Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work

By Eugene H Peterson
Reviewed by Darren Cronshaw

I have loved reading Peterson over the years. He is an inspiration as a pastor and reflective practitioner. He is often very counter-cultural both to contemporary society and contemporary expressions of church life and its tendency towards managerial, programmatic leadership. I am reading and re-reading through all his books. My motivation is to get some fresh inspiration for ministry and leadership, but also capture something of the heart and life of the author. He’s an inspiration to me as a long-serving pastor, deeply reflective writer and an academic on the side.

Five Smooth Stones is the first book in a series of books on pastoral ministry. In his classic Peterson in calling for an enthusiastic return to the Bible as a source for pastoral inspiration and models. He explores basic elements of pastoral work, looking from five books of ancient Hebrew wisdom, and shows how and where these books and ministry that is inspired by them interact with each other.

- Song for Songs for the pastoral work of prayer and directing
  Peterson has a high view of sexuality and the body, as well as spirituality and prayer. In fact, he sees sexuality and prayer as interconnected. Salvation turns us to relate in open, loving relationships with God and people. In Jewish tradition, Song of Songs has been allocated for reading at Passover. It helps remind God’s people that salvation that works on a cosmic and national scale is also available in ordinary daily settings. Pastoral work is a commitment to the everyday; it’s an act of faith that the great truths of salvation are workable in the “ordinary universe” (p. 33).

- Ruth for story-telling
  Leading worship is a uniquely straightforward and contained inside church walls. From the front door of church and into the world, however, it gets messier. Ruth’s story is a helpful model because it is a complex story, and an amazing story of God working in the lives of common people who otherwise could have been overlooked. Ruth is traditionally read at Pentecost, celebrating Israel’s national identity, allowing Israel to see the larger story. We need to be storytellers, like a doctor, a parable, a conversation among the people of God’s story, and show what makes them feel. Peterson has a high view of wisdom as an opportunity to listen in to where God’s story is engaging people’s stories.

- Lamentations for pain-sharing
  Lamentations is a sensitive and a heartfelt companion for being a companion with people through suffering. It reminds us that God recognizes the breath of suffering, from A to B, but that it also has its boundaries. It invites us to express fully our angry, painful emotions, and not to hide them, but to face suffering and any element of God’s anger and do so in community with the people of God. Ministry often shares the experience of suffering. It invites us to grapple with pain and plead with God to show us its meaning and its purpose. Suffering in Lamentations is not an ominous disaster to be avoided but a difficult, healing operation to be accepted (p. 147).

- Ecclesiastes for nay-saying
  Peterson continues to remind us that Ecclesiastes is not a straightforward approach to what God has done and is doing. Ultimately, we are in community together as church whether or not we choose our work or whether because of God’s call. We must not fail to understand the congregation just as its, as a historical community brought into being, warts and all, by God, and must not fail to be grateful for it, just as its, warts and all, to God (p. 236).

Peterson relates how pastoral work originates in worship and includes into all of life — what we sing and confess we then seek to live out between Sundays. Pastors don’t just send people out and look for them next Sunday; but accompany them in the ordinary and everyday activities of life and illness, struggle and celebration, ambiguity and blessing. Peterson writes and elevates the calling of pastoral ministry and the importance of aspects of a pastor’s craft including pastoral prayer, curiosity, visitation, sound exegesis, attending to God, and recognizing God at work in “ordinary” matters.


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