

Wednesday April 2, 2014

No past, no future – just now

By Jim Taylor

Two weekends ago, spring felt as though it had finally arrived. Buds swelled on the forsythia, the lilacs, the spirea. Along the driveway, a row of brave little crocuses peeped out. Peony and rhubarb roots thrust dark red shoots exuberantly into the sunlight.

Overhead, I heard bird songs. And a male flicker pounded his beak against my chimney, the noisiest thing he could find to broadcast his mating credentials.

Flickers – members of the woodpecker family – use resonant objects like an avian e-Harmony to advertise to the opposite sex.

And then, out of nowhere, it started snowing again. The snow squall blotted out the sunshine, hid the distant hills, coated the buds and flowers with white.

I wanted the crocuses, the rhubarb, to shrink back. To withdraw. To protect themselves from the sudden change in weather.

But of course, they couldn't. Plants only know one direction to move – forward, upward. Only members of the animal world, blessed with mobility, can pull back from danger or discomfort. A starfish can withdraw a probing tentacle; a coyote can back away from a bear; a human can decide to avoid a confrontation.

But although we animals have physical mobility, we are just as bound by time as my crocuses. We cannot reverse time. We can only keep moving in one direction.

There is only now

About a month ago, a correspondent wrote to me, "If you think about it, there is only 'now'. [Life is] a series of 'nows'. The past is our remembrances of other 'nows' and the future is our projections and hopes for new 'nows'."

I've been mulling his insight ever since.

There is no past. There is no future. There is only now.

I can leap out of the path of a speeding car. But escaping that near accident doesn't make it not happen. My narrow escape has become part of my new now – as my shortness of breath and palpitating heart testify.

I can apologize for a thoughtless comment that hurt someone. But I can't take it back. The pain it caused continues to be part of her now, and of mine.

This suggests to me that I should not base my decisions and actions on what I did, or didn't do, in a former now. Things are different in this now – if only because of that previous action or inaction.

Similarly, I should not second guess the future. That's not an excuse for indulging myself now while destroying the future. Rather, it's a recognition that I shouldn't count on the future, that it will not unfold as I expect it to. By the time what I expect gets around to happening, it will be in a different context.

A Greek philosopher named Heraclitus, very long ago, taught that you cannot step into the same river twice. Even if you step off the same rock, the water you stepped into last time will already have flowed far downstream. And if you could find that particular patch of water again, you would have to step into it from a different place.

The past has gone; the future hasn't happened yet. There is only now to live in.

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YOUR TURN

Something about last week's subject, on sitting in rigid rows, spurred your writing reflexes. I got lots of letters. But one of the first set me back on my heels (or some other part of my anatomy). George Brigham wrote from England, "Do you live a very traditional part of Canada? In UK many of the things you suggest are on the way to being 'normal':

- Many churches have their rows in a circular pattern. Those leading are not upfront but in the middle – a much more vulnerable place!
- Cafe Church – often in coffee shops, or less successfully in churches and church halls -- attracts both regular church goers and those who initially come for the free coffee. Some synods are also adopting a similar pattern for their meetings.
- Messy Church -- especially for kids and their parents/grandparents/child-minders – involves craftwork, a meal, and some simple 'conventional' worship.
- I know at least one place in England where bread baking is a regular part of their worship.
- The whole, growing, Fresh Expressions movement embraced by most Protestant denominations encourages a wide variety of ways of doing things differently. In some cases these are special events, monthly or less often. In other cases they are the regular diet."

Thom Carnahan doesn't use rows either: "Worship service at Bentley retirement community in Yorkton, Saskatchewan, we sit in circle and members are expected to contribute to the sermon -- agreeing, disagreeing, adding to, etc. It's a monthly service as part of United Church outreach, with 12 people."

Frank Martens, obviously an educator, asked: "Where have you been the last 30 years? Teachers from elementary school up to social studies 12 have been using the 'round table' method for a long time now. For the younger group, it allowed them to mingle with different kids, share their crayons, and allow the shy ones to get a word in edge-wise now and then. Teachers had to be careful to watch for dominating kids though. At the high school level, round table discussions were used for problem solving, and this worked very well, particularly if the shy ones were later asked by the teacher to articulate the consensus of their group.

"At the adult level, round table discussions have, for example, been used to formulate Official Community Plans. One would be amazed at the discussions that followed [especially when] led by experienced facilitators."

Lewis Coffman also shared personal experience: "As a former educator I experimented with various seating arrangements in my classes. I think that perhaps the most successful was in my instrumental music classes. The students sat in 'Band' formation, able to look at others directly face to face as they made harmony (once in a while)!

"In my association with our First Nations people I also learned valuable lessons about sitting in a circle, watching others' faces and listening intently and patiently. We are so inclined to speak without thinking about the words we are using. When one faces the group to which one is speaking, one is more attentive to the careful use of words. And, hearing what is being said and how it is being communicated is also so very important."

Isabel Gibson offered a practical consideration: "Rows are a great way of maximizing the use of space -- the only thing that lets you get more people in is a standing crowd, like the mash-ups at rock concerts.

“I like the notion of a freer-form worship: a blend of discussion groups, wandering minstrels leading little outbursts of song, someone leading little pockets of prayer. Maybe churches could initiate ‘stations of worship,’ each with a different activity, sort of like today's kindergarten classes. I think that's the last time we weren't sat in rows...”

John Schaffer noted, “People do resist change, and perhaps one of the reasons is that a different seating pattern would require a different level of involvement. I floated the idea of getting rid of the pews in a couple of churches. While they didn't discuss crucifixion, there was a lot of resistance. Most new churches have chairs, but alas, while more comfortable, they are still in rows.”

Christine Skinner gave an example of breaking out of the mold: “One year, when I was preparing the Confirmation liturgy for our parish, I read the story of Pentecost for the gazillionth time and ‘saw’ and ‘heard’ the wind and fire for the first time. I was immediately struck by how inadequately the usual symbols of our liturgy communicated our theology of the Holy Spirit. Henceforth, our Confirmation liturgies have begun with a group of confirmands running through the church in bare feet carrying banners of red, orange and yellow ribbon. It has become a rich and powerful symbol of the Spirit who stirs us, enlivens us and fills us with energy.”

Vic Sedo had some strong words about people's habits: “Our church has space for at least 350, but the worship service is usually half or even two-thirds empty. What gets me is that the last back rows are always taken. These regular people are like milk cows who must have their own stalls. Try to move them forward or block off the back pews -- Forget it! It's their comfort zone. They would rather leave the church than continue the forward movement exercise...”

While offering moderate support for freer worship styles, Charles Hill noted some benefits of row seating: “As a speaker/teacher, the rows [enable you to] observe the reactions on the faces of the audience. The speaker can make eye contact with most of the audience if the auditorium shape and size permits it. This personalizes what is going on. In the classroom, it gives you a better chance to move around the room and see who is sitting there texting on a phone hidden under a table or desk, rather than listening or taking notes.”

Jim Henderschedt wondered how seating might change worship experiences: “My wife has been saying, for many years, that there ought to be a way for people to respond, question, challenge sermons. I agree. Our present system of sit, be quiet, and listen has prevented creative thinking. For the most part we work on a second-hand belief system; what we believe is what we've been told to believe. I long for the day when someone would say to me...."I've been thinking about what you said and I am not sure I agree with you." What would follow would be a time for sharing, learning, and understanding. But there is a danger in this. The Church would lose its control over the people and might have to revisit centuries-old doctrines and theologies.”

Ralph Gardner agreed with Jim: “I do believe control or subservience is the underlying reason for having people sit in rows. They do really become an audience -- sit there and listen. Having conducted workshops among teachers for a good number of years, it was easy to arrange a meeting of listeners – just sit them in rows. For a true ‘workshop’, tables of 4 to 6 created a very responsive gathering. Recently I tried to convince our strata council that we should arrange seating for our AGM to allow members to sit at tables of 4 to encourage discussion of items on the agenda. The reaction was one of disgust -- the AGM was a meeting to inform, not for participation!”

Brooks Henderson picked a hole in the argument that fixed seating is part of control: “In the Middle Ages the worshippers stood -- chairs were not provided. I wonder — did they stand in rows? The church in that time was pretty authoritarian...”

Steve Roney concurred: “Sitting down in church is as relatively new custom--since the 1400s.”

Likewise, Hugh Pett noted, "Other worship arrangements have been used, of course. For example, Russian Orthodox services conducted with all standing, except for the few unable to do so (who are accommodated on benches around the periphery.) Could this also be another example of McLuhan's dictum about medium and message?"

Doug Clubb wrote about the psalm paraphrases I include (see below): "I am a lay preacher and use your paraphrased psalms many times. The most significant time was when I wrote my Mother's funeral service. In it her young granddaughter read the [23rd Psalm version] about being a child, her older granddaughter read the biblical one, and her sister read the one about being old. It was very touching. Since then those verses have been used by my friend for her father's funeral, and others have asked for them too. Thank you for writing what touches the heart, the soul, and the mind in a picture we all can understand."

PSALM PARAPHRASES

"Out of the depths have I cried to you, O Lord..." If any psalm is a wail of despair, this one is. No doubt Psalm 130 was chosen for the Lectionary to suit the mood of penitence for Lent.

2 God, hear me! Please listen to my pleas.
1 I am a helpless blob of misery.
I have dissolved in self-pity.
3 If you're keeping score, I'm a loser.
4 I'm counting on your mercy.
You have the power to punish me or to pardon me.
5 My life depends on your decision;
Not daring to say a word in my own defence, I wait for your verdict.
6 Like a hungry child waiting for dinner,
like a job applicant waiting for a phone call,
like a grandmother waiting for the birth of a grandchild,
I wait.
7 If your overflowing love cannot forgive me, I have no hope.
No one else can free me from my guilt,
from the prison of my repeated failures.
8 Only you can save me from myself.
You are my only hope.

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.

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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