

Wednesday October 3, 2012

The gender of God

By Jim Taylor

I was about 40, I remember. I was attending a publishing conference on Long Island, in New York state. It was either early spring or late fall – there was frost on the lawn in the morning, and no leaves on the trees.

I think I was the only Canadian there – at least, it felt like that.

The organizers had set up the conference to explore the imperial manner in which American corporations manipulated world markets for their benefit.

So we had speakers about American weapon sales – equal to all the rest of the world combined. Not surprising, since the rest of the world was their market.

And about pharmaceutical companies selling outdated prescription drugs to Latin America.

And about mining companies funding right-wing paramilitary squads to subdue local peasant protests.

And about children's sweat shops sewing soccer balls in Bangladesh, and women's sweat shops churning out blouses in Thailand and South Korea...

Feeling isolated

A few industry representatives offered vigorous defences. But the whole event proved a pretty heavy guilt trip for most of the American editors.

I had a somewhat different reaction. Because I learned that some American multinationals were buying Canadian mining companies to do their dirty work in the civil wars raging in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. They were seizing control of Canadian rail companies, Canadian grain companies, Canadian publishing companies...

I didn't feel guilty. I felt like a victim.

And then the conference ended. A group of American editors invited me to share their taxi to La Guardia airport. I barely knew their names, but I accepted gratefully.

I settled into a corner of the taxi's back seat while they chattered animatedly to each other. Despite their friendliness, I still felt like an outsider.

And then an astonishing thing happened. Suddenly, unexpectedly, I felt warm, comfortable, as if I had been wrapped in loving arms.

Feminine touch

The only comparable experience I could recall was when, as a child, I had a stomach ache or a skinned knee. I would run home, crying. And my mother would lift me into her lap and wrap me in her arms until the hurt went away.

But this could not be my mother. She had died three years before.

In those brief minutes of numinous awe, I realized I had two choices. Either my mother was reaching out to me from beyond the grave. Or God was enfolding me in what pietistic hymns call "the everlasting arms."

Either way, it felt like a distinctly feminine presence.

Was it real? Was it hallucination? Was it a delayed reaction to three days of brainwashing? I don't know. I will never know.

All I know is that ever since, I have had no difficulty using feminine imagery for God. God is Mother as well as traditional Father. God is She as well as He. God is soft and gentle, as well as stern and powerful.

But most of all, God is more than an abstract concept.

I am now confident that God is, whether or not I can define her.

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YOUR TURN

Jim Henderschedt called last week's column, about whether it is even possible to forgive crimes like the murders and rapes committed by David Shearing, "an excellent treatment of a difficult human dilemma." As usual, readers had their own insights to add.

John Nelson commented, "It seems to me that forgiveness, as Jesus taught it and practiced it, is equivalent to an Olympic-level performance. Few of us get there. But unlike the Olympics, which only a tiny percentage of athletes will ever reach, every single Christian has a call to practice forgiveness at that extraordinary level. Even to forgive David Shearing. The problem is that most of us don't even exercise regularly. What would it take to forgive a David Shearing? Training. A disciplined practice of forgiveness, one that is integrated into every day, one that is tested regularly against persons and behaviors who are increasingly more difficult to forgive. If I do that, perhaps in time I could truly forgive someone who hurts me. With much more practice, in time I may be able to forgive someone who hurts someone I love.

"Forgiving is difficult in and of itself. It's doubly difficult in a culture like ours (I'm writing from the US) which tends to exalt independence and victory over enemies to the level of idols, while forgiveness is at best paid lip-service but actually perceived as weak. I believe that those who see forgiveness as weak have the perspective of the Roman empire; those who see it as the deepest kind of strength and power come close to the perspective of Jesus."

Cliff Boldt had a series of questions to ask: "What is this world if we don't have a vision beyond mere survival? I hear a lot about closure from people and often wonder if it isn't about revenge rather than justice? There is a clear distinction between the two and neither can undo the past events. How to deal with the issue when you or a loved one are the ones who have been violated? I am so glad that I have never had to be in a position where I had to choose between revenge, justice, and forgiveness."

Slightly more cynically, Cliff added, "A friend suggested that people have had a long time to practice what they say to a parole board.

Hanny Kooyman wondered, "Is it about forgiving, or about the fear that this person might commit the same crime again? For me it is the second."

When I suggested that forgiving was not the same as forgetting, Hanny responded, "According to the Bible, we have to forgive many times. Is then forgiving perhaps more a learning process? None of us is without 'wrong-doing.' Then it will be a constant learning because humanity also keeps forgetting what was learned. Around and around it goes."

Diane Robinson picked up some of the same theme: "Your column on forgiveness reminds me of a film I watched with my learning colleagues while at school. *Dead Man Walking* stars Susan Sarandon as Sister Helen Prejean and

Sean Penn as a prisoner on death row. The prisoner deserves to be on death row -- there is no question about that in my mind (although capital punishment and my struggle with it is a topic for another day). His crimes are dreadful, heinous, and reprehensible. Throughout much of the film, I felt horror for the crimes and disgust for the prisoner. But something shifted in me as I began to observe Sister Prejean (for her initial struggle to be spiritual caregiver to the prisoner in his final earthly days was palpable). As the film progressed, I could see Sister Prejean begin to see the prisoner as a human being -- true, a human being who had done horrendous things -- but still a human being who had been made in the image of God. Through her eyes, I also began to see the prisoner in a different light -- dare I say, in God's light? It's a film I've never forgotten, a challenge to me and a struggle for me, to see the monsters as God sees them."

Isabel Gibson: "Over the course of several centuries, we have come to understand that there are mental illnesses that drive people to do terrible things: paranoid schizophrenia among them. Being delusional in this sense means that you don't understand the difference between right and wrong, and is a legitimate legal defence (at least as I understand it from extensive watching of American TV courtroom dramas!).

"Family members who have worked in the criminal justice system distinguish between individuals who are mentally incompetent in this sense of not knowing right from wrong, and those who commit terrible crimes in the full knowledge that they are wrong, and just don't care."

Isabel wondered if we can, or should, make a distinction between "moral judgement, [and] legal consequences like (perhaps permanent) incarceration in the interest of public safety."

PSALM PARAPHRASES

For this coming Sunday, the revised Common Lectionary calls for Psalm 26, a rather mealy-mouthed song of self-justification. I much prefer the alternate reading, the glorious Psalm 8. But if this is what the lectionary expects, so be it.

1 Do not treat me harshly, God. I have been true to you.
I have trusted you; I have never doubted you for more than a moment.
2 If you don't believe me, test me.
Look into my heart and listen to my thoughts.
See for yourself that I have been faithful.

3 Can't you see that I'm devoted to you?
Everything I do, I do for you.
4 I don't play around with pretence;
I don't flirt with false ideals.
5 I despise those who do wrong;
I avoid those who flaunt their faithlessness.
6 I wash my hands of them.
My hands are clean; I come to you with a clear conscience.
7 I constantly count my blessings;
I always speak well of you.
I bless the day you entered my life.
8 I glow when I am near you;
I bask in the sunshine of your smile.
9 Don't brush me off like dandruff;
don't dump me out with your garbage.
10 The trash can is full of people who cheat and swindle;
they deceive their friends; they play both ends against the middle.

11 But I am not like them.
12 I can hold my head high, among your people,
Because I have been faithful to you.

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

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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