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Wednesday November 26, 2014

You don't have to believe everything

By Jim Taylor

Our son would have been about 15, I suppose, when he took confirmation classes.

Confirmation is one of those strange rites found only in churches that baptize infants. By baptism, those babies become members of the church. Later, when those infants are old enough to understand what was done to them when they were too young to understand what was being done to them, they're expected to spend anywhere from a weekend to a year studying why it was done, and owning what their parents did on their behalf.

Confirmation probably has roots in the Jewish *mitzvah* traditions, marking the transition from child to adult, although no one ever says so.

Theologically, confirmation is a meaningless rite. Baptized young people still belong to the church, even if they never get officially confirmed. The love of God doesn't have a valve that gets shut off just because a teenager opts out of a religious ritual.

Practically, confirmation serves as a kind of graduation from Sunday school. Having graduated, the vast majority of young people never come back.

It's almost like getting vaccinated against a contagious disease.

Getting done

Anyway, back to our son. The week before his confirmation ceremony, he came to us. "I don't think I can go through with this," he said.

We wondered why.

"It's this book," he said, waving a hand vaguely at his Bible. "I'm

supposed to say that I believe all this stuff. And I know that's not how the earth was formed."

We had a long talk. We didn't attack geology, or evolution, or anthropology. We tried to say that the Bible wasn't intended to be a scientific document. Much of it was based on myth and legend – ancient attempts at describing how we humans might have become the kind of people we are.

Both sources of knowledge were valid, we said, but different.

Our son must have bought our explanation. He went through with the ceremony. He answered all the formula questions: "Now I ask you, before God and this congregation..."

(Although the presiding minister did tell us, later, that he glanced down, during his address to the congregation, to see our son tying his shoelaces together.)

Free to think

In hindsight, though, I wish we had told our son that he didn't have to accept either science or the Bible uncritically.

That he didn't have to believe everything science told him. That he was free to apply his own intelligence, to any and all scientific claims. He could hold in abeyance those "facts" that required further examination. He could accept the bits that built a more comprehensive picture of the universe he lived in, and reject the bits that didn't.

And in the same way, that he didn't have to believe everything the Bible told him. That he was free to apply his own intelligence, to any and all religious doctrines. He could hold in abeyance those teachings that conflicted with his experience. He could accept the stories, the traditions, the practices that helped him to live a fuller and more compassionate life, and reject those that didn't.

I wish I had told him that.

But I didn't, and I couldn't. Because I hadn't gotten there myself yet.

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YOUR TURN

Last week's column, on the difference between some jays and the ways we

humans think we communicate effectively, generated a variety of replies.

Mary Blackburn got the point: “Word of mouth - sharing the good news as told and taught and lived by Jesus, with friends, family, and strangers - isn’t that what the first disciples did? I do believe the jays may be braver and wiser than many of us Christians these days.”

John Hopkins expanded the point: “Yes Jim, those cheeky Steller’s jays do have a lesson to tell us about effective communication. But I fear the lesson will be lost with our most recent generation of the electronically-connected. As a self-employed consultant now retired, I found that all of my future business prospects came from the tried and true word-of-mouth method and not from advertisements or flyers. For me, this is further proof that if you have a message worthy of sharing, endorsements from those who have shared your experience are the best way in which to gather support.”

Steph Wakelin reminded me that there’s more involved than just communicating: “It may be word of mouth, but if you look closely food is always somewhere in the picture. Families used to sit around the dinner table. Even at church, networking is through dinners.”

Vern Ratzlaff wrote, “A great column echoing my own concerns with denominations, seminaries, and other social agencies.”

Debra Huron doesn’t have Stellar’s jays in Ottawa, but she does have blue jays, a close relative. She suggested I look up a website she’s involved with. “I wonder if you know what else blue jays do with their mouths,” Debra asked. It turns out that jays, as they cache acorns for future meals, plant new oak forests because, hold onto your throat here, “A blue jay’s esophagus expands so it can hold up to five acorns at a time.”

Christa Bedwin commented, “I’ve often wondered how the animals know so quickly when we put some seeds out. They’ll be round the back door very quickly. Are they constantly monitoring all the backyards? How do they know?”

Christa also had a response for Tom Watson, whose letter last week expressed his discouragement with voting: “YES, it is absolutely crucial that we all get out there and vote against Harper. Nobody in the history of Canada

has done so much damage to our country. Discouraged or not, this next election is crucial -- if he doesn't somehow change the election laws to give himself a dictatorship first, that is."

And finally, Claudine LaForce wanted to defend the Canadian Legion: "I disagree that another war/battle is needed to recruit more members to the Legion. We've had several in recent years but the difference is the belief of the soldiers who head to these battles. Most go only because it is their job; not because they believe in the cause. When they return from battle, they mostly want to forget the experience rather than re-live it. I believe this is why they haven't turned to the Legion for support."

PSALM PARAPHRASES

Suddenly, it's Advent again (and thank God we're finished with gospel lessons from Matthew for a while!). The recommended psalm for this first Sunday of Advent is Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19. Coming as it does at the beginning of winter, I wondered how garden plants might feel when that first frost hits. Perhaps we too have seasons we struggle to survive.

- 1 Listen to me, God.
You are warm, while you leave us to freeze!**
- 2 Stir yourself to save us.
Shine some light into our winter;
Send some warmth our way!**
- 3 Bring back the sun;
Give us a chance to live again!**
- 4 Are you angry with us?
We cannot survive the cold on our own.**
- 5 Bitter blasts come down out of the north.
Frost burns our faces.**
- 6 We hang our heads in shame;
We wilt away.**
- 7 Bring us back to life again, God.**
- 17 Let the sun warm the earth again,**

**so that our stems can grow tall and straight,
and our blossoms lift their faces to the sky.**

**18 Take away this winter of our discontent, Lord,
and we will not let you down.**

Give us life, and we will give you glory.

**19 Send spring quickly, O creator.
Let your garden grow again!**

**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...

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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.

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