores are full of glossy “how-to” manuals written by pastors of giant congregations, which supposedly teach proven techniques to transform the sleepy little country parish into a thriving mega-church. What makes the drive to succeed even more irresistible is the illusion that as a successful pastor we can please both God and our egos at the same time—have our cake and eat it too. But Peterson points out that a glamorous career in religion often becomes a distraction from the pursuit of a true pastoral ministry, or “vocational holiness” as he refers to it. In fact, it is often in direct opposition to it.

When I first felt the call to ministry, a glamorous career in religion was the farthest thing from my mind, as I believe is the case for most pastors. Somewhere down the road, however, the lure of success and recognition began to show up on the radar screen. I think it began innocently enough as a desire to see “results”, but over time I began to become discontent with the routine and modest work of an assistant pastor, the “mucking out the stalls, spreading manure, pulling weeds” (Peterson, 16). In my heart I’ve come to desire the more glorious and noble activities of preaching, teaching, writing, and leading. Success is what I desire, the sort that can be measured on a chart and be recognized by my peers. Unfortunately this desire for recognition and success is not compatible with having a true shepherd’s heart, one that lays down the self for the sake of others.

Peterson’s approach is to view the congregation not as a place to advance one’s career in religion, but as a place for a spiritually maturing life and ministry (Peterson, 21). To pursue this, one has to put careerism on the back burner and instead pursue “vocational holiness”, developing a spirituality that is adequate to our calling as pastors. It means tearing down the idols of career and

success, and viewing the congregation as a monastery, where we as pastors can come to know God in the way that we must.

In order to renounce the idolatry of the glamorous career in religion (Tarshish in the Jonah story) and embrace our calling to be pastors in Nineveh, we must undergo *askesis*, a time in the belly of the great fish. It means ridding ourselves of our god-illusions, of purging ourselves of false motives and desires, of finding the limits of our mortality (Peterson, 90). This *askesis* experience has also been described as the “dark night of the soul”.

My first *askesis* experience occurred quite unwillingly, when my mother died in 1995 of breast cancer. The depression and grief that I experienced in those days rid me of any illusions that I was strong or self-sufficient. It also produced in me a great dissatisfaction in the things that had previously occupied all of my thoughts and energies—success in school and career. The gut-wrenching sorrow in those days, my time in the belly of the fish, caused me to cry out to God in a way that I never would have otherwise. God then called me to be a pastor, and the rest is history.

Peterson suggests the praying the Psalms as a way of developing the tools needed to respond to God. Jonah prayed the Psalms in the belly of the whale, because that was the text with which he was familiar and could draw from. I myself have had difficulty developing a prayer life to sustain me as a pastor. Too often my prayers degenerate into egocentric navel-gazing, in which the focus of prayer is simply and only *me*. Praying the Psalms makes it this impossible, and at the same time allows individuality and flexibility in my prayer. I haven’t approached prayer in this way before, and am excited to begin.

Finally, although we are not as pastors called to a glamorous career in religion, we are also not called to be “program directors”. Churches are not franchises, and congregations are not cookie-cutter

replicas of each other. What works in one place will not necessarily work in the other. The analogy of farming is useful: the farmer must till and care for the topsoil, but he must not bulldoze the land to fit a preconceived idea of what the “farm” should be. So our ministry must be rooted in the particulars (the geography) of the place we are called to minister, and not be and exercise in squeezing a congregation into a mold.

My undergraduate education was in mechanical engineering. In engineering (as in most business), efficiency is valued more than perhaps any other quality. To deliver a particular result with the least amount of material and energy is success. This paradigm does not translate well into ministry, but nevertheless that is what many pastors have done. Programs are developed, packaged, and marketed as efficient means to an end. Pastors then struggle to implement these programs in whatever locale they find themselves in, without proper regard for the lay of the land or the quality of the topsoil.

As I have struggled with the challenges of being an assistant pastor, it has become very easy for me to ignore the particulars of the place I’m in and the people I’m ministering to. It’s much more convenient to simply design and apply a system to the problem—that’s what I’m good at. When energy and time is short, it’s so easy to simply create rules and procedures. But more than anything else, this has diminished my experience of pastoring as a vocation. Instead of being a spiritual director, I’ve become a program director, which is quite unsatisfactory.

As Peterson quotes Blake, “If you would do good, you must do it in Minute Particulars.” It’s in the hospital visits, the team meetings, the telephone calls; in all the mundane activities of life that we find God. It is in those moments, no less than the sermon or lecture, that we can achieve vocational holiness if we don’t forget what it is we’re called to do.