

A Long Relationship

Mark 10:35-45

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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I want to begin this morning by taking you on a kind of mini-tour of my week which will hopefully provide some insight into the evolution of this sermon.

On Wednesday morning I discovered that October is “Pastor Appreciation Month.” I’m not sure who decides these things (Mark Zuckerberg? Oprah?), but I suppose it’s always nice to be appreciated.

On Thursday morning, I had a conversation with one of my former pastors—a conversation that I appreciated in many ways.

On Thursday afternoon, I saw a few posts from Facebook friends with news that a prominent pastor to many people around the world (myself included) was entering his last days.

So, I interpreted this confluence of discoveries and conversations as the voice of God, directing me toward how I might approach this Sunday’s sermon.

I decided that I would preach a short, simple sermon oriented around two pastors that I appreciate.

The only problem with this was that I always send out instructions for worship leaders, musicians and storytellers on *Tuesday* morning.

So, yet again, I have to ask for forgiveness to all those involved in the service for my last-minute changes.

They have to forgive me. Two of them are my parents. And the others? Well, it’s Pastor Appreciation Month, after all!

Last week, I got to church one morning and saw the flashing light that indicates there's a message on the phone. The voice on the message was a surprise. It was Rudy Heidebrecht, the pastor of Coaldale MB church for most of my childhood.

If I were to think of a word to describe how I thought of Rudy as pastor it would be "solid."

His sermons were methodical and expository. He had a deep love for the Bible which was obvious even to an easily-bored teenager. He was convinced that the truths of Scripture were meant to challenge and reorient human hearts and minds. The Bible was to be obeyed, simply and straightforwardly.

His sermons would not have gone viral on the internet. They weren't like action-packed TED talks. He didn't have PowerPoints or visual aids. He didn't use a lot of pop culture references.

He just faithfully stood up there with his bible for over two decades and proclaimed the word of God to the best of his ability.

Why was he calling me, you might be wondering? Well, like many retired pastors he has many books and wasn't quite sure what to do with them. Would I want to take any of them?

My instinct was to say, "Well, you know a lot of reading has migrated online these days... And our theological interests might be a bit different... I'm not sure I'd have much use for your books."

Luckily the Holy Spirit guarded me from such a foolish response. What I in fact said was, "Sure, I'll come over next Thursday morning."

I hadn't seen Rudy for a while. He was older, of course. His back was slightly hunched over. He lived in his condo alone after recently losing his wife. He had a minor stroke recently which has affected his ability to read and write the way he would like. But he was gracious and deferential, just as I remembered him.

He showed me his books, neatly stacked alongside binders filled with twenty-three years of type-written sermons. I took a few.

But then we got to talking—about pastoring, about the future of the church, about what God might be up to in it all. He expressed some of his laments about people who had left the church over the years, whether his specific church or the church more broadly.

And then he said something that has stuck with me for the rest of the week: "I always thought that church was like a long relationship... where you forgive each other and you grow together... like a family."

His voice trailed off at that point. He looked sad or resigned or... something. We just stood in silence for a moment.

I've been thinking about those three words from my former pastor all week. *A long relationship.*

The second pastor that I'm thinking about this week is someone that many of you have probably heard of.

Eugene Peterson is probably most well-known as the author of *The Message* which has sold well over six million copies around the world.

He's written countless other books as well, most of which sit on the shelf of my study (I almost said "my office," but Eugene Peterson would have rapped my knuckles for that. An "office" is a place for conducting business! A pastor has a "study," not an "office!")

Eugene Peterson served as pastor in Christ our King Presbyterian Church in Bel-Air, Maryland for 29 years. He also taught at Regent College in Vancouver, but he was gone by the time I attended there. I never had the privilege of taking a class from him.

For the last few years, Peterson has been living in a cabin with his wife near his home town of Kalispell, MT.

Earlier this week, news began to trickle out on Facebook that Peterson was likely nearing the end of his life. His son posted a note saying that advanced dementia and heart disease would likely take him within days.

For many pastors over the last half century or so, Eugene Peterson has been a lifeline. I would number myself among them.

Peterson gave a generation of aspiring (or reluctant) pastors permission to think of themselves as something other than the American cultural default of the "pastor-preneur"—the executive director, marketing manager, celebrity leader, program director that so many churches seemed to be demanding.

Peterson saw the trends in America of churches becoming like shopping malls, where the consumers dictated the product that was produced, where sermons were thin forms of pop psychology, where entertainment and efficiency were prioritized, where faith was a mile wide and an inch deep, and where the bottom line was often the bottom line.

Peterson stubbornly said “no” to all of this. The pastor’s priority was to deal with God and to help others do the same. It was to pray and to help others to pray. It was to read deeply and broadly, to understand the culture and to understand what God was calling the church to in its specific context.

During one season, he famously had his secretary block off several hours each week in his calendar where he would sit in his office and read Dostoevsky novels.

Peterson refused to play the consumer Christianity game. He sought to prioritize the Scriptures, the sacraments, prayer and relationships—the things that have sustained the church for two millennia. He emphasized the mystery and the intimacy of God.

The first Eugene Peterson book I ever read was called *A Long Obedience*. It was a series of reflections on the Psalms of Ascent and talked mostly about the road of faith as a long journey that required patience, devotion, and commitment.

And it is a long road that we walk *together*, with sisters and brothers in the church. I was drawn to this quote on a Sunday where we welcome Linda and LaVerne into membership but I suspect the rest of us could use the reminder, too. It puts on display Peterson’s usual blunt, theologically honest wisdom:

There are Christians, of course, who say... “I love God but I hate the church.” But they are members all the same, whether they like it or not, whether they acknowledge it or not. **For God never makes private, secret salvation deals with people.** His relationships with us are personal, true: intimate, yes; but private, no. We are a family in Christ. When we become Christians, we are among brothers and sisters in faith. No Christian is an only child.

But, of course, just because we are a family of faith does not mean that we are one big happy family. The people we encounter as brothers and sisters in faith are not always nice people. They do not stop being sinners the moment they begin believing in Christ. They don’t suddenly metamorphose into brilliant conversationalists, exciting companions and glowing inspirations. Some of them are cranky, some of them dull and others (if the truth

must be told) a drag. But at the same time our Lord tells us that they are brothers and sisters in faith. **If God is my father, then this is my family.**¹

Eugene Peterson spent a lifetime trying to speak the truth—the truth about us, the truth about the church, and the truth about God.

He had little patience for quick fixes or instant results. He knew that those don't last. He knew that discipleship was a long obedience in the direction of Christ, together with those on the same journey.

He knew that the life of faith was a marathon, not a sprint. And now he is nearing the end of his race.

So what do my old pastor's ideas about church as a "long relationship" and Eugene Peterson's view of faith as a "long obedience" have to do with our passage this morning?

Quite simply, I think that the only way we will cultivate churches of a "long relationship" where we together seek to be people of a "long obedience" is if we decide that we are servants of one another.

It's easy to be critical of James and John for their arrogant request to sit at Jesus' right and left.

But what do they want that many of us don't hunger for from time to time? A bit of recognition and status. To be honoured as important. To have their hard work and sacrifice acknowledged publicly. To get our way for once. To be vindicated.

These are the things that all of us want and these are the things, unfortunately, that lead to all kinds of broken relationships in churches and beyond.

To all this, Jesus says four simple words: not so among you. Communities who commit to follow Jesus are defined by service to one another.

I want to be clear that I am not saying that we will never change churches over the course of our lifetimes. Very few of us will stay at one church for a lifetime (or even 29 years, like Eugene

¹ Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 169-70.

Peterson!), whether we move or our life circumstances change. We live in a transient culture that is *very* different than the one many of us grew up in. Few of us will live and die in one geographic location.

I am also not saying that it's never appropriate to change churches. Sometimes our own spiritual trajectories diverge from communities that we are a part of. Sometimes churches grow toxic and need to be left behind. Sometimes we have to go elsewhere to give and receive the gifts that we need to grow in Christ. This happens.

But for the seasons that we *are* together, we must seek to have our interactions to be guided by the servant ethic Jesus gives us here.

Are we seeking to be first or last? Are we demanding recognition and status or willingly surrendering it? Are we clinging to our preferences or learning to die to ourselves? Are we consumers or are we family?

The disposition of servanthood that Jesus describes in Mark 10 is the glue that keeps communities together and transforms them into powerful witnesses to a watching world.

May God continue to grow us into something like a family, pursuing a long obedience in a long relationship.

For Christ's sake and for our own.

Amen.

