

## The Unbusy Pastor



*Over the coming weeks, we are highlighting Leadership Journal's Top 40, the best articles of the journal's 36-year history. We will be presenting them in chronological order. Today we present #38, from 1981, written by the pastor of a small church in Bel Air, Maryland, Eugene Peterson, the first of many he would write for the journal.*

The one piece of mail certain to go unread into my wastebasket is the one addressed "to the busy pastor." Not that the phrase doesn't describe me at times, but I refuse to give my attention to someone who encourages what is worst in me.

I'm not arguing the accuracy of the adjective; I am, though, contesting the way in which it is used to flatter and express sympathy. "The poor pastor," we say. "So devoted to his flock; the work is endless and he sacrifices himself so unstintingly." But the word *busy* is the symptom not of commitment but of betrayal. It is not devotion but defection. The adjective *busy* set as a modifier to pastor should sound to our ears like adulterous to characterize a wife, or embezzling to describe a banker. It is an outrageous scandal, a blasphemous affront. Hilary of Tours diagnosed pastoral busyness as "irreligiosa sollicitudo pro Deo," a blasphemous anxiety to do God's work for him.

I (and most pastors, I believe) become busy for two reasons; both reasons are ignoble.

I am busy because I am vain. I want to appear important. Significant. What better way than to be busy? The incredible hours, the crowded schedule, and the heavy demands on my time are proof to myself-and to all who will notice-that I am important. If I go into a doctor's office and find there's no one waiting, and see through a half-open door the doctor reading a book, I wonder if he's any good. A good doctor will have people lined up waiting to see him; a good doctor will not have time to read a book, even if it's a very good book. Although I grumble about waiting my turn in a busy doctor's office, I am also impressed with his importance.

Such experiences affect me. I live in a society in which crowded schedules and harassed conditions are evidence of importance. I want to be important, so I develop a crowded schedule and harassed conditions. When others notice, they acknowledge my significance and my vanity is fed. The busier I am, the more important I am.

The other reason I become busy is that I am lazy. I indolently let other people decide what I will do instead of resolutely deciding myself. I let people who do not understand the work of the pastor write the agenda for my day's work because I am too slipshod to write it myself. But these people don't know what a pastor is supposed to do. The pastor is a shadow figure in their minds, a marginal person vaguely connected with matters of God and good will. Anything remotely religious or somehow well-intentioned can be properly assigned to the pastor.

Because these assignments to pastoral service are made sincerely, I lazily go along with them. It takes effort to refuse, and there's always the danger that the refusal will be interpreted as a rebuff, a betrayal of religion and a calloused disregard for people in need.

It was a favorite theme of C. S. Lewis that only lazy people work overhard. By lazily abdicating the essential work of deciding and directing, establishing values and setting goals, other people do it for us; then we find ourselves frantically, at the last minute, trying to satisfy a half dozen different demands on our time, none of which is essential to our vocation, to stave off the disaster of disappointing someone.

But if I vainly crowd my day with conspicuous activity, or let others fill my day with imperious demands, I don't have time to do my proper work, the work to which I have been called, the work of pastor. How can I lead people into the quiet place beside the still waters if I am in perpetual motion? How can I convincingly persuade a person to live by faith and not by works if I have to constantly juggle my schedule to make everything fit

into place?

If I'm not busy making my mark in the world and not busy doing what everyone expects me to do, what do I do? What is my proper work? What does it mean to be a pastor? If I had no personal needs to be fulfilled, what would I do? If no one asked me to do anything, what would I do? Three things.

I want to be a pastor who prays. I want to cultivate and deepen my relationship with God. I want all life to be intimate--sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously--with the God who made, directs, and loves me. And I want to waken others to the nature and centrality of prayer. I want to be a person in this community to whom others can come without hesitation, without wondering if it is appropriate, to get direction in prayer and praying. I want to do the original work of being in deepening conversation with the God who reveals himself to me and addresses me by name. I don't want to dispense mimeographed hand-outs that describe God's business; I want to report and witness out of my own experience. I don't want to live as a parasite on the first-hand spiritual life of others, but to be personally involved with all my senses, tasting and seeing that the Lord is good.

I can be active and pray; I can work and pray; but I cannot be busy and pray. I cannot be inwardly rushed, distracted, or dispersed.

I know it takes time to develop a life of prayer: set-aside, disciplined, deliberate time. It isn't accomplished on the run, nor by offering

prayers from a pulpit or at a hospital bedside. I know I can't be busy and pray at the same time. I can be active and pray; I can work and pray; but I cannot be busy and pray. I cannot be inwardly rushed, distracted, or dispersed. In order to pray, I have to be paying more attention to God than to what people are saying to me; more attention to God than to my clamoring ego. Usually, for that to happen there must be a deliberate withdrawal from the noise of the day, a disciplined detachment from the insatiable self.

I want to be a pastor who preaches. I want to speak the word of God that is Scripture in the language and rhythms of the people I live with. I want to know the Scriptures thoroughly, personally, intimately; and then be able to say them again to the people around me. I am given an honored and protected time each week to do that. The pulpit is a great gift, and I want to use it well.

I have no interest in "delivering sermons," challenging people to face the needs of the day; or in giving bright, inspirational messages. With the help provided by scholars and editors,

I can prepare a fairly respectable sermon of that sort in a couple of hours or so each week, a sermon that will pass muster with most congregations. They might not think it the greatest sermon, but they would accept it.

But what I want to do can't be done that way. I need a drenching in Scripture; I require an immersion in biblical studies. I need reflective hours over the pages of Scripture as well as personal struggles with the meaning of Scripture. That takes time, far more time than it takes to prepare a sermon.

I want the people who come to worship in my congregation each Sunday to hear the Word of God preached in such a way that they hear its distinctive note of authority as God's Word, and to know that their own lives are being addressed on their home territory. A sound outline and snappy illustrations don't make that happen.

This kind of preaching is a creative act that requires quietness and solitude, concentration and intensity. "All speech that moves men," contends R. E. C. Browne, "was minted when some man's mind was poised and still." I can't do that when I'm busy; there's too much happening. When I am busy I can prepare and deliver clever, well-outlined, readily understood sermons; when I am busy I can be a fairly creditable cheerleader, rallying people to the cause of righteousness, quite often to the satisfaction, even the praise, of my congregation. But I can't preach when I am a busy pastor.

I want to be a pastor who listens. A lot of people approach me through the week to tell me what is going on in their lives. I want to have the energy and time to really listen to them so when they are through, they know at least one other person has some inkling of what they're feeling and thinking.

Listening is in short supply in the world today; people aren't used to being listened to. I know how easy it is to avoid the tough, intense work of listening by being busy (letting the hospital patient know there are ten more persons I have to see). Have to? But I'm not indispensable to any of them, and I am here with this one. Too much of pastoral visitation is punching the clock, assuring people we're on the job, being busy, earning our pay.

Pastoral listening requires unhurried leisure, even if it's for only five minutes. Leisure is a quality of spirit, not a quantity of time. Only in that ambience of leisure do persons know they are listened to with absolute seriousness, treated with dignity and importance. Speaking to people does not have the same personal intensity as listening to people. The

question I put to myself is not "How many people have you spoken to about Christ this week?" but "How many people have you listened to in Christ this week?" The number of persons listened to must necessarily be less than the number spoken to. Listening to a story always takes more time than delivering a message, so I must discard my compulsion to count, to compile the statistics that will justify my existence.

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I can't listen if I am busy. When my schedule is tight and crowded, I'm not free to listen: I have to keep my next appointment; I have to get to the next meeting. But if I provide margins to my day, there is ample time to listen.

"Yes, but how?" The appointment calendar is the tool with which to get unbusy. The appointment calendar is a gift of the Holy Ghost (unlisted by St. Paul, but a gift nonetheless) that provides the pastor with the means to get time and acquire leisure for praying, preaching, and listening instead of just doing. It is more effective than a protective secretary; it is less expensive than a retreat house. It is the one thing everyone in our society accepts without cavil as authoritative. The authority once given to

Scripture is now ascribed to the appointment calendar. The dogma of verbal inerrancy has not been discarded, only re-assigned.

When I appeal to my appointment calendar I am beyond criticism. If someone approaches me and asks me to pronounce the invocation at an event and I say, "I don't think I should do that; I was planning to use that time to pray," the response will be, "Well, I'm sure you can find another time of the day to do that." But if I say, "My appointment calendar will not permit it," no further questions are asked. If someone asks me to attend a committee meeting and I say, "I was thinking of taking my wife out to dinner that night; I haven't listened to her very carefully for several days," the response will be, "But you are very much needed at this meeting; couldn't you arrange another evening with your wife?" But if I say, "The appointment calendar will not permit it," there is no further discussion.

The trick, of course, is to get to the calendar before anyone else does. Mark out the times for prayer, for reading, for leisure, for quietness, for emptiness, for silence and solitude, out of which, and only out of which, creative work-creative prayer, creative preaching, creative listening-can issue.

I find that when these central needs are met, there is plenty of time for everything else.

And there is much else. For the pastor is not, and should not be, exempt from the hundred menial tasks, the trivial errands, the necessary duties, or the administrative humdrum. These also are pastoral ministry. But the only way I have found to accomplish them without resentment and without anxiety is to first take care of the priorities. If there is no time to nurture these essentials, I become a busy pastor, harassed and anxious, a whining, compulsive Martha instead of a contemplative Mary.

A number of years ago I was a very busy pastor and had some back trouble which required therapy. I went for one hour sessions three times a week. No one minded that I wasn't available for those three hours. Everything still got done. Because the three hours had the authority of an appointment calendar behind them; they were sacrosanct.

On the analogy of that experience, I venture to prescribe appointments for myself to take care of the needs not only of my body, but also of my mind and emotions, my spirit and imagination. One week, in addition to daily half-hour conferences with St. Paul, my calendar reserved a two-hour block of time with Fyodor Dostoevski. My spirit needed that as much as my body ten years ago needed the physical therapist. If nobody is going to prescribe it for me, I will prescribe it for myself.

In Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, there is a violent, turbulent scene in which a whaleboat scuds across a frothing ocean in pursuit of the great white whale, Moby Dick. The sailors are laboring fiercely, every muscle taut, all attention and energy concentrated on the task. The cosmic conflict between good and evil is joined: chaotic sea and demonic sea monster versus the morally outraged man, Captain Ahab. In this boat there is one man who does nothing. He doesn't hold an oar; he doesn't perspire; he doesn't shout. He is languid in the crash and the cursing. This man is the harpooner, quiet and poised, waiting. And then this sentence: "To insure the greatest efficiency in the dart, the harpooners of this world must start to their feet out of idleness, and not out of toil."

Melville's sentence is a text to set alongside the psalmist's "Be still, and know that I am God" (Ps. 46:10), and alongside Isaiah's "In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength" (Is. 30:15).

Pastors know there is something radically wrong with the world. We are also engaged in doing something about it. The stimulus of conscience, the memory of ancient outrage, the challenge of biblical command involve us in the anarchic sea which is the world. The white whale, symbol of evil, and the crippled captain, personification of violated righteousness,

are joined in battle. History is a novel of spiritual conflict. In such a world noise is inevitable and immense energy is expended. But if there is no harpooner in the boat, there will be no proper finish to the chase. Or if the harpooner is exhausted, having abandoned his assignment and become an oarsman, he will not be ready and accurate when it is time to throw his javelin.

Somehow it always seems more compelling to assume the work of the oarsman, laboring mightily in a moral cause, throwing our energy into a fray we know has immortal consequences. And it always seems more dramatic to take on the outrage of a Captain Ahab, obsessed with a vision of vengeance and retaliation, brooding over the ancient injury done by the Enemy. There is, though, other important work to do. Someone must throw the dart. Some must be harpooners.

The metaphors Jesus used for the life of ministry are frequently images of the single, the small, and the quiet, which have effects far in excess of their appearance: salt, leaven, seed. Our culture publicizes the opposite emphasis: the big, the multitudinous, the noisy. It is, then, a strategic necessity that pastors deliberately ally themselves with the quiet, poised harpooners, and not leap, frenzied, to the oars. There is far more need that we develop the skills of the harpooner than the muscles of the oarsman. It is far more biblical to learn quietness and attentiveness before God than to be overtaken by what John Oman named the twin perils of ministry, "flurry and worry," for flurry dissipates energy and worry constipates it.

Years ago I noticed, as all pastors must notice, that when a pastor left a neighboring congregation, the congregational life carried on very well, thank you. A guest preacher was assigned to conduct Sunday worship, and nearby pastors took care of the funerals, weddings, and crisis counseling. A congregation would go for months, sometimes as long as a year or two, without a regular pastor. And I thought, "All these things I am so busy doing-they aren't being done in that pastorless congregation and nobody seems to mind." I asked myself, "What if I, without leaving, quit doing them right now? Would anybody mind?" I did, and they don't.

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