

RELIGION

Wobegon's Garrison Keillor has sin pegged



By TERRY MATTINGLY
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The young Garrison Keillor and his Uncle Earl rowed out to fish amid swirling, almost spiritual morning mists and the kind of solitude that inspired the boy to confess his dreams of becoming a writer.

At day's end, Keillor failed to tie the boat securely to the dock and gravity did its work as his heavyset elder attempted to disembark. But Uncle Earl didn't lose his temper as his nephew pulled him out of the lake. Instead, he offered a graceful benediction: "Well, you can't go fishing without getting wet."

For America's best-known radio storyteller, it's a short leap of faith from this happy parable to a sobering message about sin.

"You can't live life without making mistakes," said Keillor, wrapping up his "Celebration of the Spirit" special on the Vision Interfaith Satellite Network. "You can't live life without hurting other people.

And they'll get mad at you and they'll be right and you'll just have to ask them to forgive you."

Keillor is a rarity — an entertainer who talks about guilt, grace, faith and God with a twinkle in his eye. His fundamentalist Christian upbringing gives him reams of moral metaphors that connect with many conservatives. But his life's twists and turns have given him a fervent desire to kick at the messes left by sacred cows.

Keillor mixes his stories about his imaginary hometown of Lake Wobegon with gospel and pseudo-classical music and poetry by author Madeleine L'Engle. The nuts join Keillor on "Breakfast Cook Boogie," playing piano, pots, pans, coffee mugs and cereal boxes. The result: a familiar blend of honey charm and pop intellectualism, as if PBS had staged a church talent show.

Ironically, Keillor's populist roots are also a source for his progressive politics. In a recent interview in *Image*, an arts journal, he noted that many sermons he

heard as a youth were packed with images such as the sinking of the Titanic and other stories of the fall of the decadent rich. Christians were warned "not to be conformed to this world."

Thus, it angers Keillor that many Christians have been co-opted by the Republican Party, which he believes is "morally and intellectually bankrupt" and a "criminal party." Newt Gingrich, he added, is "not a man of faith. ... I think his courting of fundamentalists is completely cynical."

This is Keillor preaching to the old-line Protestant choir. However, he has another side that intrigues a wide range of religious people, including conservatives. He embraces many traditional Christian teachings and his devotion to the Bible is clearly sincere.

"I have the same faith I had as a child," he said, in an interview with *Leadership*, an evangelical journal. "It's not that I've placed a value on the Gospel or believe that it leads us toward a particular life. It's true; it's not a value. ... When it comes down to a choice

between scripture and our own imaginations and our own charm as individuals, one does well to choose Scripture."

But people will sin and fall short of the mark, stressed Keillor in the VISN special. His own experiences as an entertainer, as a parent and through divorce have taught him that people must learn to offer and accept forgiveness. However, God seems to be able to work through the lives of all kinds of people, he said. At least, that's the way it is in Lake Wobegon.

"A town depends on sinners," he said. "Saintly people prefer each other's company and separate themselves from the others so as to protect their saintliness. But sinners are right in there getting the work done and don't tell me otherwise. ... A strong sense of personal guilt is what makes people willing to serve on committees."

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