

Wednesday November 7, 2012

Visitors that sneak in by the back door

By Jim Taylor

An old friend – younger than me, but a friend for over 40 years – doesn't go to church any more.

Which might be a bit surprising. Because she's a minister's wife. She studied theology. She served as a missionary in Africa. She spent years volunteering in social causes that help the down and out in seaports and urban cores.

Her life has been far more committed to living her Christian faith than mine has.

But she doesn't feel comfortable in church any more.

It's not the preaching, she says. Or the creeds, or the liturgies.

It's the music. In her denomination, the hymns are – she lists their failings – triumphalist, sexist, obsessed with sin, anthropomorphic....

They typically describe God as all-powerful, all-knowing, conquering other faiths, guaranteed ultimate victory. They portray God as an ageless male patriarch who judges us poor helpless mortals from somewhere up in heaven, a benevolent monarch who dispenses favours to his followers.

And they treat humans as little more than ping-pong balls batted back and forth by the irresistible forces of good and evil.

Paying attention

Granted, my friend is unusual – she actually pays attention to the words she's expected to sing. Most people don't, I find. They sing lustily about waging war against Satan's powers, about looking forward to blissful life in eternity, about sacrificing children as a sign of love. But all they hear is familiar and therefore comforting memories.

Someone wise said once that if you want to know what people believe, don't listen to what they say; listen to what they sing.

Sermons, you see, enter our minds through the front door. We can let those words in, like visitors. We entertain them for a while; then we can send them away again. Or perhaps we keep that door shut, as we might for a pesky door-to-door sales rep.

But music slips in through the back door. We don't even realize it's wandering around inside our minds until it has already made itself at home. Ideas that come in through the back door are much harder to evict.

Especially when they're accompanied – as they often are – by a catchy melody. The music turns into an earworm -- you find yourself singing along while you do the laundry, mow the lawn, drive down the highway. And each time, the unnoticed message borrows more deeply into your sub-conscious.

Unless, like my friend, you become aware of what you're endorsing when you sing those words.

Historical artifacts

There are some hymns that I longer enjoy singing. The words offend me. I can sing them as historical artifacts. But I feel as uncomfortable belting them out as I would signing a petition in favour of child pornography.

I won't try naming those hymns, because they may belong only to my own religious tradition. Or some of those hymns might be among your favourites. If so, it's not up to me to set you straight. Better that you discover for yourself what you're singing.

Neither my friend nor I suggest that the “grand old hymns” should be trashed. But we should all pay attention to what we’re singing about.

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YOUR TURN

Last week's column reminded Christa Bedwin of Shakespeare's famous line, “All the world's a stage...”:

She found the column comforting: “I have just come through a life experience that made me aware that I can't control much -- This column has a soothing effect on me -- I am not alone!”

Barb Taft wrote from Kingston, Ontario, “Loved this column! Reminds me of the time I sang a verse of a song in complete gibberish -- having forgotten the words . I wonder if sometimes I'm not doing this in real life?”

A correspondent who chooses to identify herself as “Smithers Singing Pat” had some advice: “Every day, be the person you want to be. You don't get a do-over.”

Bob Walker applied the column to his ministry: “The Danish lay theologian Soren Kierkegaard said that we humans are the actors in an unfolding life, with the Holy One being the sole audience (paraphrased). Your treatise fits Kierkegaard's assessment....

“Once during my years at the University of Washington, I was in a one-act play directed by a drama student. It wasn't until the end of the play that I discovered that I had been the leading actor. For whatever reason, the director did not have us actors rehearse a curtain call; instead, she simply directed each of us in turn, with me as the final actor to trot out front!

“In the last half of my 42 years as a United Methodist minister, I delivered my sermons in the extempore style, in that I wrote a careful manuscript, but rehearsed it enough to be delivered without always remembering every line; that method stood me in good stead toward the end of my career and into my retirement years of occasional preaching as a blind man.

“Indeed as you suggest, life and what we do with it takes place as a drama, [not always} what we had anticipated.”

Charles Hill noted, “There are those who attempt to give us a life script: preachers, parents, teachers. The problem comes when we blow a line or a scene. Another problem comes if we are playing out someone else's script. Our heart isn't in it. Not all are capable of improvising and not all have a supportive cast. Hence depression, rage, suicide, striking out at those whom we believe caused us to blow our lines.

“Our lives are usually played out with a difficult cast, a vague or inappropriate script, and a highly critical audience. It keeps counselors in business!”

One of the letters I included last week was from Dale Perkins, struggling with the fact that the word “God” carries an enormous amount of anthropomorphic baggage with it, regardless of how carefully we frame the name.

Krista Markstrom responded to Dale's letter: “I agree that when people speak of God, particularly God the Father, God is suddenly humanized, taking on all our limited qualities of seeing, knowing, hearing and speaking.

“I've been struggling with the label 'God' for several years now... It is what I recently experienced with my father when he was dying that convinces me we limit and restrict 'God' to our image. The Divine Mystery of life cannot be stuffed into a bag of skin. Not that I equate my father with God, but my father provided to those of us fortunate to be with him a presence beyond a pronoun/noun....

"The closer he came to death, he overcame both his vision and hearing loss, reaching out to us in a way that I've never before experienced. My father became more than his body. He became a presence of love ... Nothing that I could explain in my limited vocabulary could define what my father became. If I say what happened using the word 'God', I would put a limitation and restriction on a powerful force that completely enveloped the room and us -- Jews, Christians, and non-church goers -- with unbounded love.

"Is there a spiritual life possible without that word?"

PSALM PARAPHRASES

Psalms 127 poses a cultural problem. In the wisdom of the psalmist's time, children offered the only social security most families had; barrenness was considered a curse because you would lack family support in old age. Today, when many people choose not to have children, they rely on government pensions for financial security. But what about emotional security?

- 1 The road of life takes many tricky turns;
you never know what crisis waits around the corner.
- 2 Each day has only 24 hours;
You cannot earn bonus points by burning candles at both ends;
You will only burn yourself out.
But God knows what you can do, and God will give you the strength you need.
- 3 God gives family and friends to sustain us when we weaken;
- 4 They are our insurance against the future.
- 5 Treat everyone as a friend, and you will never lack for support when you need it.

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

YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

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For other web links worth pursuing, try

- David Keating's "SeemslikeGod" page, www.seemslikegod.org;
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, isabel@traditionaliconoclast.com
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap," write reynoldsrp@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.

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