

Wednesday December 5, 2012

The clergy hot-line to God

By Jim Taylor

In my religious tradition, we have something commonly called “The Prayers of the People.”

Essentially, it’s a time when people within the congregation have an opportunity to identify and voice their own concerns – silently or out loud.

Most of any worship service is defined in advance. It may come from a prayer book or a lectionary. Some one – sometimes a minister or priest working alone, sometimes a team of staff and volunteers – chooses the readings, the music, the themes that will be presented to the gathered people.

The worshippers often have no direct input (aside from singing hymns and intoning liturgical responses) until the Prayers of the People.

There are still places, I’m sure, where clergy presume that they already know what their people should be praying for, and proceed accordingly.

But that doesn’t happen as often as it used to. Even in churches that follow a prescribed liturgy, there’s usually time for individuals to name the persons and situations for whom they want prayers.

The voice of authority

But why, I keep wondering, must those concerns be expressed by the worship leader to qualify as a prayer?

I understand and respect the need for the person with the microphone to repeat some of the requests. Even when asked to speak loudly, some people can’t. Or won’t. Perhaps when they were children, too many adults told them to keep quiet in church.

But why, having already repeated the information once, do clergy then feel they have to repeat it again in the body of the prayer?

Does God listen only to church professionals?

I recall visiting a church where the minister asked for prayer concerns. People spoke of one person’s diagnosis of cancer, another’s car accident; of a spouse sent overseas to help with disaster relief ... They spoke with joy, with pain, with a catch in the throat...

Even as an outsider, I could feel emotion rippling through the congregation.

The minister made careful notes. And then he repeated all the concerns in his prayer. But by then, a spontaneous outpouring of caring had become a sterile formality.

After the service, I asked, “Didn’t God hear, when the people said it themselves?”

He looked startled.

Call on the professional

There was a time, before Roman armies razed the Great Temple, when the Jewish people thought their religious obligations were taken care of as long as the High Priests in Jerusalem performed their functions.

And I wonder if modern churches have slipped into the same mindset.

Invariably, it’s the minister who’s asked to open a meeting with prayer. Or to say grace before a meal. Or, on Sundays, to voice the prayers of the people. As if concerns only register with God when an accredited voice says it.

Does heaven use voice-recognition technology?

To his credit, the next Sunday, the minister I referred to above asked for the people's prayer concerns as usual. As usual, they responded from the heart.

After a pause for reflection, the minister simply said, "God, you have heard our prayers...."

I don't think anyone felt God had not been listening.

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YOUR TURN

Last week's column, about how we affect the future as we live the present, was more of a "think-piece" than usual I suppose. But you readers rose to the challenge.

Isabel Gibson caught the larger implications, what she called "the 'making a difference' conundrum. We see big issues and think we can't 'do anything' about them; we see small issues and think we can 'fix' them. Both conceits are likely wrong. Everything we do and don't do 'makes a difference': we just get to decide what kind of difference we make, not how much."

So did Mike Crockett: "This reminded me of the concepts developed by Aristotle of a God who exists in the actualization of our potential. So at Christmas we might mean by 'Christ being born in me' that God has been growing in us since conception, impacting in one way or another on our development, mostly with our cooperation but on occasions even without it, bringing us into our own future.

"Is it too wild to say, 'My future is God's future?'"

James Russell asked, "Isn't it interesting how as our knowledge of physics advances, so does our concept of god? Having moved past Newton's great clock-maker, is there a quantum limit to how small a god's part in this world may be ... or how closely we may be entangled with events on the other side of the universe?"

Bruce Fraser liked to have his thinking pushed: "Really thought-provoking column. I like it when you stretch us.

"The comment about the Great Engineer designing everything reminds me of science fiction writer, Isaac Asimov, and his trilogy titled *Foundation*. The main theme was psychohistory, a concept he invented. Just as economists cannot say how one individual will behave, they (try to) predict how current global trends in business and commerce will play out in the future. In a similar way, although psychohistorians cannot say how individuals will behave, they use advanced mathematics to predict how society will look in years, decades, centuries and even millenia to come. And if something interrupts the desired flow of events, they tweak the system to bring it back in balance. Which I think is how traditional theologians explain God causing The Plan to work -- but, hey, I'm no theologian, so take that comment with a BIG grain of salt. Anyway, theology aside, Asimov's work is a fascinating and entertaining read."

Byron Wilson was still reacting to the Harper Conservatives voting down support for providing generic HIV retro-viral medicines to Africa: "The (faint) hope that we can positively affect the future is all that keeps me going these days -- how we have negatively affected it seems to loom over almost everything."

Cliff Boldt passed along some family dialogue and an observation:

A woman asks her husband: "What are you doing?"

"Nothing," he replies.

"That's what you were doing yesterday!" says the woman.

"I wasn't finished," he says.

Cliff concluded: "When we reply 'Nothing', it is just as untrue as when some asks, 'How are you?' and we reply 'Fine'."

John Willems also indulged in some wry humour: "Sometimes I go into my shop and think about nothing, and other times I just sit. It gives me the fuel to do something that matters here and now."

Mary Collins wrote about the previous week's column: "Your piece about your grandson's friendship with the two conjoined girls, Krista and Tatania, in his class, was beautiful. His taking them quite for granted reminds me of a story a woman in my church told many years ago when our UCW was discussing the theme of racial discrimination etc. Her son had come home with a handkerchief tied around his knee. He said that he had fallen in the school yard during play and skinned his knee, so Catherine in his class had given him the handkerchief.

"I know I shouldn't have asked this, she told us, but I knew there were two Catherine's in his class. So she asked him, 'Which Catherine?'"

"Huh?"

"Was it the white Catherine or the black Catherine?"

"I don't know," he replied, 'I'll look tomorrow and tell you.'

"Colour didn't enter into it for him (until she asked!)."

PSALM PARAPHRASES

The lectionary doesn't prescribe a psalm for this Sunday, Advent 2. Rather, it calls for Zechariah's song, Luke 1:68-79. It parallels, with variations, Mary's Magnificat and Hannah's song in Samuel 1. I can't help wondering if a Palestinian family, somewhere in the West Bank or Gaza, might be crooning something like this to their newborn baby, too:

Allah is great!

Allah has seen his people's suffering, and has acted to save them.

For unto us a child is born, unto us a child is given,

who will be the saviour of His people.

The words of Allah came to Mohammed:

We will be saved from our enemies;

Those who occupy our birthright will be displaced;

We will be restored to our ancestors' heritage,

so that we can worship Allah without fear.

This he promised to his Prophet.

And you, child, will be successor to the Prophet of the Most High.

You will stand before the Almighty

to hear His voice and declare His will.

Our lack of faith will not be held against us.

A new light will dawn on our people;

We will shrug off the darkness that has cloaked us for generations,

and take our rightful place in the sun.

Allah is great!

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

HYMNSIGHT

My friend Ralph Milton, who published his Rumors newsletter for many years, has something special for you. It's called HYMNSIGHT, and it's for any church that currently projects the words of hymns and prayers, or plans to.

Ralph writes, Since retiring, I have rediscovered my old love of photography, and found creative use for my pictures in the life of First United where Bev and I worship. Our entire liturgy is projected, so that people read responses and sing hymns from screens. I use my photos to add color, vitality and depth to all the hymns and most of the liturgy.

In the course of this, I have developed slide sets to go with 600 hymns, plus about two thousand slides, in both the standard screen and the newer wide screen shape. You can use all of them, in any way you wish, without permission, and absolutely free, as long as it's non-profit and church related.

All you need to access the website is go to:

<http://www.hymnsight.ca> www.hymnsight.ca

In addition to all that visual material, there's a comprehensive "how-to" manual for those who are new to the idea of using projected visuals in church, and for those who have already begun.

HymnSight provides a set of suggested visuals to go with each hymn, but the words to the hymn are not there, mainly for copyright considerations.

Please take a look to see if this service scratches where you itch. If you think it's worthwhile, please let some of your colleagues in ministry know about it. And if you know of a website that could benefit from a link to HymnSight, why not add it?

Blessings,

Ralph Milton

YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

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For other web links worth pursuing, try

- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, isabel@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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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
