

**The Joke Is on Satan!
Matthew 17:24-27**

**Hyattstown Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
April 19, 2020 (“Holy Humor Sunday”)**

In early Christianity, it was the Greeks who began the custom of “Laughter Sunday”, immediately following Easter Sunday. It was their way of celebrating what they considered to be 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”. This is our third “Holy Humor Sunday”, and it could not be more timely than now, considering our need for a good laugh or two while practicing the isolation that the coronavirus has imposed upon all of us.

Jesus touched upon almost 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 banter walking along with the twelve, no laughter with the crowds. It is said that effective humor is a sign of high intelligence, and Jesus’s intelligence is unquestioned, even by his detractors. Can’t you imagine Jesus breaking into a broad smile, or maybe enjoying a giggle or two with a child on his lap? I have little doubt that it would have been fun to hang around with Jesus! Quite a contrast, isn’t it, with what most of us learned as children, that the church sanctuary was no place for laughter or fun!

It is in Chapter 3 of the Old Testament book Ecclesiastes that we read: “For everything there is a season...a time to weep, and a time to laugh”. And it is in the New Testament, in the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Corinthians that we read: “We are fools for Christ!”

“Laughter Sunday” comes at the right time: Following the empty tomb, and during yet another plague of Biblical proportions.

Elton Trueblood, the beloved and respected Quaker theologian, wrote the book *The Humor of Christ* as a challenge to the conventional picture of a Christ who never laughed. Trueblood argued that “there are numerous passages in Jesus’s teachings which are practically

incomprehensible when regarded as sober prose, but which are luminous once we become liberated from the assumption that Christ never joked". Jesus frequently took light-hearted swipes at the arrogance of the Sadducees, the Pharisees, the Essenes, the Zealots, even the Romans. The brief passage in Matthew 17, is but one example:

"When Jesus and his disciples came to Capernaum, the collectors of the temple tax came to Peter and asked, 'Does your teacher pay the temple tax'. 'Of course,' Peter answered. When Peter went into the house, Jesus spoke up first, 'Simon, what is your opinion? Who pays duties or taxes to the kings of this world? The citizens of the country, or the foreigners?' 'The foreigners,' answered Peter. 'Well then,' replied Jesus, 'that means that the citizens don't have to pay. But we don't want to offend these people. So go to the lake and drop in a line. Pull up the first fish you hook, and in its mouth you will find a coin worth enough for my temple tax and yours. Take it and pay them our taxes.'"

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 that there is no indication in the story that Peter ever followed through by going to the lake to try to catch such a fish. 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, by the way on a later occasion, he would disrupt in a most public, violent manner. For now, he is satisfied to mock the rules of the religious authorities.

The humor of Christ! A time to weep...and a time to laugh! Fools for Christ!

(INVITE THE CONGREGATION'S HUMOR, introduced by the WP cartoon of a ZOOM meeting)

On “Laughter Sunday”...on “Holy Humor Sunday”, allow Rev. Steve Bilynsky of Valley Covenant Church in Oregon to put the humor of Jesus in theological context:

“God’s best joke was a joke on Satan. The most humorous irony in history is the great reversal at the end of the Gospel story. Death is not the end... life is. The greatest one liner ever told is ‘Christ is risen!’”

So, let all the people exclaim: “Christ is risen! Yeah!!”