

When God Laughs and Plays

Acts of the Apostles 20: 7-12

A Sermon Preached by Lou Snead

On June 24, 2007

Today I want to resurrect with you a little-known church tradition that has been rarely been exercised in Presbyterian churches that I am aware of but that I believe needs to be recovered among Christians who are serious about our faith in God. This tradition is known as “Laughter Sunday” or “Holy Humor Sunday”. The roots of this Laughter Sunday go back to the Slavic Orthodox church with its Lateran mass that begins with a call to rejoice in God’s goodness and that was then picked up by the Lutheran church during the Reformation period. Martin Luther is still fondly remembered by many Lutherans as having said “if there is no laughter in heaven, then I don’t want to go there.”

So, word has it that some Lutheran churches adopted a Sunday during the church year to celebrate God’s gift of laughter and to indulge in a little human frivolity. Originally this “Laughter Sunday” was celebrated on the fourth Sunday in Lent when everyone was getting tired of eating fish and giving up their favorite vice; the season of Lent has a way of making Christians feel like a group of recovering alcoholics at an AA meeting who all desperately need a smoke to help them cope with their addiction. As I understand it, this tradition got lost for a long time in the Lutheran church, at least until the humorist , Garrison Keillor, came along to help Lutherans see themselves as they really are. But, thankfully some Lutherans back in the early 1990’s remembered this European tradition and Laughter Sunday began to re-emerge as a Sunday where folks in the church could come and tell jokes and laugh out loud and make fun of ourselves so that, as the Apostle Paul said, we appear to be “fools for Christ’s sake”. Thinking that this tradition might fit in well here with our congregation, I decided it might be good to try to introduce this lost tradition of Laughter Sunday into our summer-time liturgical calendar and see if it would tickle our funny bone enough to do at least once a year.

The immediate challenge, of course, was to find appropriate Scripture passages that would illustrate either God’s sense of humor or the early church’s ability to laugh at ourselves. I found both in the Bible which I have included as scripture readings for today- Psalm 2:4 and Acts 20: 7-12. I hope you heard the Psalmist say that “God sits in heaven in derision and laughs”. There are actually a number of places in the Bible where God is described as having a good laugh. And I have found a good deal of subtle humor in the bible that most of us miss because we often read scripture with spiritual intensity and moral up-tightness. Let me read to you a story from the Book of the Acts of the Apostles that describes what happened to a young man, named Eutychus, who came to hear the Apostle Paul holding a discussion about Jesus with a group of folks one evening. This was a night church meeting in the upstairs room of a house and Paul was preaching. Listen for the Word of God in this odd story.

Like most preachers I find great consolation in this story about a young man who dozed off when the Apostle Paul was preaching. I have watched some of you in this congregation doze off during my sermons from time to time. As far as I know, however, no one has been injured yet from being put to sleep by one of my sermons. Here's my question- why do you think that Luke included this story in his account of the development of the early church? Was Luke wanting to embarrass the Apostle Paul and make preachers more aware of how a long sermon negatively impacts listeners? Or, was Luke trying to comfort congregations during his day and into the future who would read this story so that all of you might say, "yes, it's tough to try to stay awake during a long sermon and I can sleep through the sermon without anyone knowing it" In either case, I'm fascinated by the last line in this account of Euthychus falling out of a window while Paul was preaching. When they ran down to the street and found that the young man was ok, Paul returned to his preaching. When all the worry about the young man was over, Luke ends the story by saying that Paul went off to do more preaching and those assembled there "took the boy away alive and were not a little concerned (NRSV)". Other translations of the Greek suggest that the congregation went away "full of life", "immensely relieved", and maybe laughing about what had happened.

I remember a number of times when God decided that a congregation needed a little spontaneous laughter in worship at church. When I was a seminary intern in a Presbyterian church in upstate New York, I was one of two students who worked with that church and helped to lead the worship services. My classmate was a little more serious of a Christian than I was at the time, although I have become much more serious over the years as you all know. He wanted to distinguish himself as a would-be preacher and pastor, so he was in the habit of wearing a clergy preaching collar with a dignified black preaching gown whenever he was leading worship. He had an air of pompous piety about himself when he went to the pulpit to lead prayers, to introduce hymns, or to preach. On one Sunday my fellow student intern gave a children's sermon about the different meanings of time we find in the bible- he used a large wind-up alarm clock to illustrate his point and put it back under the pulpit at the end of his talk with the children. The service progressed on and he later went back to the pulpit to offer the prayers of the people after the pastor had preached a rather long sermon. Just as he started his prayer by asking God to wake us up the movement of the Holy Spirit in our midst, that alarm clock suddenly went off, much like the walkie-talkie did last Sunday when I was preaching. As he fumbled around trying to turn the alarm off while continuing to pray I got tickled and the pastor got tickled and before we knew it the whole congregation was sitting with heads bowed and bellies shaking in restrained snickering, until one old guy in the congregation couldn't keep it hidden and he burst out laughing.

I couldn't help but remember that day what Reinhold Niebuhr, the famous theologian of the mid 20th century, had noted when he said- "Humor is a prelude to faith and laughter is the beginning of prayer." Karl Barth, who most Presbyterians think is the last great theologian of our time, claimed that laughter is the closest thing we experience in life to the grace of God. So, why is it that Christians seem to have so much trouble laughing and rejoicing and playing when we are together as the church? Maybe Voltaire was right

when he said that “God is a comedian playing to an audience that is often afraid to laugh”.

Even the classically trained pianist, Victor Borger, who turned his musical abilities into humorous exhibitions, realized that, as he said - “Laughter is the shortest distance between two people”. Even those who we do not normally think of being humorous have discovered the importance of laughter in our lives. Take JFK for instance. He said, “There are three things which are real – God, human folly, and laughter. The first two are beyond our comprehension so we do what we can with the third.”

The Biblical faith gives us a lot of encouragement to laugh and play as a way of honoring the life that God has given to us-

“A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones” Prov. 17.

“When we recognize God’s blessings our mouth is filled with laughter and our tongue with shouts of joy”. Psalm 126

Even the rock and roll group U2 had a theological song that claimed that laughter comes from God.

There are at least 42 places in the bible that speak about the importance of laughter to the human soul- all of these references come from seven root Hebrew and Greek words meaning “to be entertained, jesting, mocking, celebrating, joking, playing, rejoicing, smiling, and being scornful.”

I don’t know why the church has often given the impression that we must shun humor or laughter as an expression of our faith in God. Maybe it’s because we worry that too much laughter, or frequent expressions of humor, will imply that we think life is a trivial matter rather than a sacred gift. I know from my experience growing up in the church that most people thought that the appropriate response of faith was reverence for God, when we were worshipping with heads bowed, hands folded and in quiet prayer. Laughter was considered to be sacrilegious frivolity.

No one bothered to point out the role of humor and laughter in the bible stories that we professed to hold sacred. Like the story of God talking with Abraham and Sarah when they were told that they would have a child when he was a hundred years old and his wife was 92. Sarah laughs when Abraham delivers this news he has received from God. God asks her why she laughed at the prospects of what God had promised to do. It’s a scene reminiscent of the TV show *All in the Family*. Sarah says then with some fear of God, I didn’t laugh when Abraham told me this. God says, “Yes, you did”. “No, I didn’t laugh, I may have snickered”. “Oh yes, you did laugh”. So, when they did have this unexpected child, guess what they named their little boy? They decided to call him - Laughter.

From what I heard in the church of my youth it was easy to get the idea that God only shows up in the pain and struggles of life. But, I can still recall the first time in a church when I heard a Presbyterian minister quote Mark Twain by noting that “laughter is God’s hand on the shoulder of a troubled world”.

Years later I read one of the most famous Presbyterian ministers of the past generation who claimed that faith and humor both function as gifts from God to help us deal with the ambiguities and contradictions that human beings experience in life. Humor helps us to see the ironies in life and even pokes fun at some of the things we believe. The *Far Side* cartoons are some of my favorite examples of this kind of humor. I have one on the door of my church office that depicts a man up above the clouds with a halo around his head who is standing among a host of pigs with halos around their heads. The caption says, "Through some unfortunate celestial error, Ernie is sent to Hog Heaven."

There is no doubt in my mind that laughter is good for the soul. Humor has a universal appeal and maybe a spiritual dimension that we often neglect to embrace. I know that humor and laughter can be redemptive when we find life being difficult. This realization was expressed by the great silent movie comic, Charlie Chaplin, who said, "To be able to truly laugh we must be able to take our pain and play with it."

So, does anyone here today have a good joke to tell or a funny story to share? We need to laugh and get in touch with the joy of life that God has given to us.