

Wednesday July 17, 2013

Faith is not a security blanket

At least partly by Jim Taylor

For the summer doldrums, I'm calling in a pinch hitter, my friend Jim Mein, recently retired as Archdeacon of the Diocese of Edinburgh in Scotland. Here's part of a sermon he preached last September.

For the last seven years I have been teaching students how to preach. A while ago I decided to preach a really bad sermon, for them to criticise.

They caught on to my monotone, looking down at notes and not at them, dropping my voice at the end of sentences and so on. But I wanted them to comment on the content -- and with that they seemed amazingly happy.

I raved on about how God was providing all that we needed, the fruits of the earth, the rain and sun, the trees and flowers, the food and drink -- and so on.

Every night on our TV news, there were starving children. Floods in some places, drought in others. An earthquake leaving thousands homeless. Fish stocks declining; coral reefs disappearing. Pollution and plastic litter threatening the survival of many species. Global warming a clear threat.

I mentioned none of that. And not one student seemed to notice or care.

The environment has not been a big issue in Christian history. I suppose that in Biblical times creation was so big, so beyond any actions of puny humanity to affect it, that people simply prayed God would control it in their favour.

Things have changed. The most likely scenario for the rest of this century sees bio-diversity critically reduced. Many low-lying parts of the world flooded. Wars over food and water.

Called to follow

And what has theology -- talk about God -- got to do with the crisis in our oceans and the future of life on earth? I think it has to do with what makes humanity what God intended it to be.

Who are the human beings I admire most? Dietrich Bonhoeffer facing death in a German prison; Nelson Mandela imprisoned on Robben Island; the paralympians we watched with amazement last summer; my friend Malcolm in those last painful weeks of his life....

These people have faced suffering or disaster to a degree I can't imagine, yet retained their humanity, their interest, their generosity, their love for others.

So I'm not talking about practical responses to environmental threats (though I'm all for doing everything we can). Rather, I'm suggesting that Christian faith is not a comfort blanket, promising that God will protect us from disaster. Small children may think their father, or mother, can protect them from all bad things. But we are not infants, and I no longer believe in a God who treats us like infants, or who wants us to behave like infants.

So it is not the powerful, miracle-working Jesus who inspires me today. It is the man who continued to love, to act generously, to go without his own comfort, who calls us to walk bravely and with integrity even when the future looks bleak.

It's not an image that most of us have felt called to follow in these past 60 years of continual growth. But it's one to which our young may well be called over the next 60 years.

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YOUR TURN

Lots of letters about last week's column on different kinds of love.

Charles Hill recalled, "Many years ago I taught a sociology class named Marriage and Family. The textbook had a chapter with about 45 different definitions of love. I heard that the class caused several couples to break up. Many times I struggle with Paul but I think his best writing is I Corinthians 13. It was always unconditional. I suspect he desired reciprocity though obedience and knew that the sin would cause harm.

"I agree with your three categories," Charles noted, but added, "the third is rare."

Elwyn Hunt, in New Zealand, had a suggestion: "The three categories listed, 'I want you', 'you need me,' and 'as is' could be combined into a fourth category, 'mutuality'. The mother who wants a baby because the baby can give all sorts of things to the mother (love, purpose to life, social acceptability, physical contact even rather callously, in New Zealand anyway, access to a social welfare benefit!), the baby who needs the mother for its survival, and both mother and child who can love 'as is'."

Isabel Gibson wasn't completely happy with my definitions either: "I'd quibble that you haven't defined love, you've characterized it. I say that because I'm not sure the first form is love, in any meaningful sense - but then I find that I'm not sure exactly what I'm objecting to. Maybe that the focus as you've described it is self, not other?"

"As for the 'change for me' form - wow. I get uncomfortable calling that love too, but it can't be for the same reason, can it? When it comes to love, maybe (a la Stephen Covey) we focus too much on parsing the feeling and not enough on undertaking the doing: the cherishing, the appreciating."

Bob Walker had mixed reactions: "As usual, Jim, your observations on the many meanings of 'love,' were instructive and wise. I do, however, have a few perceptions contrary to yours.

"I am told that the Greek word *eros* does not translate into 'erotic,' but to 'self-love.' Interestingly, there are a few biblical references that do speak to the importance of self-love. An indirect statement is in 1 John that we love because we have first been loved. The Hebraic Book of Leviticus has at least one fine statement; namely, we are to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. In the Christian Writings, Jesus was reputed to have said that the sole commands of importance are to love God with all that we can be and do, and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves without exclusions of any kind. That's the meaning of *eros*.

"On the 'sin no more' statement attributed to Jesus, some modern scholars are skeptical. The phrase comes at the end of John's story about the self-righteous religious leaders trying to trap Jesus into authorizing the stoning of an adulterous woman. Modern scholars now say that it's a good guess that a judgmental monk, copying the biblical books, decided to paint Jesus as a conditional love advocate by inserting those false words. The earliest documents of the story do not have Jesus pronouncing such a judgmental statement."

[But it's far from the only instance of Jesus telling people to go and do something after a healing or intervention: JT]

"Finally, *agape* does mean unconditional or unrestricted love, even toward our enemies. Love without attached strings, as we know all too well, is the hardest gift to enact; nevertheless, Ephesians calls us to imitate God on that *agape* score."

Paul Coffman offered a further variant: "Sometimes I wish that translators would translate the Greek 'agape' in the New Testament into the English 'respect' instead of 'love'. Respect your neighbor as you respect yourself. Respect your enemies; they are persons just like you. Have respect for everyone; we are all human beings. That seems to me to cover what *agape* means better than the word 'love' with all its connotations."

Old friend Carolyn Terry wrote, "I like your definitions of love. I have heard lots of sermons about the different kinds of love, and I've wondered myself if those different Greek words really explained love."

Don deGroat wanted some more information about the kind of love that the Greeks called "storge": "My Konine Greek is a bit rusty so I consulted my Analytical Greek Lexicon, then my Arndt and Gringrich Greek-English Lexicon but could find no reference to storg or something close to it. What is the base root of this word? Or is this a more modern Greek word not found in biblical reference work?"

The problem is simply that internet transmission sometimes substitutes or eliminates special characters. The last character should have been an e-acute, but it didn't come through that way

Laurina Tallman commented, "It is always dangerous to analyze something Jesus did from the perspective of pagans, however revered. Greek intellectuality was no match for the message brought to it by the new Christians."

Laurina then analyzed, quite extensively, the difference between Greek and Jewish perspectives. She concluded, "'Agape' by definition can never be an emotion; it is a (left brain) mindset that controls and redirects all emotion, which is perhaps what the Dalai Lama means.

"When you outline 'stages' of love, essentially you are describing maturational stages through which a person who is capable of learning high levels of self-control passes between infancy and childhood, childhood and young adulthood, young adulthood and mature adulthood, mature adulthood and the wisdom of age. Some people are incapable of traversing that route; they are 'stuck' somewhere along the route. We are called to love them regardless. As we examine our thought patterns and behaviour, at any age, we recognize the unruly child within who is more emotional and demanding than self-controlled; we are called to love ourselves regardless, for that is the best way of teaching and quieting that inner child, allowing the potential for self-control to keep an edge. Perhaps that, also, is what the Dalai Lama means because it certainly is what Jesus taught."

PSALM PARAPHRASES

When I read Psalm 52 – the selection for Sunday July 21 – I see a dissenter who thumbs her nose at the powerful.

1 You boast about beating your competitors;
you brag about evading taxes;
you use other people's money for leveraged financing.
2 You think you're worth millions.
But everything you do exposes your moral bankruptcy.
3 You'd rather lord it over your neighbors than love them;
you'd rather knife your employees than nurture them.
4 You're a bundle of malevolent reflexes.
5 Someday, you will get what you deserve.
Your spouse will leave you, your children will despise you, your colleagues will avoid you.
Your empires will come crashing down around your shattered ego.
6 Even those you exploited will laugh at you.
7 They'll say, "How the mighty are fallen!"
They'll laugh, "The bigger you are, the harder you fall!"

8 I'm not powerful or successful.
I'm a child compared to you.
But I can still laugh in the rain and sing in the sunshine.
I ride my roller coasters in the park, not in the stock market.
I'd rather hold a hand than a meeting.
9 What I do, I do for God.
If any credit is due, I give it to God.
And God frees me to enjoy the goodness of living.

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

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
