

Sermon: "Still Fools for Christ"

In early Christian practice, many churches observed the end of Lent and the celebration of Easter with a week of parties and picnics called "the days of joy and laughter." Originally, they called the Sunday after Easter, Bright Sunday, no joke. Early theologians including Augustine and Gregory of Nyssa taught that God played a big practical joke on the devil by raising Jesus from the dead. "Ha, Ha, He's not here, He's risen." They called it "Risus pascalis" – the Easter laugh. Some modern day churches have brought back this practice observing it as Holy Humor Sunday. As Cal Samra, founder of the Fellowship of Merry Christians, put it, "we thought churches needed to lighten up. Jesus had a sense of humor. Why not us?"

The bulletin cover art you see is from this movement. It is entitled "The Risen Christ by the Sea" or more commonly, the Laughing Christ. Jesus did have a sense of humor. He was God in human form said the early theologians. How could he not enjoy a good laugh? It has been hard for us to see both because of, and despite the Gospels. Think of this. God did not come as royalty or learned priest. He comes as an untutored craftsman from backwater Nazareth in Galilee, speaking with a country dialect. Then when Jesus does put together some followers, who are they? The twelve, a rag-tag, grab-bag gang, the ones who couldn't shoot straight, who almost never understood what he was saying. Don't tell me he didn't laugh at the improbability of pulling off his assigned task from God, to establish the Kingdom of God on earth, as it is in Heaven.

Speaking of heaven, that has been the source of much humor, especially Pearly Gate stories, I like the story where St. Peter asks the man at the gate to Heaven: "What did you do to earn your way here?" The man responds "Once in my life I stood between a nice young woman and a gang of Hell's Angels." Peter then asks: "When did that happen?" The man responds: "Five minutes ago!"

Another man approached St. Peter at the pearly gate and told him that he had been faithful to one wife for 66 years, that he had raised seven children and attended every school event they ever were in, that he had given 10% of his money to his church and another 10% to missions and that he had been a faithful worshiper on Sundays and that he weekly attended a discipleship Bible Study.

St. Peter said "that's great. That means you have 3 points towards the 1000 you need to get into heaven." The man stood in shock and said, "My goodness, I will never get into heaven except for the grace of God!" St. Peter said, "That's right! Come on in!"

This is one of the Pearly Gate jokes that helps us understand the idea of grace. We get into heaven only by the Grace of God!

Some, like the late Elton Trueblood, have argued that some of Jesus' less understood sayings like in Matthew 15:26, when he seems to criticize the non-Jewish woman that comes to him for help for her possessed daughter, could be understood if we granted him a sense of humor. Here Jesus says, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." A lot of folks scratch their heads at this response. Is Jesus calling the woman and daughter dogs? What if he is teasing her or challenging her to help him explain this to his disciples? She does when she says, "Lord, even the dogs eat crumbs that fall from the master's table." Jesus commends her faith and her daughter is healed.

This reminds me that some folks confuse religion and medicine. Three fellows were walking along when an angel suddenly appeared before them, and said, "Behold, I can grant you each a wish." The first one said, "I've got terrible arthritis. It gives me such pain all the time, and I just can't get around like I used to. Can you cure it?" the angel said, "Your healed," and the man went away flexing his arms and legs.

The second man said, "I've got bad heart trouble and I can't do anything strenuous. I'd love for you to cure it." The angel said, "You are cured." And the man skipped off joyfully.

The angel looked at the third fellow, who threw up his arms, backed off, and said, "Get away from me. I am on full disability." Not everybody wants healing.

I think a lot of Jesus' humor was self-deprecating. I think he was making fun of his adversaries, especially the Pharisees, for making religion too serious and missing the point. Rabbis, priests and preachers down through the years have often lost their sense of humor only to have their congregants remind them of their "foolishness".

One preacher thought he had delivered a great sermon and was feeling good on the way home. So he asked his wife, "How many great preachers do you think there are preaching today?" "One less than you think," she answered.

That's why I think it is good for ministers to have family, such as the minister's young daughter who noticed that her father always bowed his head for a minute before starting his sermon. One day she asked him why. "Well, I'm asking the Lord to help me preach a good sermon," he said. "Then how come He doesn't do it?" she replied.

Of course, pastors often do develop a sense of humor, as a sort of coping mechanism, like when an IRS agent called upon a minister and said, "One of your members, Sam Harris put down on his tax return that he had made an annual contribution of \$15,000 to your church. Is that true?" The minister thought a minute and replied, "If he didn't, he will."

Or take the case of the man who pulled his pastor aside and said, "I need your advice. I think my wife is trying to poison me." The pastor promised to look into it and calls him back a week later. "I talked to your wife... I talked to your wife for three hours... Take the poison."

It helps if church teachers and staff keep a sense of humor too, especially when dealing with our children. A Sunday School teacher was teaching the Golden Rule. "It means we are here to help others," she said. A little girl raised her hand and asked, "What are the others here for?"

Another Sunday School teacher had told her class the story of the Prodigal Son who came home, whose father was so glad to see him, that he killed the fatted calf, threw a big party and everybody was full of joy except the older brother who was jealous of the attention to his brother. So later, she was quizzing the class to see what they had learned. She asked, "Who was not happy about all this?" James spoke up and said, "The really unhappy one was the fatted calf." Good answer, don't you think?

Humor in religion often revolves around our presumptions of what is correct. A good joke can point that out. A Catholic and a Jew worked side by side in the plant and got to be good friends. One day the Catholic came in smiling and said, "I'm so proud. My son is going into the priesthood." "So what?" said his Jewish friend. "Well, he might become a bishop," said the Catholic. "So what?" "He might even become a cardinal." "So?" "You know, he could even become Pope." "Will he ever be Jesus Christ?" piped the Jew. "No, of course not." "Well, one of our boys made it."

Sometimes the humor is just out of miscommunication. A preacher was riding through a rural area and came to a church with a large crowd gathered, apparently for a funeral. As he started to ride by, a man ran up to him and said, "You're a preacher, are you not?" He said he was. The man said that their preacher had taken ill and they had no one to preach the funeral. So the preacher said he'd be glad to do it. As he walked up the aisle, he noted that the coffin was closed. He turned to the

man, who brought him in and whispered, "Is this a brother or a sister?" The man whispered back, "Just a cousin."

Often the humor we create is wholly unintentional. Some of those can be the best moments in our day. Rev. Dan Clark tells the true story of when he was pastor of the Presbyterian Church in Stanford, KY. He says, "I usually answered the phone at the church by saying, "May I help you?" One morning I was studying 1 Cor. 13, "The Love Chapter," in preparation for Sunday's sermon. The phone rang. Without thinking, I picked it up and said, "May I love you?"

At first, no one responded. Then I heard someone clearing her throat, and it turned out to be one of the pillars of the church, 83 years old. She said, she forgot why she called. The more he thought about it, said, Rev. Clark, "that was good theology."

And it was. Saying I love you is always good theology, even when we say it accidentally. It was certainly no accident when Jesus demonstrated how much he loved those twelve bumbling disciples and ultimately us all by dying on the Cross. His memorial supper, we call The Lord's Table sets it up so well. All who love the Lord as the Saving One are invited to share bread and cup remembering the grace we enjoy because of Christ' deed which tricked the Evil One and Death itself. Let's see who has the last laugh. Alleluia! Amen.