

This e-mail is sent only to a voluntary subscriber list. If you no longer wish to receive these weekly columns, send a blank e-mail (no message) to softedges-unsubscribe@quixotic.ca. Or write to me personally, jimt@quixotic.ca

Wednesday October 15, 2014

Lessons from lazy geese

By Jim Taylor

Our house sits on a hillside, high enough above the lake that sometimes I get to look down on flights of geese as they take off, heading to who knows where.

Or is that gaggles of geese?

Anyway, one of those flights or gaggles went by the other morning. They had taken that characteristic V-formation. They squawked and honked noisily as they headed north.

Wait a minute – north? In autumn, geese are supposed to head south, aren't they?

But in this instance, the lead goose had clearly decided they were heading north. Up the lake. Perhaps to a sheltered bay with abundant aquatic vegetation. Perhaps to a field, imperfectly harvested. And the rest followed, because that's what followers do.

I've read that the V-formation is a labour-saving device. The pattern lets each goose ride the slipstream of the goose in front, saving energy. Sure enough, as these geese passed by, I could see that the leading geese had to flap vigorously to forge ahead; the geese at the tail end were coasting. Some of them barely flapped at all; they soared on outstretched wings, surfing the wake of those who had gone before them.

The geese near the back also seemed to do most of the squawking.

Just like us

Those geese reminded me of some human organizations I've belonged to.

Just the other day, I heard a minister wonder, "Why is that the people

who have the most difficulty hearing always sit at the back of the church?”

In another organization, someone cited the “80/20” rule: 20 per cent of the people do 80 per cent of the work. It follows that 80 per cent do only 20 per cent of the work.

If that rule sounds cynical, consider some other truisms you may hear about human behaviour. “If you really want something done, give it to a busy person.” And from a choir leader: “Good singers practice; the others just imitate the good ones.”

Occasional exceptions

Several dictionaries defined a truism as an obvious statement that says nothing new or interesting; a cliché, a platitude.

I think that’s too simple. A truism contains some truth, often derived from anecdotal evidence, but it can never be proved, because there are always exceptions.

A truism is like the famous paradox uttered by a citizen of Crete: “All Cretans are liars.” If it’s literally true, he too must be lying. But if he’s lying, then all Cretans are not liars. But that would make his statement false, which again means he’s lying...

If we treat that statement as a truism, though, it becomes a general claim that allows exceptions.

So too all the truisms I’ve cited above. The slackers in a church congregation may be the hardest working volunteers at the food bank; the weak links in the neighbourhood watch program may be key coaches in youth soccer.

Even geese take turns at the front of the formation. At least, biologists say that they do. I don’t know enough geese personally to confirm that fact.

But somehow, I suspect that a few lazy geese never do take their turn up front. Why should they work harder than they need to? To cite another truism, they’re only human, after all.

Copyright © 2014 by Jim Taylor. Non-profit use in congregations and study groups, and links from other blogs, welcomed; all other rights reserved.

To comment on this column, write jimt@quixotic.ca

YOUR TURN

I almost blush to list some of the comments about last week’s rewriting of

Exodus 16. Ralph Milton called it “delightful.” Mo Rajabally called it “brilliant.” So did Lurna Tallman, but she did add a further comment: “Brilliant. Absolutely brilliant. However, God is God of the credit system and can use it to his Glory, too.”

Cliff Boldt thought of another variant of a familiar story, in which the Seven Dwarfs sing, “I owe, I owe, it's off to work I go!”

“That came back to me as I finished your article,” Cliff wrote. “A humorous description of those who flock to Wal-Mart, Costco and car dealerships to get stuff. And the sad part is this: if we all stopped shopping, our economy would collapse as surely as it did in October, 1929.”

Judith Westerhoff wrote, “Oh, how I wish this had appeared in my mailbox prior to its lectionary Sunday! I laughed so hard I had tears streaming down my face! It sure hit home with me. I will never look at a credit card in the same way again. Thank you for your sermon to me.”

And this from Tom Watson: “What a marvelous modernization of the Exodus story! I loved the line ‘Sufficient unto the day is the weevil thereof’.”

Okay, I admit it – I had fun too.

PSALM PARAPHRASES

Psalm 99, in its usual versions, is clearly tied to the story of Moses being allowed to see God's backside. But I don't think it has to be. God can be more than an extension of anthropomorphic imagination:

**1 Like a halo of holiness, the spirit of God envelops the earth.
In the stillness of space, God's spirit gives life;
let us acknowledge our insignificance.
In the emptiness of infinity, God's spirit creates life;
let us acknowledge our interdependence.**

**2 Look up if you would see God;
raise your sights beyond your repetitive routines.**

**3 But do not attempt to face God as an equal--
fling yourself face down on the earth
before the creator of the heavens.**

**4 Almighty God, you love to do right.
In your dealings with your creation, you are always fair.**

**5 We humans grovel before your greatness.
Humbly, we kiss the humus from which you fashioned us.
You are holiness itself.**

**6 The humus holds the recycled cells of those who came this way before us;
Step by step they searched for you, until you found them.**

**7 By the pillar of fire and the whispering breeze,
by bonfire and whirlwind, by prophecy and parable,
you showed them your way.**

**8 Because they tried to follow you, you forgave them their failings;
But those who laid traps for them, you did not tolerate.**

**9 So pledge allegiance to the Holy One!
Gather at the foot of the mountain, where even the rocks reach up towards our
God.
Our God is holiness itself.**

**For paraphrases of most of the psalms used by the Revised Common
Lectionary, you can order my book *Everyday Psalms* from Wood Lake
Publishing, info@woodlake.com.**

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 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

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- 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>
- 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

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 un-subscribe 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
