

Wednesday May 15, 2013

The signboard to the window to God

By Jim Taylor

In his autobiography, *The Wanderer*, former United Church moderator Sang Chul Lee tells of discovering a Christian gospel while in a Mongolian labour camp. He had never met a Christian. He knew nothing of the Christian church.

But he found Jesus to be the most winsome personality he had ever encountered.

And that creates a problem. Because the Christian church insists its core is a real person who suffered, died, triumphed over death, who reveals the true nature of God, and who still lives and moves among us. The church insists each of us can know him personally.

But without that story in the Bible, how could Sang Chul Lee encounter Jesus?

Ways of meeting Jesus

My congregation occasionally sings a hymn, “Christ has no body now but ours...” The words acknowledge that Jesus is no longer physically present to meet people directly.

So how could strangers like Sang Chul Lee get to know Jesus?

Not by attending religious rituals and sacraments. We re-enact (supposedly) things that Jesus did. But the routine repetition of a rite conveys little of his life, his teaching, his personality.

Communion, at most churches, resembles a lineup at a soup kitchen more than a joyous feast of fellowship. Baptism is more likely to invoke images of Chinese water torture or CIA waterboarding than a celebration of birth into a new family.

Without the Bible to tell the story of Jesus, the Christian church would not exist.

Unfortunately, the actions and attitudes of his most fervent followers could give an utterly misleading idea of his personality. The Jesus that Sang Chul Lee read about showed compassion for all in need, had little patience with rigid rules, and even forgave those who crucified him. But some of his modern followers hate blacks, Hispanics, and gays, denigrate women, love guns and punitive legislation, and despise the environment.

Indeed, Kansas Republican Mike O’Neal claims that a verse in Psalm 109 directs him to pray for his president’s death:

“Let his days be few; and let another take his office;
May his children be fatherless and his wife a widow.”

That is, I submit, massive misuse of scripture.

Laying out the path

You can, in fact, support almost any position – from genocide to rape and incest – by quoting the right verse from the Bible. And I suspect that single-minded devotees can similarly distort the scriptures of other faiths.

What scriptures do, I suggest, is to differentiate one religion from another.

You cannot worship Krishna without reading the Mahabharata. You cannot belong to Islam without learning the Qur’an. Without the Torah, a Jew would be just an ethnic male without a foreskin.

Each religion’s scripture defines its own acceptable route towards an encounter with ultimate holiness.

Yet paradoxically, you can discover the divine without those scriptures. Many people do. Even some who call themselves atheists. They find God – by whatever name -- outside the boxes created by the Bible, the Vedas, the Qur'an, or the Torah.

The best any text can do is point towards God.

When scripture becomes a barrier that prevents people from seeing beyond its words to its greater truths, we should treat that scripture with skepticism.

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YOUR TURN

Marjorie Gibson shared her feelings about the loss of a friend in last week's column. From the letters, it's obvious she's not alone. Beyond sharing recollections of losses, several letters considered the connections we have with each other.

Mary Faith Blackburn commented, "A timely column today, Jim, as I begin my day in the realization that the parishioner I said good-bye to yesterday is truly no longer here. So much of my time and thoughts have been connected to this person over the last year of illness, and now she is suddenly gone, and too soon for many of us left behind. And tomorrow I will meet with another family and prepare to write a funeral reflection for their father. He was 91, but in the 20 plus years I knew him he was just quietly present in my home church. He too is missed.

"We are all connected, and I am glad it is so, even on the saddest of days."

Allison Playfair wrote, "I am currently participating in a hospice volunteer training class. It is a 10 week course, covering the many facets of end-of-life that we will encounter with the folks we are companioning. last week we did an exercise where we listed three most important things in a number of categories. Then the instructor asked to choose one from each category to give away, then he took some until at last we were left with nothing! It was a very visceral way of gaining some understanding of the losses we encounter at end of life -- physical capacity, emotional battles we might fight, relationships that will end...so on."

Allison went on to describe a family situation where she felt a connection had already been severed – by behaviour rather than death. I won't quote from that portion of her letter.

She also wrote about the losses caused by transitions; "One is my household , with one daughter leaving for college and the other blowing in and out for brief moments like the shifting winds at sea, never knowing if she will bring tempest or treasure tossed carelessly on the shores of our changing relationship. This new to me -- to be the land from which she embarks. I am used to thinking of myself as the one who goes out. Not for me to journey now, but to instead become a safe harbour to which she may return.

"The other is my church, seeking to find a way through the death of old ways and find new life in mission where members are pulling and pushing on the one hand and digging in and afraid to lift anchor on the other..."

Charles Hill sent what feels like a mixed message, somehow: "I agree wholeheartedly with your observations. You are, of course, waxing very New Age....shudder! Is the cord really cut at death?"

By some coincidence, Sally Stoddard sent some musings which, I think, partially answer Charles's question: "We will never recover that 'special something' we had, but the very fact that we had something special means that we have already been enriched beyond measure. As we say goodbye, we more fully appreciate what that 'something

special' was. Even though we find it hard to think of saying goodbye to any of our family or friends, we know our hearts are fuller because we have known them.”

Isabel Gibson also suggested that death need not totally cut the cord of connection: “A nice piece -- although since you used my mother's poem, maybe I shouldn't say so!

“Odd, though, that notion of feeling diminished by another's death. I feel the loss, but somehow also feel as if I'm more. For having known them? For now truly ‘getting’ the pain that all others feel?

“At our best, our losses help us be in the world in a gentler way. One last gift from those we've loved, perhaps?”

Margaret Carr wrote, “Today’s Soft Edges reminds me of an excellent book for children called ‘The Invisible String’ by Patrice Karst. I bought it for my Grandchildren who live many miles away in Wisconsin. A mother explains ‘People who love each other are always connected by a very special string made of Love. Even when you can’t see it you can feel it deep in your heart and know that you are always connected to the ones you love.’” A beautiful children’s book that teaches we are never alone and the invisible string can always tug at your heart because it is made of Love.”

Bev Ireland liked my line, "We are a vast network of life and living." She wrote, in response, “I recalled the search for my daughter's biological mother. The search took approximately 10 years. When we all finally met there were two unknown connections. My best friend's daughter was a good friend of my daughter's new-found half-sister. The half-sister was also a friend of the new minister who had arrived in our community. Coincidence? Or connection?”

Elsie Rempel described her own work: “Part of my ministry mandate is to work with seniors. I often talk about seniors nurturing their spirituality so that they can be good spiritual companions for their grandchildren and the young people in their congregations. When I do so, I use Charles Olson's description of the spiritual rhythms of life - letting go (acknowledging our losses), naming God's presence, and taking hold.(The Wisdom of the Seasons, 2009).

Several elements of last week’s mailing connected for Paul Harvie at several levels: “I read the Psalm Paraphrase. It was another that really hit home. Since Easter, two weeks after my leg amputation, I have experienced lots of things that have hit home. The poem on loss was really beautiful as well.”

PSALM PARAPHRASES

The lectionary does suggest a psalm for Pentecost Sunday, although I suspect many congregations might skip the psalm in favour of the readings from the gospel, Acts, and Romans. Anywhere, here’s a version of Psalm 104.

24 Abundant and plentiful are your creations, O Lord;
you imagined them, and they came into being.
The world is full of your vision.
25, 26 You fill the abyss with the ocean, the seamless womb of life.
Upon its surface, you support tankers and freighters and cruise ships;
in its depths dwell creatures beyond counting--
sleek and gaudy, strange and deadly,
anchored like rocks and faster than fear.
From invisible plankton to playful whales,
the Lord God made them all.

27 All these owe their existence to you;
you set each in an environment where it can survive.
29 But if you turned your thoughts away from them, they would vanish,
a fleeting figment of your imagination.
Your spirit gives them life, as your spirit put breath in our clay;
without it, we return to the dust from which we came,
the dead elements of bygone stars.

30 Blow your breath through our being, Lord.
Create us afresh;
renew the life of your creation.
31 Then your glory will continue forever;
all living things will rejoice in God's gift of life.
The imagination of the Lord will be apparent
in all creatures great and small;
32 from coral cells to the continents themselves.

33 Is it any wonder I sing the praises of God?
As long as I live, my life itself attests God's glory.
34 So may even my imagination always turn towards God,
and may the Lord fill all my thoughts.

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

- 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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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
