

THE LORD LOVES A *CHEERFUL*...
a sermon by Rev. Elizabeth L. Greene
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Call To Worship

The Bible tells us that a merry heart does good, like a medicine.

Samuel Butler, elaborating, says, "A sense of humor keen enough to show [people their] own absurdities as well as those other people will keep [us] from commission of all sins, or nearly all, save those that are worth committing. (Peter, 185)

Contemplation

Comedian Steve Allen says, "[Humor] is... a remarkably useful thing in the context of the whole process of human communication in that it is an aid to the expression of other emotions and to the transmission of important messages of spiritual, political, educational or commercial nature. It is, come to think of it, an absolute necessity in the maintenance of sanity."

Lawrence Peter, famous author of *The Peter Principle*, received an important life lesson early in his teaching career. At the end of a class, a student came up to him and said, "Dr. Peter, you must be greater than Einstein." Dr. Peter putting on a suitably modest-yet-proud demeanor, replied, "Oh?" The student continued, "I don't understand Einstein very well, but I don't understand you at all." (Peter, x and 3)

Reading

Does laughter bring us nearer to God or signify being filled with the Holy Spirit? Exuberant worship, sometimes featuring laughter, has cycled in and out of favor, having a place in the heritage, if not current practice, of many denominations....

"Laughing revivals" offer an intriguing contemporary manifestation of this "old time religion" that provide fascinating case studies in the power of contagious laughter. In the article "Laughing for the Lord," *Time* magazine (15 August 1994) reports the growing popularity of "laughing revivals" among many groups, including the otherwise reserved Anglicans....

The visitation of the Holy Spirit to members of the contemporary congregations is signaled by the spread of laughter through the group, followed in some by falling to the floor, sobbing, shaking, twitching, speaking in tongues, and even roaring. (Provine, 134,5)

Sermon

One day an ape escaped from the Bronx Zoo. They searched for him

everywhere, in every borough. They announced his disappearance on the radio and television as well as the newspapers. But, no one reported seeing the ape.

At last, he was discovered in the New York Public Library. Officials of the zoo as well as the animal handlers were summoned to the library. They found the ape sitting at a desk in the reading room with two books spread out in front of him. The ape was reading with great concentration. One book was the Bible; the other was Darwin's *Evolution of Species*.

The zoo keepers asked the ape what he was doing.

The ape replied, "I'm trying to figure out whether I am my brother's keeper or whether I am my keeper's brother."

Consider the case of the Illinois man who left the snow-filled streets of Chicago for a vacation in Florida. His wife was on a business trip and was planning to meet him there the next day.

When he reached his hotel, he decided to send his wife a quick e-mail. Unable to find the scrap of paper on which he had written her e-mail address, he did his best to type it in from memory. Unfortunately, he missed one letter, and his note was directed instead to an elderly preacher's wife, whose husband had passed away only the day before.

When the grieving widow checked her e-mail, she took one look at the monitor, let out a piercing scream, and fell to the floor in a dead faint. At the sound, her family rushed into the room and saw this note on the screen: Dearest Wife, Just got checked in. Everything prepared for your arrival tomorrow.

Signed, Your eternally loving husband.

PS. Sure is hot down here.

If you are new this morning recently—maybe even if you are not—you may be saying to yourself, “Yeah, I’m laughing. But how can they call this a religious service, when it seems to be just a bunch of jokes...?”

A fair question.

One of the things that a religious faith is about is the well-being of its followers. And we all know that the beneficial effects of laughter have been known at least since 1979, when Norman Cousins wrote about checking out of the hospital and into a motel, where he watched funny movies, laughing many times a day. He found relief from pain, and he found healing (remember: “heal” and “whole” and “holy” all have the same root).

But In my reading recently, I ran across a book by a highly-qualified neuroscientist who sheds doubt on the cherished hypothesis about laughter and health. William Provine, writing in 2000, analyzes a whole lot of studies, concluding,

Research on medicinal laughter, like many other promising enterprises..., will pay a price for the burst of early exuberance with a backlash of undue pessimism.... In the wake of overly optimistic predictions in the style of Norman Cousins..., we are probably entering a downward phase, as disillusioned investigators realize that the necessary science is neither as easy nor as obvious as first anticipated and negative results will start accumulating... (206,7)

Oh dear. If I maintain my long-held hypothesis that humor is part of making meaning in life, of being healed, becoming whole—those fundamental religious jobs—if I maintain that it is part of our spiritual journey to find things to laugh about, then am I betraying the modern divinity of science? Does it mean that I am fooling myself, when I tell this joke as an important faith reminder?

If you can start the day without caffeine,
if you can eat the same food every day and be grateful for it,
if you can overlook it when those you love take it out on you when,
through no fault of yours, something goes wrong,
if you can take criticism and blame without resentment,
if you can face the world without lies and deceit,
if you can relax without liquor,
if you can sleep without the aid of drugs,
if you can honestly say that deep in your heart you have no prejudice
against creed, color, religion, gender orientation, or politics,
THEN, you have reached the same level of enlightenment as your dog.

Of course we will not stop telling jokes as part of our religious life. (As a matter of fact, Dr. Provine really knows how beneficial humor is. Right after the words I read to you, from his last chapter, there is an appendix entitled, “Ten Ways To Increase Laughter In Your Life.” [209])

Life is hard. Life is absurd. Life is filled with unfair events that cause very real suffering. Life is full of our own dumb actions and bad choices, that cause very real suffering. My heart overflows so very often, as I see these universal truths of the human condition acted out every day. (By me, among others.)

If we can create and appreciate humor—making up situations in which our suffering, our wondering, our unbearable longings, our human despairs, take laughably unexpected twists, we can enter the lightness of laughter. If we laugh (even though sometimes crying at the same time), we are more likely to find our center, wherein dwells the Holy as we experience it. If we can genuinely see the absurdity of the human condition, our suffering is likely to be lightened. As one writer says, “Humor is the sense of the absurd which is despair refusing to take itself seriously.” (Peter, 73)

For instance, we all know that infidelity in intimate relationships is an extremely serious moral, religious, emotional, spiritual subject. It is universal to the human

condition, and has caused rapture and despair, and heartache, and fury, and forgiveness—and growth—for millennia. A very important part of me knows all that, speaks and acts accordingly. Nevertheless, I laughed when I heard about the man who came home to his wife and said, “Honey, you’ll never believe what I just heard! The supervisor of this building has had sex with every woman in this apartment house except one!” She thinks for a minute, then says knowingly, “And I’ll bet it’s that stuckup Mrs. Bixby on the third floor.”

Sexuality is one of humankind’s most powerful forces, for good and ill. The absurdity of it is reflected not just in jokes about fidelity or lack thereof, but in jokes in general.

After having been commissioned by God to take a survey of how man was doing on Earth, St. Peter now stood before his boss ready to present his findings.

"Tell me, St. Peter, what have you found out?" God asked.

"I'm very sorry to have to tell you this, but the people are behaving in a sinful manner. There's drugs, alcohol, murders, you name it—a regular Sodom and Gomorra. But the worst is this obsession with practicing the act of procreation in ways other than the one way prescribed by You. According to my survey, 88% of the population is doing it. I'm afraid it has reached epidemic proportions.

“Hmmm," God said thoughtfully, "do you have any recommendations as to what should be done to put an end to this terrible problem?"

"I think we should send a message to everyone on Earth who engages in this behavior. The contents of that message should tell them exactly what will happen to them on Judgment Day if they do not stop it," replied St. Peter.

"That is an effective solution," God stated, "but I think that instead of punishing those who practice it, we should reward those who refrain from it. Let's send a letter that's personally signed by me to each one of these good people." And so they did.

Do you know what the letter said? --No?

Hmmm, So, You didn't get the letter either, huh?

Some respected public figures are not exempt from the sexuality issue, either, and we make jokes about them. You know that future historians will be able study at the Gerald Ford Library and the Jimmy Carter Library and the Ronald Reagan Library—and the Bill Clinton Adult Bookstore.

Sexuality is perhaps the second most troubling subject to us absurd humans, with death coming in first. Death is probably the most religious and the most serious subject in the whole catalog of human concerns. We in this church know that so very well recently, having lost nearly a dozen loved ones in the past year or so. I would be horrified to the tips of my toes if I thought any of our bereaved family members, any of

us who mourn, felt that I—or we—pass their losses off lightly. But, like all humans through time, we also laugh, just as we weep. The poor widow getting the message hoping she will join her late husband in an extremely hot place tickles our sense of the absurd. We laugh and wince at the truth of Woody Allen's saying, "It's hard to view one's own death objectively and still carry a tune," (Peter, 92) or "I don't mind the idea of dying—I just don't want to be there when it happens."

If it is true, as UU minister Forrester Church tells us, that religion is about being born, knowing we are going to die, and figuring out what to do in between, it should not surprise us that religion is the subject of many, many jokes. Because spirituality is a truly serious subject, it is vital to cultivate a lightness of spirit about it. There is the danger of fanaticism in those who are unhumorously earnest about religion, a self-righteousness that can lead to very terrible deeds. And so, we do our best to lighten up.

Church bulletin bloopers always crack me up:

Announcement for a National Prayer and Fasting Conference: "The cost for attending the Fasting and Prayer conference includes meals."

"Our Holy Redeemer Lutheran Church youth basketball team is back in action, Wednesday at 8 pm, in the recreation hall. Come out and watch us kill Christ the King."

"Ladies, don't forget the rummage sale. It's a chance to get rid of those things not worth keeping, around the house. Don't forget your husbands."

Or children's Sunday School contributions:

The seventh commandment is thou shalt not admit adultery.

David was a Hebrew king who fought with a race of people who lived in Biblical times, the Finklesteins.

Lot's wife was a pillar of salt by day, but a ball of fire by night.

Not just religion in general gets the humorous treatment. Each faith tradition has its own self-mocking jokes. The joke about the ape reading the Bible and Darwin helps us laugh at our efforts to find Truth with that capital "T," efforts we UUs take particularly seriously. We are known for being very questioning (if we are fanatical, we burn question marks on people's lawns), for wanting to discuss heaven rather than go to it, for being always skeptical and reserved about religious truth. (Like the worship service in a large Boston UU church, where a back-bencher kept shouting, "Hallelujah! Praise the Lord!" The head usher asked him to behave a little more in keeping with the UU way, and the shouter said, "But, man, I got religion!" The usher replied "You didn't get it here.")

Here's a typical example of humor at our expense:

A Unitarian was taking a walk through the woods, admiring all that the "accident of evolution" had created. "What majestic trees! What powerful rivers! What beautiful animals!", he said to himself.

As he was walking alongside the river he heard a rustling in the bushes behind. As he turned to look, he saw a 7-foot grizzly bear charge towards him. He ran as fast as he could up the path. He looked over his shoulder and saw that the bear was closing in on him. He tried to run even faster, so scared that tears were coming to his eyes. He looked over his shoulder again and the bear was even closer. His heart was pumping frantically as he tried to run even faster, but he tripped and fell on the ground. He rolled over to pick himself up and saw the bear right on top of him raising his paw to kill him.

At that instant, he cried out "Oh My God!" Just then, time stopped. The bear froze, the forest was silent, the river even stopped moving. A bright light shone upon the man and a voice came out of the sky saying, "You deny my existence all these years, teach others I don't exist and even credit my creation to a cosmic accident and now do you expect me to help you out of this predicament? Am I to count you as a believer?"

The Unitarian, ever so proud, looked into the light and said, "It would be rather hypocritical to ask to be a Christian after all these years, but could you make the bear a Christian?" "Very well," said the voice.

As the light went out, the river ran, the sounds of the forest continued and the bear put his paw down. The bear then brought both paws together, bowed his head and said, "LORD, I THANK YOU FOR THIS FOOD WHICH I AM ABOUT TO RECEIVE."

There is a web site I recommend, with thousands of UU jokes available. (<http://www.sb.org/stoney/uujokes.html>) I am assuming that the man who created and maintains it is a Unitarian Universalist. I hope so, because if he is, he has the right attitude: a person who cares enough about his faith to poke fun at it. Who understands that questing, doubting and exploration—things we are quite serious about—are foundation stones of Unitarian Universalism, and therefore also subject to absurdity.

A Catholic was explaining to a Unitarian Universalist friend how dogma was formulated in the Catholic Church. "First it is debated by the Church authorities. Then, when the debate is ended, whatever was decided upon is declared dogma by the Pope."

"It's pretty much the same with us," said the UU.

"I thought you didn't have dogma."

"That's because no debate among UUs ever ends!"

For the members of any religion:
To have a few doubts is normal.

To have many doubts is a crisis of faith.
To have constant doubts is a conversion to Unitarian Universalism.

A visitor was asked afterward how she had liked the Unitarian Universalist church. “That was the darndest church I ever went to,” she said. “The only time I heard the name Jesus Christ was when the janitor fell down the stairs.”

And finally:

A UU was worried, and confided to another UU, “I want to invite a friend to the Sunday service, but our minister uses the J-word so much I’m afraid it will make my friend feel uncomfortable.”

“When has our minister ever mentioned Jesus?” asked the other.

“No, the other J-word. I meant ‘justice.’”

I invite you to visit the web site. I invite you to practice the religious discipline of seeing the absurd side of your life, in all its human triumphs and tragedies. I invite you to laugh compassionately at yourself and your cherished beliefs, so that you will have a perspective that keeps you from laughing unkindly at others.

Sources consulted

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