

Wednesday January 16, 2013

Good pastors don't flunk failures

By Jim Taylor

At various times in my life, I have taught writing and/or editing courses for several professional institutions. I can sum the experience up in a single sentence -- I love teaching; I hate marking.

I watched like a proud parent as my students – some older than I was – honed their skills in expressing themselves, in organizing their thoughts, in discarding distractions.

I celebrated their improvement.

And then I had to tell a few of them that despite their best efforts, it wasn't good enough. They still didn't measure up to some external standard that existed only in my mind.

Bluntly put, they flunked.

American theologian Martin Marty recently wrote (in his Internet column *Sightings*) about his transition many years ago from pastoral ministry to professor. His new dean and supervisor, Jerry Brauer, told him, "Marty, there is a difference in your new role. Good professors have to flunk some people; good pastors never do."

Not Pollyannas

I've known a few good pastors. The difference between them and lesser pastors has little to do with knowledge, preaching, or administration. Not even with charisma. The good pastors didn't flunk their parishioners. Even if some people could never grasp the point of the sermon. Even if they never served on any committees. Even if they never put more than \$2 on the collection plate...

These pastors weren't Pollyannas, unable to see faults. Pastors are, often, acutely aware of people's shortcomings – perhaps more so than anyone else in the congregation. They've seen commitments that didn't get followed through, good intentions abandoned, promises broken. They know about abuse lurking behind closed doors, addictions carefully kept under wraps, incompetence disguised by blaming others...

David Brooks wrote a column in the New York Times called "Suffering Fools Gladly."

Brooks wrote about himself: "I don't give myself high marks on suffering fools. I'm not rude to those I consider foolish, but I strenuously and lamentably evade them. But I do see people who handle fools well. Many members of the clergy do, as do many great teachers."

They see the failures. But they don't flunk them.

Unconditional caring

I take inspiration from people like that.

An old friend died recently. Although she had no formal training in ministry, she had her own ministry in her congregation and her community. I don't recall her ever saying an unkind word about the people she dealt with. She didn't judge people by their weaknesses; she preferred to focus on their strengths.

My father, both a minister and a psychologist, noted that counsellors don't spend much time working with well-adjusted, successful, competent clients. They get people who – for whatever reasons – are having troubles. Sometimes their lives have been warped by a troubled past. Sometimes they have done foolish things. Even criminal things.

A good counsellor may be shocked, dismayed, even appalled, by what she hears. But she continues to care about her client. To seek only the best outcome for that person.

It may not be what we normally define as love. But it is unconditional.

It's a valuable talent in a black-and-white world.

Copyright © 2013 by Jim Taylor. Non-profit use in congregations and study groups, and links from other blogs, welcomed; all other rights reserved.

Please encourage your friends to subscribe to these columns. But if you forward a column, please identify yourself as the sender, so that I don't get accused of sending out spam!

To send comments on this column, to subscribe or to unsubscribe, write jimt@quixotic.ca

YOUR TURN

Saying unkind things about new babies is a risky thing to do. Fortunately, a few of you agreed with my assessment of the selfishness of the newborn.

Bob Lewis, from Emmaus, PA, wrote, "In a conversation, one asked the other, 'Just from looking at a little baby, can you believe in original sin?' The other replied, 'Not from looking at one, but from living with one I certainly can!'"

And Cliff Boldt proved once again that he cannot resist a pun: "Some babies are born wanting a womb with a view."

Friend John Towgood wrote, "Interesting article about original sin (OOPS,I mean that babies are not perfect)."

John's right, though – the column was about original sin. Although I reject Augustine of Hippo's rationale for original sin, he was right that we humans are born tainted with original sin. It is, simply, the selfishness derived from a desire to survive. We don't need to have Jesus as a sacrifice to save us from our innate selfishness, but we do need to grow up and discover that our personal survival may not be the most important thing in the world. In that, Jesus provides us with the supreme example.

Clare Neufeld liked Charles Hill's challenge to his counselees: "If you were to die today and someone wanted to put something on your tombstone, what would you want them to say about you?"

"Charles Hill's comments reminds me of that very question, posed to me, when in my early- to mid-thirties," Clare wrote. "At the time, I didn't hesitate to answer, 'He loved us!' It didn't impress the listeners to my answer. For me, however, it was emotionally charged at the time."

Nancy Harms added another variant to cat poems: "Purr, and the world purrs with you; hiss, and you hiss alone."

Rafael Vallejo requested permission to use my paraphrase of Psalm 29 in his adult study group. I said yes. I will always say yes, as long you, the user, don't try to claim my words as your own, or to make a profit off your use of my words. ☺

PSALM PARAPHRASES

This coming Sunday, the second Sunday of Epiphany, calls for Psalm 36:5-10. I find, as I search through my archives, that I have only one version of a paraphrase for this psalm. So that's what you get.

5 Your door is always open, God.

You stand at your door, and welcome all who come to it.

6 Entry to your home is not limited to your friends, your associates, your social class.
You extend your welcome to everyone and everything:
Beggars and outcasts, oppressors and victims,
People who have handicaps and drifters who huddle under bridges and in culverts.
From the rats cowering in their sewers to the birds soaring among the clouds --
You make them all welcome in your home.
7 All of creation is your household, God.
All can live together in harmony under your roof.
8 In your kitchens they are fed;
In your living room, they are entertained and uplifted.
9 For you are life itself.
10 Continue to give us life, O Lord.
Show us how to live in harmony in your home.

For this and other paraphrases, you can order *Everyday Psalms* through Wood Lake Publications,
info@woodlake.com or 1-800-663-2775.

HYMNSIGHT

My friend Ralph Milton, who published his Rumors newsletter for many years, has something special for you. It's called HYMNSIGHT, and it's for any church that currently projects the words of hymns and prayers, or plans to.

Ralph writes, Since retiring, I have rediscovered my old love of photography, and found creative use for my pictures in the life of First United where Bev and I worship. Our entire liturgy is projected, so that people read responses and sing hymns from screens. I use my photos to add color, vitality and depth to all the hymns and most of the liturgy.

In the course of this, I have developed slide sets to go with 600 hymns, plus about two thousand slides, in both the standard screen and the newer wide screen shape. You can use all of them, in any way you wish, without permission, and absolutely free, as long as it's non-profit and church related.

All you need to access the website is go to:

<http://www.hymnsight.ca> www.hymnsight.ca

In addition to all that visual material, there's a comprehensive "how-to" manual for those who are new to the idea of using projected visuals in church, and for those who have already begun.

HymnSight provides a set of suggested visuals to go with each hymn, but the words to the hymn are not there, mainly for copyright considerations.

Please take a look to see if this service scratches where you itch. If you think it's worthwhile, please let some of your colleagues in ministry know about it. And if you know of a website that could benefit from a link to HymnSight, why not add it?

Blessings,

Ralph Milton

YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

If you know someone else who might like to receive this column regularly via e-mail, send a request to jimt@quixotic.ca. Or, if you wish, forward them a copy of this column. But please put your name on it, so they don't think I'm sending out spam.

For other web links worth pursuing, try

- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap," write reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. [<http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>](http://www.churchwebcanada.ca)
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.

TECHNICAL STUFF

This column comes to you using the electronic facilities of Woodlakebooks.com.

If you want to comment on something, send a message directly to me, jimt@quixotic.ca.

To subscribe or unsubscribe, send me an e-mail message at jimt@quixotic.ca. Or you can subscribe electronically by sending a blank e-mail (no message) to softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca. Similarly, you can unsubscribe at softedges-unsubscribe@quixotic.ca.

You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Sunday called Sharp Edges, which tends to be somewhat more cutting about social and justice issues. To sign up for Sharp Edges, write to me directly, at jimt@quixotic.ca, or send a note to sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca
