

Wednesday January 30, 2013

The losers don't get to tell their stories

By Jim Taylor

There's one thing more certain than death and taxes. It's that when someone is diagnosed with a dangerous disease - especially a potentially terminal illness like cancer -- someone else will immediately want to tell them about a miraculous cure.

"My sister had that same thing," they'll say. "And she went down to Mexico and saw this amazing shaman..."

If not Mexico, then the Philippines. Or China. Or Peru.

I tend to be sceptical about miracle cures. About anything miraculous, in fact.

I don't question their sincerity of those who describe the miracles. Nor do I doubt that the miracle has changed their lives.

But we rarely hear from the people who didn't experience the same miracle.

The promise that failed

I don't believe they simply lacked faith. Or that God plays favourites.

In the Bible, God made a promise to Abraham and his offspring – "an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you..." Abraham's descendants became 12 tribes. Among them, the tribe of Benjamin.

When a visitor from the tribe of Levi stopped overnight in Benjamin territory, some randy young men violated the conventions of hospitality. The Levite pushed his woman out the door to appease them. The men spent the night raping her.

When she died of her injuries – does this sound like some recent news stories from India? – the Levite demanded vengeance. The other 11 tribes annihilated the tribe of Benjamin. Men, women, children, livestock – everyone.

Read the story for yourself: Judges, chapters 19-21.

Yet the people of Benjamin were just as legitimate inheritors of God's promise as the tribes that wiped them out. Somehow I doubt that they would have exulted, like a later psalmist, "Surely the Lord is our help, our defender..."

The writers of history

I've written before about the Canadian holidaying in Indonesia when the 2004 tsunami struck. As he was being swept out to sea, he cried out, "Lord Jesus, save me!"

Sure enough, the next wave swept him back to land.

Again, I don't doubt that it happened exactly as he described it. Or that he genuinely believes Jesus saved him from drowning.

But we don't hear from the others who also called on Jesus, and didn't get rescued. They're not around to tell us their story.

"Histories," Winston Churchill is reputed to have said, "are written by the victors." More accurately, by the survivors.

No one can ask Nancy Lanza, for example, if she might have changed her mind about guns ensuring her safety after her son used them to shoot and kill her.

At one time, the city of Carthage in North Africa rivalled Rome as a centre of culture and learning. Its empire surpassed Rome's in size and affluence. Apparently founded by the Phoenicians, who also invented the Roman alphabet we still use today, Carthage had a history 2,000 years longer than upstart Rome,

We have all heard of Rome's fame. But how many of us know anything about Carthage? When Rome won the Punic Wars, it erased Carthage. They never got to tell their story.

I'm not suggesting that miracles don't happen. Just that when we hear about them, we're hearing from the winners, not the losers.

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YOUR TURN

I guess I should have expected lots of mail about religious refugees, and mixed marriages. After all, it's something we all deal with every day.

George Brigham, from Northumberland, in England: "Perhaps the strangest mixed marriage I encountered was in Rexburg, Idaho. I was invited to Sunday lunch, whilst passing through on my way to Yellowstone. Among the other diners were a couple -- son of the host and his wife. He had grown up in Methodism, but his wife had been raised a Mormon. 'When we married', he volunteered, 'we compromised and both became Lutheran.'"

"You nailed another one," wrote Jim Henderschedt. "I too am among the Religious Refugees, or as Ed Hays calls them "Exodus Christians" (for me, from the Lutheran guild). While our denomination is hemorrhaging members instead of trying to stop the flow the wound is being opened wider. 'Religious rigidity' as you call it is sending its roots deeper and alienating those who are walking away. That being said, I treasure those few times in a year when my wife and I visit our son, daughter in law, and grandsons in Virginia where we worship at a united Methodist Church where rigidity and burdensome liturgy are absent and simple worship and excellent preaching abound."

Bob Stoddard, in Nebraska, thought the description of "religious refugees" "sounds like the our Unitarian Church, which may be a notch farther toward the 'nones' than even the United Church of Canada"

Robert Caughell shared his own experience: "One of the strengths of the United Church of Canada is that it allows people to think for themselves and form their own opinions. I had never met a 'recovering Catholic' before talking to a former Catholic who was fed up with its rigid dogma."

Diane Robinson, in Saskatchewan: "I am another who is, as I call so many of us in the United Church of Canada, a 'hybrid'. My Dad was born Presbyterian; my mother was born Anglican -- she became United when she married Dad. In the three congregations I currently serve, many of the couples are 'hybrid'; such as: Ukrainian Orthodox + United, Lutheran + Baptist, and Roman Catholic + United. Too, like the congregation you attend, there are also the 'refugees' who've come along from other denominations. I could also mention our families' countries of origin: in the congregations there are Norwegian, Ukrainian, Lebanese, British, Irish, Swedish, German, to mention a few.

"It seems to me that hybrid couples, hybrid congregations, and hybrid denominations (for the United Church, as we're aware, is also a hybrid) while certainly bringing their weaknesses to the mix -- also add their strengths to the mix.

"As you so simply yet eloquently expressed: *'[these] origins shape what we are ; what we were; but above all, what we aspire to be.'*"

Isabel Gibson liked that quotation too: "The sentiment/admonishment is a good one for those of us who lack patience with others and with ourselves."

Elsie Rempel works for the Mennonite Church Canada. She questioned my reference to Mennonites: "In this last column, I must say I was surprised by the 'park your brains' description. While our autonomous way of organizing and our great propensity for splitting when we disagree over what constitutes faithfulness (thankfully more so in the past than is now the case) has produced a great many variations on what it can mean to be Mennonite, lack of academic rigour or thoughtful reflection has not characterized the many congregations with whom I have contact."

I agree that was an unfair reference to what I used to know as General Conference Mennonites. The stereotype that popped into my mind, and to which the Mennonites I was thinking of belonged, would be some of the western Mennonite denominations, who hold to the literal inerrancy of the Bible – and among other things, still refuse to have women as ministers.

Richard Yoder echoed Elsie's rebuttal: "I am a Mennonite and I never felt a need to stop thinking nor [have I been] encouraged to."

Johann Cresswell also objected to that line: "Today's article contains a comment that I find utterly out of line. 'The Baptists had to park their brains outside the door to worship...'"

"This just blew me away that you have so little information about this denomination. Are you referring to Southern Baptists? Or do you even know what you are referring to?"

"I have many professional, most intelligent friends that worship at a Baptist church. I find this not only a distasteful comment, but an uneducated one -- and would even go so far as to say an 'ignorant' one.

"To make one point clear, I am not a Baptist and am thankful today that I do not attend the United Church if this is its prevalent thinking..."

Let me be clear here. I do not express the views of the United Church. Or of any other church, as far as I know. My views are my own, and should not be attributed to any official body.

If I choose to quote United Church policies, I will always identify the source.

Margaret Carr, however, resonated with the "park your brains" comment: "Your essay struck a chord in me which is still vibrating. I live in a small SK town but I feel like I need to 'park my brain at the door' after the readings of scripture our minister blesses 'God's Holy word' and I am offended. As Walt Whitman said, 'Re-examine all you have been told. Dismiss whatever insults your soul.' I try to dismiss it but it is so hard to not jump up and say, 'That is not from God's mouth to our ears.'

"Recently I was asked by our then minister if I would speak to the communicants class ... I am a Progressive Christian. When I finished the minister laughed and said and I quote. 'Ministers have known that for years.' I wanted to say, 'Then why in Heaven's name don't they tell the congregation?'"

"I have always questioned and sometimes the answers satisfied me, and sometimes they laughed at me until I thought it was wrong to question the Bible. Then a wonderful minister came and introduced me to Bishop John Shelby Spong. It seemed like nearly every question was answered and I have read nearly all his. I guess I will have to see if I can find any other brave souls who actually want to live with me in Exile."

PSALM PARAPHRASES

Psalm 71 is entitled an old man's prayer, but it could equally well be a young child's. Both ages are vulnerable and dependent on others. I chose to paraphrase from the child's viewpoint. Every one of us has been a child; only a few of us have been old -- yet.

- 1 Don't let them make fun of me.
Let me hide myself behind your skirts.
- 2 Comfort me and protect me;
listen to my fears, and enfold me in your arms.
- 3 When I am in trouble, I run to you.
I have no one but you to rely on.
- 4 The bigger kids won't leave me alone;
their greedy hands keep grabbing at me.
Rescue me from their clutches.
- 5 From the time I was tiny, you have been my refuge.
I have always been able to trust you.

6 Before I was born, I felt safe in your womb.
As an infant, I rested on your breast.
You are all I have, and all I ever had.

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

HYMNSIGHT

My friend Ralph Milton, who published his Rumors newsletter for many years, has something special for you. It's called HYMNSIGHT, and it's for any church that currently projects the words of hymns and prayers, or plans to.

Ralph writes, Since retiring, I have rediscovered my old love of photography, and found creative use for my pictures in the life of First United where Bev and I worship. Our entire liturgy is projected, so that people read responses and sing hymns from screens. I use my photos to add color, vitality and depth to all the hymns and most of the liturgy.

In the course of this, I have developed slide sets to go with 600 hymns, plus about two thousand slides, in both the standard screen and the newer wide screen shape. You can use all of them, in any way you wish, without permission, and absolutely free, as long as it's non-profit and church related.

All you need to access the website is go to:

<http://www.hymnsight.ca> www.hymnsight.ca

In addition to all that visual material, there's a comprehensive "how-to" manual for those who are new to the idea of using projected visuals in church, and for those who have already begun.

HymnSight provides a set of suggested visuals to go with each hymn, but the words to the hymn are not there, mainly for copyright considerations.

Please take a look to see if this service scratches where you itch. If you think it's worthwhile, please let some of your colleagues in ministry know about it. And if you know of a website that could benefit from a link to HymnSight, why not add it?

Blessings,
Ralph Milton

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

- 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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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

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
