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Wednesday August 27, 2014

Old prejudices die hard

By Jim Taylor

What's wrong with these sentences?

"We had a contract, but he welshed on the deal."

"It looked like a bargain, but I got gypped."

No, there's nothing wrong with those sentences grammatically. But both sentences contain prejudiced racial descriptions.

The term "welsh" goes back to ancient conflicts between England and Wales. Raiders from Wales sneaked across the border to steal sheep and cattle from English farmers. Hence the old nursery rhyme,

***"Taffy was a Welshman, taffy was a thief,
Taffy came to my house and stole a side of beef..."***

In response, the English periodically sent armies into Wales to catch and punish the raiders:

"... I went to Taffy's house, Taffy was in bed.

I took the marrow bone and broke Taffy's head."

"Gypped," on the other hand, is a derogatory reference to the Roma, the landless gypsies who roamed all through Europe. Some stories romanticized them; most treated them as thieves and cheaters.

I know, I know, you're protesting that those things happened long ago. We don't think of the Welsh and the Roma that way anymore. Perhaps not. But language changes even more glacially than social attitudes.

An acquaintance was astonished, recently, to hear someone claim that she had jewed a thousand dollars off the price of a car. Yes, that's based on the stereotype of Jews as sharp bargainers.

Marginalized peoples

You might note that all of these terms describe marginalized people, people relegated to the fringes of an otherwise white, male, and Christian society.

If you think I'm being unfair, consider how rarely you rarely hear terms related to whites, males, or Christians used as epithets. I've never heard anyone called a "fatherf*er," for example. No one gets "white-mailed" over personal indiscretions, or "Christed" in a stock trade.**

Religious words used as swear words, yes; as personal insults, no.

When Helen Reddy sang "I am woman," when Stokely Carmichael and others declared "Black is beautiful," they took a courageous step. They deliberately used a societal put-down as a rallying cry.

Women and Africans seem to have been particularly vulnerable to verbal denigration.

The British Scrabble Players' dictionary lists more than 160 pejorative names for women that may be used in games. Even those include nothing more offensive than "bitch" or "whore." The dictionary has no comparable list for men. The only insult I can think of that's exclusive to males is to call someone a prick.

A language blog by someone called Dr. Goodword states flatly, "Prejudice against women is a flagrant characteristic of the English vocabulary."

Times do change. It's no longer acceptable to refer to black people as niggers or Negroes. (Those n-words have become so taboo that some websites even replace the Spanish word for the colour black with asterisks!) But we still refer to villains as black-hearted. People get blackmailed. Members may be blackballed. Not because those acts are associated with Africans but because many religions use light as a metaphor for the holy. Almost inevitably, then, negative actions get portrayed as dark or black.

The metaphor spills over too easily into racism.

Tragically, words that we use unthinkingly today perpetuate prejudices against groups who have struggled – sometimes successfully – in escaping from their social ghettos.

The old slogan applies: "Be sure brain is in gear before engaging mouth."

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YOUR TURN

Last week's column, about how nature starts its healing process at once when disasters occur, got two reactions, generally speaking. Some considered it encouraging; some felt it played into the hands of nature despoilers.

Florence Driedger fell into the "encouraging" camp. She wrote, "Thank you for this insightful piece which contains hope and a wonderful message of God and His love for all of his creation. And I am thankful to hear of the healing taking place of humankind's mistakes."

Jack Driedger (I don't think he's related to Florence, but he may be) commented, "Can you imagine how the earth would heal itself if mankind were removed or wiped out totally? Vegetation would break up paved roads and parking lots, etc."

"Good one, Jim," wrote Wayne Irwin. "A reminder that we truly can 'rest in the Lord' as it were!"

Fellow blogger Guy Dauncey wrote, "I do agree with you, Jim, that 'nature – the earth itself – has some kind of underlying purpose. To heal wounds. To restore abundant life.' Along with some other people, I call it syntropy, the balancing principle of entropy. But syntropy operates through consciousness, which is why scientists have failed to find it."

And Peter Scott mused, "Great column Jim. After a lifetime of ministry I have concluded in my old age (senility if you like) that the planet/universe and God are one. We humans have tried to reduce God to a larger version of ourselves because some old priest decided that humans are the pinnacle of creation.

"Given the destructive path that we humans are on today it won't be too many decades before the planet will have to write us off as a failed experiment. The planet will then heal itself and go merrily on its way without us.

"I have great faith in the planet/universe. The whole creation is holy."

Taking the other viewpoint, James Russell wrote, "Sorry, Jim. I think this 'healing earth' is just another attempt to shuffle off our own environmental

responsibilities.

“The earth ‘healed’ after whatever killed off the dinosaurs. But the world of the dinosaurs wasn’t healed. It just died.

“There will be some sort of planet here if we kill off all the people on it, and likely some sort of life. The stuff of the universe seems to evolve and adapt whether we are here or not... But ‘healing’ implies a point of view on that process, where some states are ‘better’ than others -- for the being making the judgement. Should we consider that from Earth’s point of view, it might be better off ‘cured’ of humans, as it was ‘cured’ of dinosaurs?

“I prefer to think that we should consider the results of our own actions, and with as long a view as possible. And take some responsibility ourselves for preserving an environment that suits people. As far as I can see, that would be an environment that includes a lot of other species as well. Don’t count on the earth ‘healing’. Count on restraining polluters.”

Dale Perkins took a similar point of view: “While I agree intellectually with your point about the earth healing itself, it’s extremely dangerous thinking, in that it easily can become the justification for us humans to screw around and exploit the earth without worries, resulting in faster environmental degradation and pillaging, ‘cause the good ol’ earth will heal itself. The corporate capitalists love it -- simply gives them free reign to continue their nefarious ways.

“I wonder whether now we must preach restraint and care of mother earth more than we ever have in the past. I guess it’s a question of asking the whales and marine life whether they’re OK with us dumping endless waste into our oceans, and industrial sludge into the rivers and lakes. If the earth indeed is immediately going about the business of healing itself, then only question is -- ‘What’s taking you so long?’ With only a 5 or 10 year window still open to us to turn things around, we (of the conscious world) can’t enjoy the news about spontaneous healing. Need to jettison that notion to the archives somewhere.”

Isabel Gibson didn’t want to fall into either the pro or con camp: “I remember an executive of an electric utility, years ago, talking about how you could tell where there had been a spill of refined oil the previous year: the strip of greener growth under the spill line, caused by the unusual abundance of light hydrocarbons. He wasn’t making a case for crude oil being dumped into waterways, just trying to moderate the ‘“sky is falling’ reaction to any spill of any sort.

“I like the image of healing much more than the one of scarring over -- may it be so for all of us, as well as for the earth.”

Laura Spurrell took the notion of healing farther: “When we acknowledge that the earth is more than just a chunk of inert compounds and is capable of healing, don’t we also have to acknowledge that we can injure/hurt it as well? Don’t we need to be mindful that it may not have infinite capacity to heal and thus take responsibility for harming it? And is there a difference between natural disaster and human caused disaster? I believe we need to respect the earth.”

After some thought, Jean Hamilton suggested I hadn’t thought through my own thesis: “What bothers me about your article isn’t that it borders on pantheism, or that it might make God less almighty, but that it seems to embrace the argument of the evangelical right that it doesn’t matter what we do to the earth, because God will not allow it to be destroyed.

“The Christian and Missionary Alliance, to which Stephen Harper belongs, holds that ‘God is sovereign over creation and therefore humans can do no permanent damage... God established government for limited purposes and government should not intervene much in the workings of a free market economy... The media is overplaying climate change worries... The environmental movement is secular/pagan and has always been a threat to American liberties...’

“In other words, it doesn’t really matter what the energy companies and mining companies do, to say nothing of our own actions -- God will take care of it. Is this where your theology of a self-healing earth logically leads? If not, I think you need to say a lot more.”

PSALM PARAPHRASES

The Lectionary calls for Psalm 105:1-6, 23-26, and 45c. I sent you a paraphrase for verses 1-6 just three weeks ago (confounded RCL!) so here are 23-26.

23 We are their extended family;
we are their friends.

Once we had doubts about them;
 we turned a cold shoulder to their ambitions.
 24 But must have God favored them.
 God made them famous.
 25 God had plans for them;
 surely God included us in those plans.
 Of course they made some enemies along the way,
 26 but we are not among them, thank God.
 We belong to the charmed circle;
 we are their friends, their family.
 We will follow faithfully in their footsteps.

**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.**

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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 "SeemslieGod" page, www.seemsliegod.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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