

Taking Advice from an Ass

Numbers 22: 22-31

John 1: 43-47

August 11, 2013

Rev. Dr. Charles A. Parker

I. Introduction

So, there's a story about a man who goes to join a very strict monastic order, one of the orders that takes a vow of silence, and the first day that the man goes to see the abbot as he joins, the abbot says, "Our vow here is for silence, but every five years you can say two words." And so, the man vows and he goes off to his life of contemplation and prayer, and five years go by with remarkable speed, and he comes back to talk to the abbot, and the abbot says, "You've had five rich years here, Brother. Is there anything you would like to say to me?" And the monk says, "Food cold." And the abbot says, "Well, that's good to know. We'll start to address that right away. Thank you for sharing that with us." So, five more years go by and the monk again comes to the abbot and the abbot says, "It's been 10 years now, Brother. Is there anything that you would like to share with us now?" And the monk says, "Bed hard." And the abbot says, "Well, we can probably address that. We'll work on that as well." So, five more years go by, and the monk comes to the abbot again, and the abbot says, "It's been 15 years, Brother. What would you like to share with me?" And the monk says, "I'm leaving." And the abbot says, "Well, that doesn't surprise me. You've done nothing but complain since you got here."

We're taking a little time this August to look at humor and the important role it plays in the life of faith. And we started this last week and we'll finish up next week, it's a short series. We started off talking about the fact that in the

church we've sometimes got sort of a tortured relationship with humor, because in part for good reason, that we want to take our faith seriously, and our faith is serious stuff and God has called us to serious work.

But sometimes taking that seriously leads us to be a little bit dour, and we've got a reputation, frankly, of as religious people being sort of humorless and joyless, and that frankly is not doing us any favors when it comes to evangelism. Because who wants to hang out with a bunch of dour people, right? You want to hang out with people who seem to enjoy their life.

So, on a practical level -- we're sort of shooting ourselves in the foot on this -- it also, as I noted last Sunday, raises some theological problems, because we believe in a God who wants us to live rich and full and joyous lives. Jesus tells us in John that He has come that we might have life and have it -- how? Abundantly. God wants us to live joyous and abundant lives. And so, when we bring sort of a dour, serious, overly serious attitude to our engagement, that flies in the face of who we understand God to be and who we understand ourselves to be. It also may betray a tendency that we have, I think particularly here in Metropolitan, to take ourselves and our work rather seriously. And while we have serious work to do, as we noted last week, it's really God's work that we are invited into.

There's a wonderful Jesuit writer and priest whose name is James Martin, and he notes in a book that he wrote recently, "My spiritual director likes to say that the good news is that there is a messiah, and the better news is it's not you." Well, it's helpful to remember that periodically, that we are invited into God's work, but God is the one who's doing the work. It's not all about us.

II. Balaam

We also noted that our tendency to take ourselves and our religion rather seriously also often means that we miss a lot of the humor that is in the sacred scripture. And this wonderful story from the book of Numbers is one of those stories. As we heard this morning, it's at a place in the biblical narrative in which the children of Israel have been in the wilderness for a number of years but they're getting close to the Promise Land. And they've just defeated in battle the king of the Amorites and they've defeated in battle the king of Bashan, and now they're on the border of Moab. Well, the king of Moab is a little bit nervous because things haven't been going well for his neighbors. And so, he's trying to sort of stack the deck a little bit, and he invites this prophet, this holy man, whose name is Balaam to curse the Israelites and thereby bring divine favor on his armies in what he assumes will be the upcoming battle. So, just a historic note, there're archeologists who have found references to a man named Balaam in an archeological dig at a place called Tell Deir-Alla that refers to him as a "seer of the gods." There is this Aramaic text that tells a story about him. So, there may be some historical precedent for the story. It's also sort of a confusing story if you read the whole thing in that the narrative that we have in the book of Numbers is actually the combination of what was probably two different variants on this story written by writers that scholars called the Yahwist and Elohist; the Yahwist we call by that name simply because he always refers to God as Yahweh, and the Elohist refers to God by the more generic Hebrew word for God which is El. And so, you can see who's writing what passages often in some of these narratives by how God is referred to. But what's interesting, of

course, in a lot of the Biblical narratives is both of those traditions had such sacredness that the editor doesn't choose one or the other. The editor tries to weave them together. And so, if you read these couple of chapters -- which I encourage you to, it's an interesting bit of narrative -- you'll see some rough edges in how those two stories got woven together. So, in the verse just before the one that we read, God tells Balaam to go to meet with the king of Moab, but then he turns right around in the beginning of this story and clearly doesn't want Balaam to go and meet with the king of Moab. So, if you're reading this narrative, just be aware that we're weaving together two strands of story.

So, we've got this wonderful story where Balaam is going to meet with the king of Moab, and he has an angel with a drawn sword in front of him that he can't see but the donkey sees it, and the donkey appropriately swerves off the road into the field to avoid the angel, and Balaam has to beat the donkey to get back on track. And this happens again where there's not a field to go into, but he tries to squeeze by the wall and pinches Balaam's foot. And then, they get to a very sharp defile where there is no place for the donkey to go, and so the donkey just lies down, and Balaam loses it at that point and starts hitting the donkey repeatedly to get it moving, and God gives the gift of speech to the donkey who looks up at him and says, "Really? You know, we've been together for years, and I've never done anything like this. Why are you just beating me?" And Balaam, interestingly doesn't seem surprised at all that his donkey is talking to him, and very instructive word here, "You've made me look foolish, and I'm so angry I could kill you if I had a sword." And the donkey -- you can sort of visualize this -- the donkey kind of nods up the

road and says, "Well, there's a guy with a sword if you're interested." And Balaam realizes that the donkey has in fact been saving his life and bows down to worship.

It's a funny story on a lot of different levels, one of which is obviously the kind of slapstick level in which the donkey is trying to avoid this angel and Balaam keeps forcing it back on to the road. Then, of course, there's the fact that the donkey is talking and Balaam doesn't seem to think that's out of the ordinary at all. And then, there is, of course, the level of irony in the story in which the prophet, the seer of God, is unable to see what God wants and his donkey is the one that has to explain it to him.

C.S. Lewis wrote to a nun who was a friend of his in 1941 saying, "One must take comfort in remembering that God used an ass to convert the prophet. And perhaps if we do our poor best we shall be allowed a stall near it in the celestial stable."

Balaam's response to his donkey is an interesting one, "You have made me look foolish and I'm so angry I could kill you." We often encounter places in our journey where circumstances conspire to make us look foolish, Amen? And our response is Balaam's response, right, we get mad. I mean, that's our emotional reaction. We rebel against this idea that our image of ourselves might be soiled in some way.

III. The Power of Laughter

One of the wonderful invitations of this story is the wisdom that sometimes God may put us in these situations to clue us into the fact that maybe the direction we're going is not the direction God wants us to go. And

if we had maybe a little bit more ability to laugh at ourselves and maybe if we took our own earnestness less seriously, we might be opened up to see some different paths that God wants us to take. We are very goal-oriented folks, you know. We've got to get where we're going and we've got important work to do, and gosh, darn it, it's God's work too. And we're often quite certain about what God wants us to do, Amen? You know who I'm talking about, right? And I think this story may invite us to be cognizant of the fact that we don't always know what God wants and that sometimes we hit impediments that are quite hilarious in retrospect because we're supposed to take a different direction.

There's a wonderful story from The Life of St. Teresa of Avila who at one point was journeying some place, who got knocked off of her horse and fell into a mud puddle, and she cries out to God, "God, why do you do these things to me?" And God's response to her in prayer was, "This is how I treat my friends." And Teresa responded, "Then it's little wonder that you have so few."

We don't like having roadblocks thrown in our way, but sometimes an ability to laugh at the roadblocks and ourselves and our response to the roadblocks opens up some other avenues for God to guide us. Part of what this story invites us to look at and laugh at and learn from is where those places are in our lives where hilarious roadblocks are thrown up and we have the opportunity to laugh at ourselves a little bit, and as we deflate ourselves, create a little space for the Holy Spirit to move in.

We can also receive this gift from the people around us who may prick us with a little bit of humor. And most of you don't know this, but I have a

couple of quirks that my family reminds me with some regularity, that are sort of unusual and bear reflection. And I'm not always happy about hearing those thoughts or getting pricked. But one of the gifts of humor is that there's almost always an element of honesty that is being shared with us even when we don't want to hear it. And that again, if we can create a little space, an ability to appreciate the prick, maybe there's a chance to grow there, and to be led more in a path that God wants us to go.

This wonderful story from the book of John is a small example of this, and I'm going to say parenthetically, one of our members this week grabbed me and said, "You know, I'm so glad you're talking about humor because I was just talking with my husband a couple of weeks ago about the fact that Jesus seems so humorless and why did people follow him." Because we're drawn to people who have a sense of humor and that have an ability to laugh at themselves. And she said, "I don't see that in Jesus." Well, part of it as we'd discussed last week has to do with how much of the humor is culturally bound and therefore requires some unpacking if we're going to appreciate it. Part of it I also think has to do with the fact that the writers of the New Testament were working to make sure that people took the message of Jesus seriously, and therefore, I think sometimes stripped away or sublimated some of the humor that must have been part of His ministry. But I think you get little hints of it throughout the gospels, and this is one of them, where Andrew and Philip have encountered Jesus and they run to tell their friend, Nathaniel, and they tell him, "We think we found the Messiah, and it's this guy, Jesus from Nazareth." And you can sort of almost see this quizzical look on Nathaniel's face and he says, "Nazareth? Really? Does anything good come out of

Nazareth?” And it’s a little bit of a barb, a little sharp humor there. But what’s interesting is Jesus loves it. Jesus doesn’t criticize Nathaniel for making barbed comments about his hometown when he meets him. He says, “Here is somebody who will tell it like it is. You should come be a disciple.” Jesus appreciated the humor and appreciated the honesty that underlays the humor. That’s a lesson for us. Because often when people poke fun at me, I’m less appreciative of the humor or the truth, the honesty that underlies it. And we all could learn to take ourselves a little bit less seriously and hear the feedback that is part of the process of being funny.

I will also suggest that if we want to tell people something that is hard for them to hear, humor is a good tool to use. Amen? I mean, I don’t tell a lot of jokes, as you know, in my sermons -- really? But when I do tell jokes, it’s almost on Stewardship Sundays, right? Or other times when I’m talking about things that I think you’re going to fight me on. Because if you can make people laugh, you can tell them anything. And so, if I’ve got something tough to say, you’ll often find that’s the place that I tend to use humor. Humor is a great gift in that respect.

All of our great spiritual leaders took their faith with great seriousness but often combine that with a wonderful sense of lightness that drew people to them and helped change lives.

IV. Conclusion

I think we have a picture of John Wesley in our head as a rather dour, rigid kind of spiritual leader, but when you read John Wesley’s own reflections on his life, you see a lot of just really funny reflections on who he is. He had a wonderful self-awareness that allowed him to poke fun at himself. I ran

across this wonderful story this week which I had encountered before, but John Wesley kept a journal all throughout his life, he wrote a little bit every day about what was going on. And he writes on Thursday, May 20th in 1742, “I stopped at Newport-Pagnell,” a little town in England “and rode on until I overtook a serious man, with whom I immediately fell into conversation.” One of the interesting things about life in 18th century England is people debated theology all the time. They just meet one another on the street or in bars and they’d have these rich theological conversations.

So, Wesley encounters this guys, and he said, “I immediately fell into conversation and he presently gave me to know what his opinions were, and I said nothing to contradict them. But that did not content him. He was quite uneasy to know whether I held the doctrines that he did. But I told him over and over, ‘We had better keep to practical things, lest we should be angry at one another.’ And we did so for two miles, until he caught me unawares and dragged me into a dispute before I knew where I was. He then grew warmer and warmer and told me I was rotten at heart and supposed I must be one of John Wesley’s followers. I told him, ‘No, I am John Wesley himself.’ Upon which he would gladly have run away outright. But being the better mounted of the two, I kept close to his side and endeavored to show him his heart.” I love that image. The guy tries to bolt, and John Wesley’s got the better horse, so he makes sure he’s riding next to him to make sure he gets to win the debate.

There is the lightness of spirit there, I think, that is at the heart of what it means to be a believer. Because what it says is, “God is serious and has called me to serious work. But I can take myself maybe a little less seriously

than I need to or sometimes do.” I think there’s a wonderful message there for how we engage in the faith, with seriousness and yet lightness and playfulness that allows us to spread the good news of Jesus Christ and to share with the world a God who wants us to live rich, abundant, and joy-filled lives.

Amen.