

“Laughter: Glimpse of God’s Vision”

Genesis 18:9-15; Proverbs 17:22; Matthew 7:1-5

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A member of the United Methodist church approached his pastor and said, “Pastor, my friend’s dog died this morning and I want to know if you think it is all right to have a funeral for him. He was just like a member of their family.” Someone what taken aback, the pastor replied, “Yes, I suppose it would be appropriate.” The grieved man continued, “But pastor, who can my friend call to have the funeral?” Seeing where this was headed and not at all pleased with the thought of having a funeral for a dog, the minister replied, “You know, I have a terribly busy week. Try the Baptist minister. I am sure he can help you.” The man continued, “But how much should my friend pay the Baptist minister: \$500 or \$600?” The eyes of the pastor lit up and she held both hands of her parishioner and declared, “My Christian brother, why didn’t you tell me it was a Methodist dog?”

In another church, a conference was called to discuss building a new sanctuary. One rather wealthy gentleman arose to protest such a decision, suggesting rather some refurbishing of the present facility. As he took his seat, he sat down rather hard and jarred the pew, shaking the side of the building. The wall shook the ceiling which shook loose a piece of plaster which fell down and hit him on the head. He quickly rose to his feet and exclaimed, “This building is in worse shape than I thought. I pledge \$20,000 toward a new building.” A quiet voice spoke from the back, “Hit him again, Lord, hit him again.”

And here is a true story: at my home church in the 1950’s or early ‘60’s, the District Superintendent came for Church Conference. He urged the congregation out of comfortable apathy to be more welcoming to the strangers in their neighborhood, especially those less well off than they. Seeking to drive home the

point, the Superintendent said, “For example, if one of the ladies of the evening I saw on the street corner came in to this church, would the United Methodist Women welcome them?” There was a hush into which came the quiet reply: “If not, the United Methodist Men would!”

Laughter feels good. That’s the truth. We enjoy laughing. At its best, laughter is the voice of joy. It says, “Despite our problems and griefs, life is good.” Thank God for that. It is the Gospel that allows us to take true joy from life. The good news that God loves us frees us to laughter, to a glimpse of God’s vision of joy with us; that God cares for us; that we are worthy and capable of loving and being loved.

In his book, Anatomy of an Illness, Norman Cousins tells the story of his life. A noted philosopher and speaker, he developed a serious pain in his joints. His doctors agreed that he had a life-threatening illness for which they had few answers. After many months of unsuccessful treatment, he checked himself out of the hospital and into a hotel. He had read about the role that negative emotions play on the chemical balance of the body. By watching funny movies, especially old Candid Camera segments, and by certain dietary habits, he began his road to recovery. One ten-minute period of laughter gave him two hours of painless sleep. Ten years later, he was functioning at a maximum level, reversing all previous medical predictions.

Perhaps we are surprised. We shouldn’t be. What Norman Cousins “discovered” the writer of Proverbs knew 3,000 years ago: “A cheerful heart is a good medicine, but a downcast spirit dries up the bones.”

Yet at times we lose the joy that laughter reveals. The story is told of a Sunday School teacher who asked her students to pick out a scripture, memorize it, and then bring something to class to illustrate it. The next Sunday one child had a light bulb. “You are the light of the world,” he said. Another child had a salt shaker

declaring “You are the salt of the earth.” A third child had an egg, stood up, cracked the egg on the head of the child in front and said, “Take my yoke upon you.” The children laughed but the victimized boy didn’t. When another said, “C’mon, we’re not laughing at you, we’re laughing with you,” the child replied, “but I’m not laughing.”

Maybe that’s us: more laughed at than laughed with, more with yoke on our face than our shoulders.

Surely the story illustrates that there is such a thing as inappropriate laughter. Sexism, racism, classism; rude remarks or insidious innuendo couched in so-called humor and defended with “Oh, I was only joking.” When we use humor to hurt we misuse a good gift from God.

As often for church folks, I suspect, is derisive laughter borne of faithless skepticism. Such is Sarah’s laughter in the story from Genesis. Sarah overhears the messenger of the Lord telling Abraham that she would have a child, even though they were long past the age when she would normally conceive. You can almost hear her thoughts: “Ha! Who’s this guy think he is? Who’s he kidding? Doesn’t he know anything about female biology?” She is absolutely rational, reasonable, and right: except that her disdain causes her to deny the very miracle she hoped for.

We also sometimes understandably confuse faith with seriousness. The claim we make about Jesus’ life is extraordinarily serious insofar as it is a claim of vital importance: that God, through love, became a person in Jesus Christ; and that through Christ’s death and Resurrection, God conquers even death with love. Surely serious business. Yet joyful, too, reclaiming life from death and promising that “nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Angels can fly because they take themselves lightly. It is not Christ, but you and I, who hold our religion so seriously.

Consider today's Gospel. Jesus offers a word about the folly of our temptation to judge one another with a most graphic example. Can't you just picture it? Okay, you can't? Then let me help you. (Move front, place log over eye, try to remove speck from someone else's eye). Jesus is not so much rebuking us for judging one another, but more inviting us to laugh at the folly in our lives that stands between us and the vision of joyful life God has for us. Laughter is a glimpse of the vision of God.

It is a lesson I keep learning, taught me by the many saints I have been privileged to serve. One was a former Presbyterian with the delightful Scottish name of Donald Frazier. He once asked me if I knew why, when praying the Lord's Prayer, the Presbyterians said "Forgive us our debts" instead of "Forgive us our trespasses." When I admitted I did not know, he told me that most Presbyterians, as good Scots (who are known for being frugal), would much rather be forgiven their debts than their trespasses.

John Wesley, our forebear in the faith, said "Sour godliness is the devil's religion." It's what the country preachers used to call "mule-faced Christianity," and why clergy jokes are so popular. Some of the best connect clergy with golf. Consider the pastor invited to golf with two friends. He went reluctantly because he played so poorly. They needed another for a foursome and found one at the clubhouse. The minister whispered to his friends "Don't tell him I'm a minister. Just call me "Russ." They consented and addressed him only as Russ for the next several holes. On the fourth tee, however, the stranger turned to the pastor and demanded unexpectedly, "What do you do for a living?" Unable to lie, the pastor said he was a clergyman. "I knew it," declared the stranger. "Anyone that plays golf as badly as you and doesn't swear has to be a minister!"

No doubt that clergyman tried anonymity because he was weary of being pigeonholed. Sometimes we want to break free of our roles: mother, father, child, employee. My hope is that church

is such a place. But not always. Consider this mother and child's Sunday morning conversation:

Mom: "It's time to go to church." Son: "I don't want to go."

Mom: "But it's Sunday." Son: "But I don't want to go."

Mom: "But you must." Son: "Give me three good reasons to go."

Mom: First, it's Sunday. It's what we do.

Second, they love you there. Everyone will look for you. Everyone will miss you if they don't see you there. Everyone will ask me where you are.

Third: You are 47 years old and the pastor of the church.

So there is folly in our life and ministry together. But thank God it is God's folly, to use imperfect people like you and me to witness to love and joy in our world. It is the folly of God to laugh in the face of death and then blow open the sepulcher door to raise his Son and conquer death forever. It is the folly of God to use us, and laughter, to glimpse the Divine vision for us and our world. For our part, we can thank God for freeing us to love and laugh. The complexities and ironies of life need not defeat us. We can face them with the power of God, and use laughter and joy to liberate a world enslaved to gloom. Rejoice, God has overcome the world. Rejoice—and laugh!