

## **The risks required by peace and goodwill**

**By Jim Taylor**

**In this season when words “peace and goodwill” are bandied about like eggnog, it’s worth remembering that peace and goodwill come at a price. They don’t just happen.**

**When I was a child, Vancouver had a vast racial divide between those of European ancestry, and those of Chinese ancestry. The Chinese ran market gardens on the outskirts of town, and restaurants in the enclave known as Chinatown. Europeans ran businesses and patronized Chinese restaurants occasionally. Otherwise, the two communities had minimal contact.**

**My family had a Chinese gardener called Gong-On. We inherited him, I suppose, when my father became principal of the college. No one seemed to know how long Gong-On had been coming to weed the beds and trim the hedges. To a 12-year-old boy, Gong-On seemed very old, and very slow, as he shuffled from task to task.**

**Sometimes he ate his lunch alone under a tree in the garden. Sometimes he brought no meal at all. My mother broke precedent. She brought him into our house and made him a bowl of soup. He slurped it silently, wiped his mouth, burped, nodded to her, and left.**

### **Venturing out**

**Then one week he didn’t show up for work.**

**He didn’t show up the second week.**

**Our acquaintances shrugged, “Well, what can you expect from a Chinaman?”**

**My mother went looking for him. Friends warned her that it wasn’t safe. Chinatown was filled with thugs and thieves. They were as likely to slit her throat as to divulge information about one of their own.**

**But she went anyway. She tried the Chinese restaurants first. They had a hard time believing that a rich white woman – compared to them, any white woman was rich – would try to find an elderly Chinaman for purely altruistic motives. But they believed her enough to provide some possible contacts.**

**I learned later that she spent days probing through narrow alleys into concealed courtyards between clusters of tenements, where the smoke from cooking fires hung low in the air, where lines of laundry laced across the spaces between balconies, where people crouched over charcoal braziers looked suspiciously at her...**

## **Changing the climate**

**Eventually, she found Gong On, lying in a pile of rags in a room that was more like a cave than a dwelling. He was sick, but he knew who she was.**

**She called an ambulance. She paid for a doctor. She got him to hospital.**

**He died anyway. But I'm told that the people of Chinatown marveled at this strange white woman in tweeds who had cared enough about an elderly Chinese man with no family, that she came to find him.**

**I can't claim that my mother's actions changed the racial climate in Vancouver. Except that the climate did change in time. The "two solitudes" began dissolving. Today, peace and goodwill have replaced suspicion and distrust.**

**But it didn't come easy. It required courage. And sacrifice. For my mother. And for thousands of others, on both sides of the racial gulf, who took the personal risk of reaching out, of establishing contact, and of being hurt.**

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## **YOUR TURN**

**In last week's column, I expressed some despair about people who seem unable to learn from experience. Towards the end, I referred to the woman accused of promiscuity (in John's gospel) and wondered what Jesus would say to her if this had been her 27<sup>th</sup> repeat offence.**

**Several readers replied, "The answer is known; no need to wonder. He would forgive her."**

**Those particular words came from Steve Roney. Others had similar responses.**

**Dawn Taylor wrote, "When asked how often to forgive, Jesus answered,**

**‘Not seven times, but seventy seven times’ (Matt 18:22). Even allowing for some exaggeration, we still have a long way to go to understand and forgive. Hard and frustrating for most of us!”**

**Myrna Tuttle referred to the same biblical instruction, and added, “Christianity is hard to do. And it is counter intuitive. As well as counter cultural. This is sort of tongue in cheek, but I think the notion of penal colonies is an answer. Put all impaired drivers, for instance, on an island and let them govern themselves. It worked in Georgia, it worked in Australia, both of which started out as penal colonies.”**

**I’d point out, however, that Jesus apparently didn’t offer even first-time forgiveness to the merchants polluting the Temple precincts when he overturned their tables and chased them out with a whip.**

**Other readers expressed concern about my own mental attitude.**

**Joa Lazarus wrote, “Jim, sounds like you are feeling discouraged, maybe frustrated too. I can understand that feeling. I have an adult child with fetal alcohol syndrome. She is one of those people who don’t learn. She makes the same mistakes over and over because her brain does not connect cause and effect. Her mistakes have profoundly hurt other innocent people including children.”**

**Joa continued, “It’s not her fault” but “I do believe that as Christians we are called to love and to forgive, over and over again. Jesus may have said ‘sin no more’ but he never made forgiveness contingent on it. That doesn’t mean we can’t keep trying to stop dangerous behaviours and surely we also can be forgiven for wishing the problem would just go away. Even our ideal role model wished the cup could pass. But it doesn’t, and all we can do is ask for grace.”**

**Laurina Tallman wrote a long letter about mental dysfunctions, from which I’ll quote only this paragraph: “I specialize in people [whose] learning disabilities and behaviour have not been understood since childhood so they have been forced to create their own path through life in a society that has not cared enough to find out what’s wrong with them. Jailing them, letting them ‘wipe themselves out,’ and otherwise marginalizing them, which you recommend, is precisely the same kind of response as *their* responses to a world that has rejected them because they cannot comprehend and comply. You have found a church that accepts you despite your disabilities; the church is in the business of accepting the disabled, but it sets limits on its tolerance. However, the**

**church does disabled people little service if it does not try to find out what causes disability and how to heal it.”**

**Marion Loree shared some of my pessimism: “I think you have missed something in your column today about the learning process. Many of the people you describe have probably learned their lessons only too well. I suspect that most learned while still very young and impressionable that the world is not a good place to be. Through their experience of abuse or neglect they learned that they are not lovable persons and they learned to shield themselves from the world rather than risk being hurt over and over again. Thus they act out their feelings in destructive ways -- breaking the law, substance abuse, etc. Their behaviour perpetuates their deep feelings of being unloved and unlovable, and the consequences society hands out continually affirm their view of themselves.**

**“What Jesus offered was not a list of do's and don'ts but unconditional love to any and all -- that has more healing power than having one's licence suspended, being put in jail, or any other kind of punishment the legal system can dish out. I suspect that repeat offenders have never known that kind of love in their lives.”**

**David Gilchrist sympathized with me: “This matter has troubled me for a long time. In my study of Alcoholism decades ago, I learned how alcohol anaesthetizes the decision-making lobe of the brain, so it cannot function... I suspect that many (if not most) of those incapable of learning from experience have fetal-alcohol brain damage. How do we deal with people who are unable to function responsibly? We've closed most of our Mental Hospitals, and no longer take adequate care of people with other types of mental problems: how are we do deal with this relatively new phenomenon?”**

**Robeert Caughell wanted to be clear: “I'm not picking on Roman Catholics, just using them as an example. [The problem you describe] is like people who go to confession, confess their sins, but then go and do them again. On the other hand, if people did learn from their mistakes, confession booths would be a lot less busy.”**

**James West pondered, “Your column describes the reality that passes human understanding. I continue to hold to my ironic reading of the history of dogma. The only empirically verifiable doctrine of the Christian faith is the one most**

**denied, original sin. It is the condition that requires a God-sized remedy. From your research, it appears that the Almighty is making faster progress among plants than among humans. Could that be why the Lord commanded the disciples to 'Look at the lilies of the field'? (Luke 12:27)**

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## **PSALM PARAPHRASES**

**Throughout this season of Advent, the prescribed psalms seem to be a plea for the right kind of king to come. Psalm 71 is no exception. But I think that in today's world, leadership comes from many places. We don't necessarily look to royalty to set an example for us. Rather, politicians who get caught playing hanky-panky with expense accounts, and bankers who make bad investments that we bail out for billions of dollars, outrage us because they violate the standards we expect of them.**

1 If only powerful people could be more like you, God.  
2 They would apply the same standards to their own lives that they demand of those who depend on them.  
3 Then office environments would help employees enjoy working; press releases would tell the truth; industrial wastes would not defile the world.  
4 Powerful people would selflessly serve their constituencies; they would not exploit for short term profit those who have less money, less power, and less influence.  
5 Such people would earn our long-term loyalty; they would deserve to prosper.  
6 We need that kind of leadership.  
7 Their radical example would make others reconsider their own attitudes.

For paraphrases of most of the psalms used by the RCL, you can order my book *Everyday Psalms* from Wood Lake Publications, [info@woodlake.com](mailto:info@woodlake.com).

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### **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](mailto: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

- 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](http://www.seemslkegod.org);

- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, [www.traditionaliconoclast.com](http://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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