

The Jester Sang to the King and Queen

I Kings 22: 6-18
Matthew 23: 23-24
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I. Introduction

There's a scene in Shakespeare's *King Lear* where Sirrah, the court jester, The Fool, is provoking King Lear, and Lear responds to him, getting a little bit testy and angry, and he says, "Dost thou call me a fool, boy?" And Sirrah answers, "All thy other titles, thou had given away. That, thou wast born with." Now, that's sort of a bold statement to make to a king. But in doing that, Sirrah is standing in a long tradition of court jesters who are paid to entertain the king but also to speak a word of truth through their humor, to say uncomfortable things by making them funny.

We are finishing up a short sermon series this morning on humor, and we've been looking at humor because the church has not always had a really particularly healthy relationship with humor. And we've had a lot of our great spiritual leaders who have rather trivialized and sometimes even criticized humor, resulting in the fact that we as Christians sometimes come across as a rather dour lot. And what I've suggested over the course of the past couple of weeks is that I think having a healthy sense of humor is at the core of celebrating a life of joy and abundance that God wishes for us. And it also is at the heart of inviting people into a life of faith. Because when we put on our serious faces whenever we come to church, the natural response of people who are not part of our community is to say, "Why would I want to hang out with a bunch of people who never look like they're having fun?"

So, we've been talking a little bit about humor and also looking at some of the wonderful places in scripture that express the humor that runs throughout our sacred texts, and we're going to close out this morning looking at the way in which scripture uses humor in the way a court jester would, to poke fun at, and in that way criticize the power structures when they get unhealthy -- that's governmental, that's religious, that's all the power structures. As power structures often do glide into unhealthy places, humor is often the tool that goads power back onto the right path.

II. John Cleese Argued that Anger is at the Heart of Much Humor

Which is why of course the prophets in the Hebrew scriptures have always used humor so richly, whether it's Elijah goading the prophets of Baal or whether it's Isaiah telling fart jokes as we heard in our first sermon, there's this long and rich history of humor in the prophetic tradition. And we heard a little bit of that in this wonderful story that we heard this morning from Kings. It's at a period in Israelite history when the Kingdom of Israel has been divided so that the 10 northern tribes are making up the kingdom of Israel and the two southern tribes make up the Kingdom of Judah. And Ahab is the king of the northern kingdom, of Israel, and Jehoshaphat is the king of the southern kingdom, Judah. And Israel and Judah had a -- tortured relationship may be the wrong word, but sometimes they're allies, sometimes they're fighting each other. At this particular stage in history, Ahab and Israel are at war with the king of Aram, and he wants to go and attack an Aramean city, Ramoth Gilead, but he needs some backup. And so, he's approached Jehoshaphat, the king of Judah, to bring his armies up to join him in battle. So, Jehoshaphat has left Jerusalem and gone up to Samaria

which is the capital of the northern kingdom, and these two kings are in converse with one another about whether or not to attack Ramoth Gilead. And Jehoshaphat says, "Well, let's talk to the prophets and see what they say about what God wants us to do." And so, as you remember, prophets at this point in history were often paid and paid to discern and speak for God to the king. That's what "prophet" means, is "someone who speaks for." So, Ahab gathers this huge group of 400 prophets and says, "What should we do about going to war with the Arameans?" And all of the prophets tell him that he should do this. Now, the problem there, of course, is that when the king is paying your paycheck, it's sometimes easier to tell the king what the king wants to hear, right? And so, all these prophets are getting paid by the king and they know the king wants to go to war, and so, they go into their prophetic ecstasies and say, "Oh, go north and destroy the Arameans." And prophets often accompanied their prophecies, their prophetic words, with prophetic actions which were very dramatic. So, one of these prophets gets a set of iron horns and you can see him kind of parading about, "You're going to gore the Arameans like a bull," and everybody's kind of getting the war frenzy whipped up. And Jehoshaphat is not stupid. Jehoshaphat knows exactly what's going on, and he says, "I wonder if there's another prophet we haven't heard from." And Ahab says, "Well, there's this Micaiah but he never says anything positive." This is, by the way, the only place in scripture that this particular prophet appears. And so, Jehoshaphat says, "Well, let's hear what he has to say." And so, they go and send for Micaiah, and as he's coming, the messenger who's getting him there says to him sort of quietly, "You know, everybody else thinks this war is a good idea. You should probably just go along with it." And Micaiah says what you would want a prophet to

say which is, "Whatever God tells me to say is what I'm going to say." So, he gets before these two kings, robed in their royal majesty, and Ahab says, "So, what does the Lord say about going to war?" And Micaiah, words dripping with sarcasm, mimics all of these other prophets and says, "Oh, go north, King. You're going to win against the Arameans." And it's so clearly sarcastic that Ahab just says, "Just tell me what you think." And he says, "You're going to get killed. Here is what God says: I see the Israelites scattered in the mountaintop without a leader. You're going to die."

So, just to finish out the story, because frankly they have already decided to go to war, Ahab goes to war with Jehoshaphat and gets destroyed and he's killed, and that's the end of Ahab's reign. But I want to spend a few minutes with this passage, because it's a wonderful example of prophetic humor at work.

John Cleese is one of my favorite comedians because I'm fairly lowbrow. And many of you know John Cleese from Monty Python and *Fawlty Towers*. He's hilarious. And he said at an interview at one point that all humor was rooted in anger, which was an interesting statement. But what he's talking about is this kind of prophetic anger, an anger at injustice, an anger at vanity and pride and power that then takes form as humor. This is why prophets use humor all the time, because there are things in the world to be angry about, and one of the ways to expose them, to comment on them, is through the use of humor. Humor becomes a healthy way to respond to injustice because anger is not an inappropriate emotion in the face of injustice. But if you sit with anger for too long, it starts to get quite unhealthy. So, what humor does is allow us to take the righteous anger that we have over injustice in the world and turn that into something that is more positive.

There was an interesting article that Dottie shared with me this week that was an interview with Mel Brooks done by *Salon* last year, and in the interview, the interviewer asks Mr. Brooks why he so often finds himself portraying Hitler in his comedy. And Mel Brooks responded, "I don't know." He said, "After all the people that he was responsible for killing and after utterly destroying half the world, I just thought the only weapon I've really got is comedy. And if I can make this ludicrous, if I can make you laugh at him, then it's a victory of sorts."

Humor is a way of cutting down the power of evil, of putting it in its proper place, which is why all of the great saints of our church have told us that the thing the devil hates the most is to be laughed at.

But then Mr. Brooks goes on and has this very interesting line, he says, "You can't get on a soapbox with orators because they're very good at convincing people that they're right. But if you can make them look ridiculous, you win over the people." Which is to say that humor becomes a tool and a gift not only for sharing the truth with the power structures that sometimes don't want to hear it. It also becomes a tool for convincing the broader population of where injustice may reside. This is why comedians like Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert are so wildly successful. Because they have a wonderful way of highlighting the ways in which people in power become ridiculous, and in that way, highlighting some very valuable truths. This is why even though Jon Stewart is a comedian and is very clear about being a comedian, he is one of the most trusted news sources for 18 to 26 year olds, because there is a way in which what he says gets at truth in a way that objective news may not.

III. Giving and Receiving Humor

One of the questions then that arises if that is the case, in a community like Metropolitan which is filled with wonderful leaders, is how do we as leaders respond to humor that is pointed at us, whether that's our employees, the people that we lead on committees, or our children? All of those folks have wonderful ways of pricking us with their humor that is a gift if we take it in the right way.

A couple of years ago, we sent folks up to a family camp at Manidokan and we had a worship service, and my daughter opened up the worship service by mimicking me as I open the worship services in a way that had everybody just on the floor laughing. After punishing her significantly --. How that's a gift is her pointing out appropriately that sometimes I fall into ruts when I open the worship service and maybe I could learn to vary myself a little bit. But see, we all have people -- and children are great this -- who point out the hilarious things that we do if we have the spirit to absorb it.

Queen Elizabeth I actually reportedly criticized one of her court jesters for not being hard enough with her, her point being essentially if you're doing job, I should feel less comfortable with you, because she realized that that's a gift that was being given to her.

Jesuit priest James Martin, whom I've quoted at a couple of points in this series, wrote about a friend of his whose mother had gone into the hospital for some surgery, and she happened to be in the hospital at the same time that her local bishop was also in the hospital for some surgery. And after the bishop had recuperated sufficiently, he

started getting out of his room and he'd visit people in his ward to check on them. And he visited this man's mother who was in a lot of pain recovering from her surgery, and the bishop in, I don't want to say typical bishop fashion, but was a little bit patronizing and said, "Oh, dear. You know, I know just how that feels because I've just been through surgery too." And she said, "Did you have a hysterectomy? Because then you don't know what it feels like."

Well, you know, he could have responded defensively. What he did though was receive that for the gift it was, and was able to laugh at himself and his own pomposity, and the two of them struck up a friendship that ended up being lifelong. And in fact, the bishop preached at her funeral and told the story of how they met.

Good leaders receive those pricks which can be very uncomfortable at that time and realize that there's a word of truth being spoken to them that they need to hear.

So, I want to invite all of you in your various roles of leadership as you get pricked to make sure you're responding more like the bishop and less like the Pharisees that Jesus is talking to in our gospel lesson today. Jesus pricked at the Pharisees all the time, and they didn't always take it well. This is part of the ongoing struggle there. And then, this passage, of course, Jesus is making fun of the legalism that they live out. And as you all know, in the Hebrew scriptures, when people harvest grain, they are required to tithe that for the upkeep of the temple and the priesthood, and the Pharisees, of course, took that general principle and made it trivial by tithing every little tiny thing that grew in their garden. So, they tithed a little bit of mint, and they tithed a little bit of rue, and they tithed a little --. And Jesus is laughing at them in

this passage and saying, “You’re tithing these little tiny things. You’re missing the whole point about what justice looks like and how we go about creating a just society in which people have enough to eat, because that’s the point.” And in classic Jesus’ way, he puns them, because the word “gnat” and “camel” in Aramaic are very similar sounding words. So, he’s punning them and saying, “You’re straining out gnats and you’re swallowing camels.” And a lot of the words that Jesus speaks to the power structures of his day are humor. They’re humorous. A lot of the parables are rich in humor.

IV. Humor Points toward Hope

There’s a wonderful Presbyterian author and pastor, Frederick Buechner, who Ned Bachman led a class on last month. In a book called *Telling the Truth*, Frederick Buechner writes, “I suspect that many, if not all, of the parables were originally not grave,”-- he’s commenting on our tendency to engage them with great seriousness. He says, “They weren’t originally grave at all, but were antic, comic, often more than just a little, shocking. I suspect that Jesus spoke many of his parables as a kind of sad and holy joke and that may be why he seems reluctant to explain them, because if you have to explain a joke, you might as well save your breath.”

See, interesting point.

He writes this chapter which is called *The Gospel as Comedy* also not only to highlight the humor that is in the gospels but also to point out that the gospel itself is a comedy, because it is always about the process of God doing something unexpected to bring about new life and new opportunities for growth.

He writes in this chapter, "I think that the parables are essentially about the outlandishness of God, who does impossible things with impossible people. And I believe that the comedy of them is not just a device for making the truth go down easy, but that the truth they contain can itself be thought of as comic."

Humor, in other words, is pointing us at the end of the story in which God's victory is assured. We can laugh and we can be light and we can engage in our work and our love and our life and our ministry with a certain lightness of heart because we know that God's will will ultimately get accomplished.

"Tragedy," Buechner says, "is the inevitable. Comedy is the unforeseeable. The ways in which God takes the inevitability of death and loss and turns it into life and opportunity."

V. Conclusion

The last court jester in Britain was under King Charles I who lost his head in the revolution and was replaced by a very strict, very religious man by the name of Oliver Cromwell. And Oliver Cromwell didn't laugh a lot and didn't want a lot of people laughing at him and did away with the court jester as an institution. I don't think it accidental that a religious man was the one who did away with the court jester, but I want to suggest to us as a religious community now we're missing something and we don't have a jester here to needle us a little bit. Part of our call, I think, as a Metropolitan community is to embrace the rich and joyous laughter of life in God: A

God who seeks us with such passion and desires for us such abundance that our proper response is always joyous laughter.

Amen.