

STORIES OF JUSTICE AND LOVE
A Sermon for the Third Sunday after Trinity, 2011
On the Text: Propers for the Day
By the Reverend Doctor Randolph Constantine

Eugene H. Peterson is a strange man. In a sense we are all strange – in the sense that we are all estranged from one another, for none of us truly knows another person; but Peterson is somehow stranger than most people, at least to me. Now part of my problem of thinking that he is strange is that he began his academic career as a philosophy major, which makes him strange to me because I began my academic career in engineering. Now, just about everybody in the world thinks that mathematicians are strange, and I admit to having ended up as a mathematician; but if you think about it, you can easily see that most mathematicians, engineers, and others in the “hard” sciences are likely to think that anyone is strange who ever majored in one of the subjects that are called “humanities”: English, History, Philosophy, and so on. What’s more, engineers and such recognize that the feeling is mutual; humanities majors think we are strange.

Engineers and other scientists are the Joe Fridays of the academic world. We want, “Just the facts Ma’am, just the facts.” We are not interested in metaphors, motives, and nuanced shades of meaning. We don’t tell stories in interesting ways; for us it is, “just the facts, Ma’am”; and that is something that is to our detriment.

But back to Peterson and why he is somewhat strange to just about everybody. From his background you wouldn’t think he should be all that strange. He was born in 1932 in the town of East Stanwood in the state of Washington, but his family soon moved to Kalispell, Montana where he grew up. His father had a butcher shop; and as you might guess, life was hard for them during the depression and then during World War 2. When he went off to college, he didn’t major in anything an engineer might call useful. No, he went to Seattle Pacific University and got a B.A in Philosophy. Apparently, he must have also been hearing a call to ministry, because next he went to NY Theological Seminary and took a Bachelor’s in Sacred Theology. He was ordained a minister in the Presbyterian church in 1958, and planted Christ Our King Presbyterian Church in Bel Air, Maryland, a church he served for 29 years before he retired in 1991. While he was in Maryland, he took an M. A. in Semitic languages from Johns Hopkins University.

I first became aware of Peterson when Fr. Moncrief once talked about a strange new translation of the New Testament done in modern street language by some oddball named

Eugene Peterson. Based on hearing the passages he read from it, I decided I didn't want to have anything to do with that or probably anything he ever wrote. But then, not long after I had been accepted as a candidate to become a Deacon, I bought some books through Amazon from a minister who was a pastor in a church who was leaving that ministry to become a Christian counselor. He and I exchanged some correspondence and he sent me several books I had not ordered for free! Two of them were by this bird, Peterson. Both of them had weird titles: *Under the Unpredictable Plant* and *Tell it Slant*. I figured the least I could do for my donor was to read them, so I did.

What I found in those two books was an odd way of looking at things that yielded unexpected truths. And so I decided that perhaps Peterson was not a madman, just someone with a different way of looking at the Bible and ministry, unexpected, but productive.

One of those two books, *Tell it Slant*, is one of a series of 5 books he wrote on what he calls "Spiritual Theology". I now have four of the 5 and have found little in any of them that I do not agree with. One of the books in that series, *The Jesus Way*, told me something that was part of the inspiration for this sermon. In that book, *TJW*, Peterson wrote about how Jesus is not only, "the Way, the Truth, and the Life"; but that how Jesus has a Way of teaching that was not just suited to the time of His life, but to all time. That way of teaching is the telling of stories. I seem to remember that Timothy Keller also said something similar in one of his books, but I could not find it in a quick search. It doesn't really matter whether Keller said it or not; it is true, and Peterson is right that the greatest teacher of all time taught mostly by telling stories. Stories are so important as a teaching tool, that early mathematics teachers dreamed up stories to help students learn mathematics. They were called, "word Problems"; and students hated them. I guess there are certain kinds of stories that a lot of people just don't like because to understand them you have to think a little. What's odd is that some of Jesus' parables were hard to some people, not the two in our Gospel lesson for today but the one that immediately follows them is not immediately and fully clear as Timothy Keller points out in his book, *The Prodigal God*.

What do stories do for us? They tell us of situations we can identify and of people in those situations with whom we can identify. They speak to us in idioms and metaphors that make what may be hard to understand, easier to understand. Peterson defines a metaphor as an expression that both "is and is not what it names." In John 14:6, Jesus says "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." But a way is a road, a path, a

bridge, a tunnel, a method. Peterson says, “Jesus is not a road. He is covered with skin, not asphalt.” I would note that just because Jesus says, “No one comes to the Father except through me.” we cannot conclude that Jesus is a tunnel. What we can conclude from that is that Jesus is the gatekeeper, and that’s another metaphor. It is He who will judge all people on the Last Day

I have just told you a story, a story of how I learned that my “just the facts, Ma'am.” way of looking at the world did not give me the depth of understanding of the Gospel of Jesus Christ that I needed if I just read the stories directly out of the Bible, not as a sophisticated adult scientist, but as child reading a story that my Mother or my Father told me was true. This is a story that might convince some of you to try reading some of Peterson’s work. I hope it does.

Peterson was always interested in what the books of the Bible really said to the people to whom it was written at the time it was written, not what it says today to people who are reading a translation, or perhaps a translation of a translation, as some of the early English versions were when translations were made from the Latin Vulgate Bible into English, that Latin Bible having been a translation from Greek into Latin. Peterson knew that the best way to get the Gospel message across to people today would be to go back to the Greek and just translate it directly into the Modern English of today with all of today’s slang and idioms. It was Peterson who told me in one of his other books (titled *Eat This Book*) that Koine Greek was a common language, somewhat different from Classical Greek for which there were no dictionaries. Compared to classical Greek, it was considered to be a language of barbarians. About 10% of the words in the 5000 words of the Greek manuscripts of the Bible had no known translation. One of those words is in the Lord’s Prayer! It is the one that describes the bread, *epiousion*. Understanding of Koine Greek was at a standstill until in 1897 when archaeologists discovered a garbage dump at Oxyrhynchus 160 miles south of Cairo. There they found grocery lists, and a part of a page from a first century Mrs. Beeton’s Book on Housekeeping that implied that, *epiousion*, meant freshly baked. So Matthew 6:11 in English should read something like: “Give us this day our fresh bread.”, meaning bread baked today. The meaning of many other words came to light as well. We have a better idea of what Jesus was saying to the people and what St. Paul and St. Peter were saying to those disciples they had trained, such as Timothy and Titus and others. The only problem in the Epistles is that they seldom tell stories; they often just lecture.

So let’s look at a couple of stories. Two Sundays ago, I mentioned the story of the rebellions of Korah and of Dathan and Abiram against Moses, but didn’t give you much detail. This past

week, all the readings from the OT for Morning Prayer have been from the Book of Numbers and included that story in this week's readings. Most everyone knows the story of Exodus. At the end of the Book of Genesis, under his son Joseph's urging, Jacob moved all his family to Egypt to live in the land of Goshen. After 400 years, Joseph is dead and a new Pharaoh begins to cruelly oppress the Israelites. God enlists Moses and Aaron to convince the Pharaoh to let His people go. It takes 10 plagues before the Pharaoh will relent and let them go. God in a cloud with Moses at the head leads them out of Egypt through the Red Sea into the Wilderness of the Sinai on a journey in which the Israelites keep rebelling in sinful ways against God, breaking vows that they had made. In Exodus 19, God spoke to Moses on the third new moon after they had left Egypt and gave them a Covenant in verses 5-8: Exodus 19:5-8 **5 Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; 6 and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel."** 7 So Moses came and called the elders of the people and set before them all these words that the LORD had commanded him. 8 All the people answered together and said, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do." And Moses reported the words of the people to the LORD. In between this point in their journey and Numbers 16, God had given them the Law in the rest of Exodus, Leviticus, and some of Numbers and had stated the many breaches of His commandments that would result in the death penalty. But they kept on griping against God and sinning in other ways until along came Korah on the one hand and Dathan and Abiram on the other at the same time. Korah was a Kohathite, which were a sub-family of the Levites. The Kohathites had been given the duty to carry the most holy things of the Tabernacle in Numbers 4, but Korah wanted to be able to burn incense before the Lord. After Korah and 250 men complained that Moses was lording it over them, Moses told him and the 250 men to bring censers with incense in them before him and the Lord the next morning. Dathan and Abiram refused to come. We read that the next morning, that Moses said: Numbers 16:29-33 29 If these men die as all men die, or if they are visited by the fate of all mankind, then the LORD has not sent me. 30 But if the LORD creates something new, and the ground opens its mouth and swallows them up with all that belongs to them, and they go down alive into Sheol, then you shall know that these men have despised the LORD." 31 And as soon as he had finished speaking all these words, the ground under them split apart. 32 And the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, with their

households and all the people who belonged to Korah and all their goods. 33 So they and all that belonged to them went down alive into Sheol, and the earth closed over them, and they perished from the midst of the assembly. Korah was not swallowed up because he was with the 250 men with censers, who, were all consumed in a great fire from the Lord. All that was left were their bronze censers. Not much in the way of metaphor here. The lesson was obvious: Make a gross display of displeasure with God and His ordinances and His appointed Prophet and expect swift and final punishment. God was just. They had been warned and had vowed to obey, but did not. Justice was then done.

Things changed when Jesus came with His Covenant of Salvation which He sealed with the sacrifice of Himself on the Cross. Sinners would now be given more opportunity to repent. But wait, as they say in the late night TV commercials: didn't Korah and Dathan and Abiram and the 250 have an opportunity to repent? Yes they did, from the time they confronted Moses until the next morning. It wasn't a matter of their saying We want to do this which is wrong, and Bang, they were dead; they had overnight to think about it; but unfortunately, they didn't think about it.

The two parables of today's Gospel lesson bring us into that world of metaphor. Jesus is talking and eating with known sinners. The Pharisees and scribes sneer at him, so he tells them the parable of the Lost Sheep. Suppose one of you has 100 sheep and one has wandered off and is lost. Who of you wouldn't leave the 99 to go look for it? And then, when you find it, you pick it up, put on your shoulders and rejoice; and when you get home, you call your friends and neighbors and say, "Celebrate with me! Because I have found my sheep that was lost!" At this point Jesus abandons the story and states the parallel with the celebration in heaven over one sinner that repents

Written the way I just read it, it is almost exactly the way Peterson wrote it in *The Message*. And you may well ask, not Where's the Beef?, but Where's the metaphor?

First, a parable is itself a metaphor; it is a story about something that has an inexact parallel about something else. Jesus tells this to the scribes and Pharisees for whom 100 sheep might not seem like very much, and because they were self-righteous, they would not think that heaven would be likely to rejoice over the repentance of a single sinner. However, the sinners who heard the story would be likely to think to themselves, "Jesus thinks we are worth more than dirt, that we are worth a lot more than the Pharisees think we are worth, that heaven might rejoice if I repent and stop stealing or getting drunk and rowdy. Maybe I had better listen to this Jesus."

The metaphor is easy to understand; it's just that the Pharisees in their self-righteous pride reject it. However the message gets through to anyone who understands that the only person who ever lived on this earth and never sinned was Jesus, that is to anyone who understands that all anyone has to do to see a sinner is to look in a mirror. Are we lost sheep? Not now, but we sure were once. What's more, not a one of us found Jesus; He found each of us and heaven rejoiced. We may each sin again, ... and again; but as long as we recognize it and repent, we are not in danger, for we are His people and the sheep of His pasture. Remember and live the first words of Jesus' first sermon: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

AMEN!