

The Humor of Jesus
Matthew 17:24-27; Philippians 4:4-9

Hyattstown Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
April 8, 2018 (“Holy Humor Sunday”)

(Tell “The Biggest Liar” joke)

The Greeks of early Christianity began the custom of “Laughter Sunday”, following Easter Sunday. It was a way of celebrating God’s ultimate joke on Satan: the resurrection of Christ from the dead! The tradition has held up over the centuries, until now it has become known as “Holy Humor Sunday”. On this Second Sunday of Easter on the liturgical calendar, I’d like to pursue the subject by exploring “The Humor of Jesus”.

Allow me to further set the mood for “Holy Humor Sunday” by means of a couple “knock-knock” jokes. You know the routine, so please indulge me with your groans:

Knock-knock! (Who’s there?) Gladys! (Gladys who?) Glad it’s Sunday, aren’t you?

Knock-knock! (Who’s there?) Rita! (Rita who?) Read the Bible if you want to know the Good News!

Humor is tied to everything that is important in life, so it has an inevitably religious dimension. Jesus touched upon everything that is important in life, at least as it is recorded in the New Testament, so it is difficult to imagine that his three-year ministry knew no light-hearted give-and-take, no laughter, no humorous interactions. It is said that effective humor is a sign of high intelligence. Jesus’s intelligence is unquestioned, even by his detractors then and now. I have little doubt that it would be fun to hang around with Jesus!

Great humor often centers on the contradiction between our potential and our actual accomplishments...the disparity between the vision we have for ourselves and who we actually are. While we are intrigued by the mysteries of the universe and the nature of God, each day of existence is filled with the mundane of eating, working, playing, sleeping. We may be only a little lower than angels, but we are also only a little higher than worms.

Speaking of worms, and humor as a sign of intelligence, William Shakespeare, the Bard of Stratford, was a master of the sly jest. In “Antony and Cleopatra”, which Chris and I recently enjoyed at the Folger, Cleopatra rejects Caesar, preferring death by snakes (worms). An attendant blesses Cleopatra sarcastically: *“I wish for you all joy of the worm!”*

I have little doubt that it would have been fun to hang around with Will Shakespeare, when he wasn’t absorbed with his next masterpiece, just as I have little doubt that it would have been fun to hang around with Jesus, during the down times of his travels.

A few years ago I made pastoral calls to a rehabilitation center where church member Nancy was in therapy following surgery. On one occasion, two other women were in the common area, apparently observing our jovial, light-hearted visit. Nancy reported later that one of the women asked about me. Nancy revealed that I was her minister. The woman’s response was something like: “He doesn’t look and act like a minister!”

What’s a minister supposed to look like? What’s a minister supposed to act like? Have we not been duped by the stereotypical portrayal of clergy and Christians as genuine only if they are stern, austere, unsmiling creatures of a joyless nature? As we journey with Christ through highs and lows of life, are we permitted no laughter along the way?

It is in a letter to devoted followers in Corinth that Paul speaks to this very perception: *“We have become a spectacle to the world...we are fools for the sake of Christ!”* And later, to the congregation in Philippi: *“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice!...Keep on doing the things you have learned...and the God of peace will be with you!”* If you are not experiencing some genuine joy, if you are not having some fun, you do not understand and know the whole person Jesus.

The highly respected Quaker theologian Elton Trueblood wrote some 30 books, among them one entitled *The Humor of Christ*. He said that he wanted to challenge the conventionalized picture of a Christ who never laughed. He argued that “there are numerous passages in the recorded teaching which are practically incomprehensible when regarded as

sober prose, but which are luminous once we become liberated from the assumption that Christ never joked”.

In a more recent book entitled similarly, *The Humor of Jesus*, Presbyterian preacher Earl Palmer claims that Jesus was the greatest humorist of all time, for three reasons:

- 1) Jesus is a great humorist because of the breadth of what he knows about reality. He understands what is going on in life better than anyone else does.
- 2) Jesus is a great humorist because he is good to the core, and effective humor always has its source in the good surprise of grace.
- 3) Jesus is a great humorist because he is the most *normal* human being we've known. He is clear-headed, with a remarkable vision of reality. He is both the most normal man *and* the Son of God!

To say that Jesus is the most normal one, is to say that the Sadducees, the Pharisees, the Essenes, the Zealots, the Romans...all the religious and civil authorities of his time...were the true oddballs; stuck on themselves, protective of their positions in society, promoters of the status quo, intoxicated with power. Jesus frequently took light-hearted swipes at their arrogance and conceit.

The brief passage in Matthew 17, is but one example. The tax for the maintenance of the Temple was an institutional practice entrenched for centuries. As a good Jew, Jesus would honor it, in particular because the priests hoped to prove his disloyalty. But he couldn't let the encounter pass without jesting with Peter that he could find all the money they would need to meet the obligation by pursuing his craft as a fisherman: "Pull up the first fish you hook, and in its mouth, you will find a coin worth enough for my temple tax and yours".

Notice there is no indication in the story that Peter ever followed through with that result. Was Jesus by some miracle going to imbed a coin in the mouth of a fish, the very fish that would find its way to Peter's line? Jesus was making light of an oppressive, unjust system that

he would on another occasion disrupt in a most public, violent manner. For now, he mocks the rules of the religious authorities. The humor of Jesus!

Chapters in Palmer's book go on to explore the varied ways in which Jesus, the most *normal* human being of all time, *and* the Son of God, uses intelligent humor to teach us the truths of life: The Humor of the Unexpected...The Humor of Misunderstanding...The Humor of Exaggeration...The Humor of Irony...of Argument...of Love...of Joy.

Steve Bilynsky, pastor of Valley Covenant Church in Oregon, places the humor of Jesus in theological context:

"The validity of Christian humor is confirmed forever in God's best joke. Some of the early church fathers thought it was a joke on Satan. The most wonderful and humorous irony in history is the great reversal at the end of the Gospel story. The joke's on and for everyone. Death is not the end, but life. The greatest one liner ever told is "Christ is risen!"

Jesus understood reality, inside and out, better than anyone else!

Jesus is good to the core, the source of the great surprise of Grace!

Jesus is the most clear-headed, normal human being known to us!

And the intelligent, fun-loving, normal guy that he is, Jesus would appreciate the humor in the foolishness of our best intentions:

(Tell the story of my joining the table of strangers at Dylan's graduation brunch)

He doesn't act like a minister! She doesn't act like a Christian!

They have too much fun at that church! Don't they know the real Jesus?

As we journey with Christ through highs and lows of life, are we permitted no laughter along the way?