FOOLING AROUND
A sermon by Rev. Elizabeth L. Greene
Boise Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
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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)

Reading

Humanity has unquestionably one really effective weapon – laughter. Power, money, persuasion, supplication, persecution – these can lift at a colossal humbug – push it a little – weaken it a little, century by century; but only laughter can blow it to rags and atoms at a blast. Against the assault of laughter nothing can stand.

Mark Twain “Satan”, in “The Mysterious Stranger”

A couple had two little boys, ages 8 and 10, who were excessively mischievous. The two were always getting into trouble and their parents could be assured that if any mischief occurred in their town their two young sons were in some way involved.

The parents were at their wits end as to what to do about their sons' behavior. The mother had heard that a clergyman in town had been successful in disciplining children in the past, so she asked her husband if he thought they should send the boys to speak with the clergyman. The husband said, 'We might as well. We need to do something before I really lose my temper!' The clergyman agreed to speak with the boys, but asked to see them individually. The 8 year old went to meet with him first. The clergyman sat the boy down and asked him sternly, 'Where is God?' The boy made no response, so the clergyman repeated the question in an even stern tone, 'Where is God?' Again the boy made no attempt to answer. So the clergyman raised his voice even more and shook his finger in the boy's face, 'WHERE IS GOD?'

At that the boy bolted from the room and ran directly home, slamming himself in the closet. His older brother followed him into the closet and
asked what had happened. The younger brother replied, 'We are in BIG
trouble this time. God is missing and they think we did it.'

Sermon

It’s April Fool’s Day. There’s at least a minor joke that’s on me. True
story. After the newsletter came out, some people told me, with brighter
eyes than usual, that they were really looking forward to my April 1 service,
the one I called “Fooling Around” this year because of the day it happens. I
know people like the annual humor service, but there seemed to be unusual
overtones. Finally it hit me. “Fooling Around.” “No!” I had to tell them.
“I’m going to tell jokes, not talk about adultery.”

Either way, if you are new this morning, you might find it a little
unusual. A church reading that’s a joke?

Almost every year, we here at the Boise Unitarian Universalist
Fellowship devote one Sunday to humor. (OK, it was my idea, a long time
ago....) Here’s why we do it, in our church, in the face of the absolute truth
that life is genuinely serious, in the face of our spiritual responsibility to
reach out to each other in the many hard times that arise. We do it because
laughing is part of the human response to tragedy, existing hand in glove
with our tears. We do it because our egos need to be put in perspective.
And we do it because laughing binds us together in fellowship and joy,
reminding us that the root of the word religion is “religio,” “to bind
together.”

(For the record, I am not dealing with sarcastic or demeaning “humor”
in any of my remarks this morning. I would as soon they got put into their
correct category, which is a transparent attempt to dress up mean-
spiritedness as innocent fun. Ha.)

Is there any tragedy harder for humans than most deaths? I am
grieving two people just this week. And yet it does not disrespect those
dear deceased if I laugh at Woody Allen when he says, “I don’t have
anything against dying, I just don’t want to be there when it happens.” He
also said, “I don’t want to achieve immortality through my work... I
want to achieve it through not dying.”

As for the human tendency to let our egos get inflated, well, one
of religion’s sacred responsibilities is to remind us that we have much
to be humble about. It is bad for our souls to forget how little we
know, compared to Mystery, to the universe, to everything. You might
have heard about God and St. Peter’s conversation, after God had
commissioned Peter to take a survey to see how people were doing on
earth.
"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 Gomorrah. 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, 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 these things, we should reward those who only do it as I have prescribed. 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?

Here's another one that lifts up our tendency to think we're smarter than others, that we can get away with things.

At a local university, there were four sophomores taking chemistry and all of them had an "A" so far. These four friends were so confident that, the weekend before finals, they decided to visit some friends and have a big party. They had a great time but, after all the hearty partying they slept all day Sunday and didn't make it back to school until early Monday morning.

Rather than taking the final then, they decided that after the final, they would explain to their professor why they missed it. They said that they visited friends but on the way back they had a flat tire. As a result, they missed the final. The professor agreed they could make up the final the next day. The guys were excited and relieved. They studied that night for the exam.

The next day the professor placed them in separate rooms and gave
them a test booklet. They quickly answered the first problem worth 5 points. Cool, they thought! Each one in separate rooms, thinking this was going to be easy. ...Then they turned the page. On the second page was written....

For 95 points: Which tire? _________

And how about us? Unitarian Universalists? For a long time, UUs have prided ourselves on our rationality, on the fact that we apply our reason to religion, in ways other faiths may not. Sometimes, as we apply our intellect, we’ve lost sight of the truth that there are different kinds of knowing, that mind and spirit can exist just fine together. A couple of reminders to us.

There was a bad car accident. A woman is lying in the street, covered in blood, and someone in the crowd shouts, “Call a priest!”

The woman opens her eyes and asserts, “I’m a Unitarian.”

The bystander yells, “Call a math teacher!”

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At one Sunday morning service, in one of the very big Unitarian churches in Boston, a man was making a ruckus in the back pew. After every sentence the minister spoke, he would shout, "Amen! Hallelujah!" One of the ushers approached the man and spoke to him discreetly. "Sir, uh, we just don’t do things like that here." "But I got religion!" "You certainly didn’t get it here."

Before we leave the jokes that deal directly with religion, it is always instructive to look at bloopers appearing in church bulletins. Once we had an order of service which was supposed to list that we were to sing the song “Simple Gifts.” Our then-office manager, Ann, accidentally typed (and I didn’t catch in the proofreading), “Tis the Gift to Be Single.” Others:

Weight Watchers will meet at 7 PM at the First Presbyterian Church. Please use large double door at the side entrance.

The church will host an evening of fine dining, super entertainment and gracious hostility.

Eight new choir robes are currently needed due to the addition of several new members and to the deterioration of some older ones.
Please place your donation in the envelope along with the deceased person you want remembered.

Some jokes actually don’t address religiously significant human issues like death, pride and the human position in the universe. Some jokes are just funny because they have an unexpected twist that makes us laugh. Laughing together is itself a religious activity, binding us together in shared experience, in shared awareness of the absurdity of the human condition. Think of the Dalai Lama, and how he laughs every time he answers a hard question. Think of the cheerful Hindu elephant god Ganesha. Think of all those laughing Buddhas. Some things are just funny. This one came from a great book called Plato and a Platypus Walk Into a Bar, which teaches philosophical concepts—real ones—and uses jokes to illustrate.

An old cowboy goes into a bar and orders a drink. As he sits there sipping his whiskey, a young lady sits down next to him. She turns to the cowboy and asks, “Are you a real cowboy?”

He replies, “Well, I’ve spent my whole life on the ranch, herding horses, mending fences, and branding cattle, so I guess I am. What are you?”

She says, “I’m a lesbian. I spend my whole day thinking about women. As soon as I get up in the morning, I think about women. When I shower or watch TV, everything seems to make me think of women.”

A little while later, a couple sits down next to the old cowboy and asks him, “Are you a real cowboy?”

He replies, “I always thought I was, but I just found out I’m a lesbian.”

Something that often makes me laugh is what happens to our well-intentioned efforts to translate one language into another. The results really let us know how profound can be the differences among us, even when we think we’re talking about the same thing. The results can also end up pretty funny.

The Dairy Association’s huge success with the campaign "Got Milk?" prompted them to expand advertising to Mexico. It was soon brought to their attention the Spanish translation read "Are you lactating?"

Pepsi's "Come Alive With the Pepsi Generation," in Chinese translated into "Pepsi Brings Your Ancestors Back From the Grave".
Frank Perdue’s chicken slogan, “It takes a strong man to make a tender chicken” was translated into Spanish as “it takes an aroused man to make a chicken affectionate.”

There’s a category of funny-because-unexpected jokes that go by the unpronounceable name of paraprosdokians. They’re a lot better than their name, and they make us think, because the second part doesn’t follow the first in the way we think it will. Let us keep in mind that part of why we follow a religious or spiritual path is to have our world shaken up, to stay on the cutting edge of our perceptions, so that we may continue to grow.

A clear conscience is usually the sign of a bad memory.

The last thing I want to do is hurt you. But it’s still on the list. [Borderline mean spirited!]

There’s a fine line between cuddling and holding someone down so they can’t get away.

When tempted to fight fire with fire, remember that the Fire Department usually uses water.

Knowledge is knowing a tomato is a fruit; Wisdom is not putting it in a fruit salad.

The final “category” of jokes returns us to what day it is: April Fool’s Day. In ancient stories, Shakespeare, religious tales and modern kid jokes, the “fool” ends up being the wise person. The naïve, “ignorant,” unsophisticated person speaks, and a new light is cast on things.

When given the beginning of common sayings and asked to finish them, children came up with some pretty paraprosdokian-like wisdom.

Don’t bite the hand that looks dirty.

A miss is as good as a Mr.

The pen is mightier than the pigs.

A bird in the hand is going to poop on you.

Don’t put off till tomorrow what you put on to go to bed.

When the blind lead the blind get out of the way.
Here are some second-graders’ answers to questions about the very important issue of moms.

*Why did God make mothers?*

She's the only one who knows where the scotch tape is.

*What ingredients are mothers made of?*

God makes mothers out of clouds and angel hair and everything nice in the world and one dab of mean.

They had to get their start from men's bones. Then they mostly use string, I think.

*What kind of a little girl was your mom?*

I don't know because I wasn't there, but my guess would be pretty bossy.

*What did mom need to know about dad before she married him?*

His last name.

She had to know his background. Like is he a crook? Does he get drunk on beer?

Does he make at least $800 a year? Did he say NO to drugs and YES to chores?

*What would it take to make your mom perfect?*

On the inside she's already perfect. Outside, I think some kind of plastic surgery.

*If you could change one thing about your mom, what would it be?*

She has this weird thing about me keeping my room clean. I'd get rid of that.

I would like for her to get rid of those invisible eyes on the back of her head.
**Why did your mom marry your dad?**

She got too old to do anything else with him.

Sometimes our little “fools” unconsciously make pretty startling commentaries on church.

"Dear Lord," the pastor began, with arms extended and a rapturous look on his upturned face, "without you we are but dust..." He would have continued, but at that moment one inquisitive little girl leaned over to her mother and asked loudly, "Mommy, What IS butt dust?"

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A mother was asking her children as they were on the way to church service, "And why is it necessary to be quiet in church?" One of the kids replied, "Because people are sleeping."

Finally, we return to our Unitarian Universalist proud use of reason in the pursuit of our religion. Apparently, we adults pass this on to our kids. It seems that when one of our now-high-school-age youth was about nine years old, her mother asked her what she’d learned in Sunday School. "Well, Mom, our teacher told us how God sent Moses behind enemy lines on a rescue mission to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. When he got to the Red Sea, he had his army build a pontoon bridge and all the people walked across it. Then he sent bombers to blow up the bridge and all the Israelites were saved.

Mother thought for a moment, then asked, “Um, is that really what your teacher taught you?”

“Well, no, Mom. But if I told it the way the teacher did, you’d never believe it!”

**Closing Words**

May the light always find you on a dreary day,
When you need to be home, may you find your way.
May you always have courage to take a chance,
And never find FROGS in your underpants!
Sources consulted


Woody Allen quotations
http://www.quotationspage.com/quotes/Woody__Allen