

Wednesday April 23, 2014

Many ways of communicating

By Jim Taylor

I wonder how many languages there are.

I don't mean how many different spoken/written languages exist around the world. I can look that up on Google. Rather, how many ways do we have of communicating with each other?

Far more than most of us realize, I suspect.

This comes up because an editorial acquaintance found an old book among his late mother's possessions. Published in 1911, it contains the kind of pretentious prose I love to ridicule: "The student of singing, more than the student of any other art, is in danger of one-sidedness and thus of an impoverishment of his human worth and personality, which, in turn, makes it forever impossible for him to interpret adequately the very masterpieces toward which he should aspire."

But then the author took a swipe at musicians in general: "Why is it unhappily true that the musician can rarely hold his own intellectually among, say, literary artists?"

That characterization felt unfair. It's like blaming Hungarians for not speaking fluent English. Or denigrating women for not being men.

Yes, "literary artists" can talk intelligently about a wide range of topics. But only in words.

One example

Music, I submit, offers an example of a different language. Verbal language has a relatively limited repertoire of sounds and symbols to work with – in English, a 26-character alphabet, a handful of punctuation marks, and 40-plus phonetic sounds. Instead, music has pitch, duration, rhythm, and tone. A grand piano has 88 defined notes, not just 26; a voice or violin can create infinite variations between those notes. (And, in inexpert hands, often does.)

Written words cannot define rhythm or pacing for the reader; written music can. In addition, music can flavour its message by its choice of instruments. A violin is not a trombone is not a xylophone. Instruments add

colour, just as paint does; the late Nelson Riddle's inspired arrangement of "Life is just a bowl of cherries" set the mood with a tuba solo.

Add the possibilities of harmony, and I suggest that music may be a more sophisticated form of expression than mere words.

I could probably make a similar argument for the use of colour, canvas, and brush stroke in painting; shape and texture in sculpture; posture, control, and movement for dance...

Here, I'm illiterate

Body language is often overlooked. Skilled actors can carry on entire conversations on stage without saying a word. I'm a wordsmith. I can recognize nuances in word choices that escape others' notice. But I'm clueless at reading body language. I misinterpret some body signals; I miss other signals completely.

And intuition...? I wish I could recognize it.

Anthropologists say that worship has been a central act of humans as long as humans have been around. But at least in my religious tradition, worship leans heavily on spoken words, supplemented with a limited range of music and symbols. It tends to ignore all other possible "languages" by which humans communicate with each other. And with God.

Perhaps we have interpreted too literally the text, "In the beginning was the word..."

It seems to me just as arrogant to believe that there is only one language for expressing ultimate truths as to insist that those truths belong to only one political perspective, one gender, one social culture, or one religion.

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YOUR TURN

Last week's column was a bit of a departure from the norm. Perhaps spring made me feel like bursting out of the usual boxes. Tom Watson said he loved it. So did Ralph Milton.

On the other hand, Jay Sprout wrote from Vermont to ask if I had read a strikingly different interpretation by Ched Myers and Eric DeBode.

If I may summarize their theme, they argue that in a culture accustomed to corruption in high places, the owner and the obedient servants are in cahoots. The hearers of the parable would know that the mighty were being mocked. The third steward would get their sympathy. He was the whistleblower who refused to go along with the prevailing morality.

Jay quoted Myers and DeBode: “Most churches that do focus attention on Gospel parables spiritualize them relentlessly. Typically, the parables are preached as ‘earthly stories with heavenly meanings’. Thus stories about landless peasants and rich landowners, or lords and slaves, or lepers and lawyers are lifted out of their social and historical context and reshaped into theological or moralistic fables bereft of any political or economic edge or consequence.”

Jay sent a link to Myers and DeBode’s article, “Towering Trees and Talented Slaves,”

http://www.thegeneroussteward.com/uploads/Myers_and_Debode_on_Talents.pdf

Paul Coffman wrote, “Your re-writing of ‘the parable of the talents’ (Mathew 25: 14-30) reminded me of Clarence Jordan’s writing about that parable in Cotton Patch Parables of Liberation (Clarence Jordan and Bill Lane Doulos). Clarence Jordan understands Jesus to be speaking of the ideas of brotherhood and peace etc.; ideas that are the ‘currency’ of being in God’s Kingdom. Jesus has given us Christians this currency.”

Paul quoted Jordan, "This punch parable is one of Jesus' way of saying 'You better get up and git! I've given you these ideas, turned over to you my Treasure. Now what are you goin' to do with them? You gonna wrap them up in some theological junk or are you gonna get out in the streets and do business with these ideas?' "

I didn’t do my usual Psalm paraphrase last week either. Ted Wilson liked the poem by W.B. Yeats that I substituted: “More of Yeats and other like him would be appreciated. I don’t believe for a minute that God stopped speaking to and through us 2000 years ago. I find the words of such modern day profits as Gandhi, who professed not to be a Christian but was more so than most who do, M. L. K. or Nelson Mandela, etc., to be as relevant and both inspired and inspiring as anything in ‘The Holy Scriptures’.”

PSALM PARAPHRASES

Easter 2 calls for Psalm 16. When I wrote this paraphrase, our family was recovering from the deaths of two relatives within a week.

1 Life is short, Lord.

Like a breath in the night, it disappears into silence.

2 Human relationships all pass away;

we cannot depend on them for comfort in old age.

Only you, God, are forever.

Why should I put anything else first in my life?

3 Some people hold you as their closest companion.

They are the saints.

I would like to be like them.

4 Many people claim to put you first,

but they chase riches and popularity, privilege and power.

5 I say that there is nothing in life but God.

God is all anyone needs.

7 In the silence of the night, I listen for the breath of God:

In the bedlam of a business day, I watch for a whisper of wisdom.

8 I keep my mind on God.

God surrounds me like the air I breathe;

God buoys me up like water.

9 Even in a time of loss, I raise my arms to God's embrace;

My heart rests easy.

10 For you are a loving God.

Though our lives end, we do not vanish into the void.

11 No, you gather us into your warmth;

there we will enjoy the endless sunshine of your smile.

For paraphrases of most of the psalms used by the RCL, you can order my book *Everyday Psalms* from Wood Lake Publishing, info@woodlake.com.

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. 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;
- 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
