

Kingdom of Laughter

Isaiah 26: 16-18

Matthew 11: 16-19

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I. Introduction

A few of you are old enough to remember an interview that Pope John XXIII gave at one point in his ministry, when a reporter asked him how many people worked in the Vatican, and the pope thought for a minute and said, "About half." It was a somewhat unexpected moment because nobody really expects a pope to be funny, and part of that, I think, is the somewhat tortured relationship that we have in the church with humor.

There's a wonderful Jesuit priest named James Martin who is a teacher and author, and he was recounting a story about a Jesuit colleague of his who had a wonderful sense of humor and periodically got a little carried away. He told a story of going to see a confessor at one point and confessing his sins, as part of the Roman Catholic tradition, and confessing that he maybe had an excess of levity. And the rather dour confessor that he was talking to looked at him and said, "Any levity is excessive."

Now that captures a picture of who we are as a church and, I think that's one we need to reflect on a little bit. So, we're going to take just a couple of weeks this month to explore the whole issue of humor: what a gift it is and where it's appropriately used and maybe where it's inappropriately used. But it's my conviction that addressing humor in a healthier way may help us be healthier disciples and may also help us create a community that is a little bit more invitational than sometimes we are perceived as being.

We talked a couple of weeks ago about how as a Metropolitan family we start to create a culture of evangelism, how do we start to share the good news of Jesus Christ with the world. I want to suggest that one of the ways we share good news is we make it good, right, instead of being sometimes as deadly serious as we can get in the church.

II. Struggling with Laughter

Now some of the seriousness that we bring to our faith is appropriate, because our faith is serious stuff and we want to take it seriously. We are also, in our Metropolitan family, very serious people. We've got serious responsibilities and serious things to do so that we bring an intensity to our engagement with the faith that is in many ways quite positive. It can, however, start to feel a little burdensome. And I'm reminded periodically of that wonderful scene -- if any of you are Monty Python fans -- in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* where God is talking to King Arthur, and King Arthur starts to apologize for something and God reprimands him and says, "And don't apologize." He says, "Every time I try to talk to someone, it's 'sorry this,' 'forgive me that,' 'I am not worthy.'" It's like those miserable psalms, they're so depressing."

Now that's an interesting statement from God, but it actually resonates with me, because often the way we read psalms, they are depressing. I mean, I'm always struck when we read through the 23rd Psalm as a congregation. Here is a psalm about God's joyful, abundant, life-giving grace, you know, leads me into pastures and beside still waters, my cup runneth over, a table is set before me, all these wonderful images of God's abundance and we read it like it's a dirge, right? "He leads me beside the still waters. He

restores my soul. Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of --.

” This is good stuff we’re reading about, and it sounds like it’s a dirge. So, maybe something about the way we’re approaching our faith could be tweaked a little bit.

Some of the seriousness, of course, comes from our rich Puritan heritage in this country that tended to emphasize our sin and likely punishment, so that one of our great Puritan ministers, Cotton Mather, in a sermon talked about the dangers of laughter and noted, unfortunately, that Jesus never smiled. How would you know that? But it’s indicative of the eyes we often bring to our engagement with scripture and with the broader issues of our faith. Scripture has a ton of funny material in it. What I think is sometimes a little difficult for us is that so much of humor is culturally based, that it’s sometimes hard for us to see the joke that’s being told.

Much of Hebrew tradition took great detail in puns. And so, you see puns throughout the Hebrew scriptures and in the New Testament as well, and there are a few places where the writer of scripture unpacks the pun for us. So, for example, when in the two stories in which Abraham and Sarah hear about Isaac’s impending birth, and they’re so old they can’t conceive of having a child at this point, they both laugh, and scripture helpfully points out that Isaac in Hebrew means “he laughed.” So, we get clued in on the pun there, but there are countless of these that run through scripture that we never even see.

Also, as you know, so much of humor arises out of a sense of surprise, at something unexpected happening in a cultural context. And because that cultural context is so far from us, we often miss the surprise that would’ve

been self-evident to the hearers of those stories, which is why you pay pastors to unpack some of that material for you, right, successfully or not. But the scriptures are filled with these stories that are hilarious, that sometimes we gloss over because we've heard them so often or we've missed the cultural context, and therefore, miss the humor.

Our scripture lesson this morning from Isaiah is a classic example of that where Isaiah is talking to God about our deep desire to be God's people, to be the community that God has called us to be and how hard work that is, and Isaiah compares it to a woman in labor. And, you know, for those of us who have been in a labor room, husband or wife, you know that the doctor gets in there and says, "Okay, it's time to push now. Push." And the wife tries to bear down in order to give birth. And it's work and it's hard and it's painful. So, Isaiah is comparing our seeking after being God's people to that process and we're working on giving birth. And then, as you may have picked up in the scripture passage, what Isaiah says is, "And instead, we passed gas." Right? We're working really, really hard and this is the result. So, I just want to point out to you that in the Prophet Isaiah, we have fart jokes. Now -- can I say "fart" in church? It's too late. Okay.

And we miss those kinds of things which are just replete throughout scripture because of the mindset we bring.

Jesus, in this wonderful passage from the gospel, is criticizing the Pharisees for the way that they have criticized him, and they've criticized him for being too light and too frivolous, always going to parties and having dinner with the wrong sorts of people. And Jesus says, "You know, when John the Baptist came through and was enormously ascetic and very disciplined, you

said, “that guy’s crazy.” And then, I come along and try a different approach and I lack gravitas. So, make up your mind.” He says, “You’re like children who are outside trying to figure out what game to play in the courtyard. And somebody says, ‘Hey, let’s play weddings,’ and nobody wants to dance to the music. And somebody else says, ‘Well, let’s play funerals,’ and no one wants to sing a dirge. You don’t know what you want. And in fact, sometimes it seems as though what you want to be is against whatever is in front of you.” And he’s teasing the Pharisees using humor for their criticism of him for being perhaps a little bit more playful than they want a spiritual leader to be.

III. Celebrating Humor

Reinhold Niebuhr, who is not a comedian but a fairly serious theologian wrote, “Humor is in fact a prelude to faith and laughter is the beginning of prayer.” I like that line – “laughter is the beginning of prayer”. And I think the point he’s trying to get at is the theological rationale for why humor and laughter are such a gift. Because God wants us to be joyful. God has given us all we need to live joyful and abundant lives, and laughter helps to open that up a little bit. It’s also a wonderful gift for people like us who often take ourselves very, very seriously, to encourage us to maybe bring a little bit of a lighter touch to our faith walk and our work. Because, see, the success of the kingdom doesn’t rest on our shoulders, right? We may feel like we’ve got great responsibilities and grave responsibilities, but God has already won the victory. We don’t build the kingdom. God invites us into the process of the building of the kingdom that God is doing. So, maybe we could be a little bit less self-important and be able to laugh at ourselves just a little bit more and

live lives that reflect the joy of life in God. Maybe that would be more attractive to the world than our people who believe that Jesus never smiled.

I want to suggest that you can take God seriously, you can take Jesus seriously, and you can take the faith seriously without maybe taking ourselves quite as seriously. And maybe that would let us appreciate some of the hilarious stories that fill the scripture. Maybe it would allow us to bring a slightly lighter touch and appreciation to the children that will be laughing and disrupting our worship. Maybe it would leave us a little bit more room for spontaneity and embracing the unexpected.

IV. Conclusion

I had a senior pastor when I first was appointed after seminary who preached a sermon one Sunday that was quite serious, and I don't even remember what the topic was, but I remember him being in the pulpit with his large, black gown and preaching this very serious sermon, and at the close of the sermon, he leaned over the pulpit and said with great earnestness, "Let us play," totally unconsciously, and everybody broke into laughter. And I wonder if maybe we want to be and could afford to be a little bit more playful. I wonder if maybe that would make the work that God invites us to more joy filled, more hopeful, more inviting. And maybe it would teach the world around us a little bit better who our God is.

Amen.