

Humor: A Divine Gift
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Ecclesiastes 3: 1-8
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I have officiated at hundreds of weddings over the years. Some stand out in my memory. One of those was of a service for a young couple whom I did not know since they were not members of the church. I was doing the ceremony as a favor for their pastor, who was out of town and not available for their special day.

The bride-to-be was a lovely, bright, hard-charging Wall Street Day Trader and her handsome and charming fiancé was in his last year of law school. They were a delightful couple and I enjoyed getting to know them. But, midway through the premarital sessions I gained a distinct awareness that the couple viewed the ceremony as a mere prelude to the party afterward. The more we talked about the service—the words to be used; the promises to be offered; and the meaning it might hold for them and their guests—the more I understood that they were merely trying to get through the service with as little fuss as possible so that they could get to the really important part of partying with their friends and family. And, in my mind, limit the impact of the ceremony.

So, at our last session together, I stopped our discussions for just a moment to make a point, “I want you to know,” I said, “in every wedding I have officiated, there was a moment when God’s very presence was felt” I could see by their bemused smiles that my words had little meaning for them. They didn’t offer a response but I could tell they were thinking, “Yeah right!”

To emphasize the point, I repeated my claim and offered that in their service they would feel as though they were on holy ground before God.

Now, I could see they were becoming a little concerned about their substitute pastor and wondering if I was warning them that I would start speaking in tongues before their astonished guests.

So, I dropped it. But privately offered a small prayer that God might provide a special moment in the wedding ceremony to touch their hearts in a surprising way, and bring home my point.

The day of the wedding dawned bright. The setting could not have been more beautiful. We were in the back lawn of a spectacular 200 year old estate. Rows of white chairs with white ribbons were arranged under the canopy of trees offering a stunning space of sanctuary that was as beautiful as any great cathedral in the world.

The wedding was lovely. Love was in the air. Everyone was happy (which is not always the case I must say). The guests were truly taken with their loved ones’ affection for one another and delighted in their union. The whole service went smoothly and without a hitch... until the very end. And that’s when it happened. God made an appearance.

This time, the Holy moment occurred when I told the newly married couple, “You may kiss.”

With those words the couple smiled at me and turned to each other...and... *I swear to you that this is true*...as their lips touched...dozens of birds who were apparently watching from their perch upon high burst into song!

Everyone gasped!

The couple pulled back from one another in astonishment! Then they turned to me as if I might have an explanation...to which I shrugged my shoulders as if to say, "I told you so!!"

Then, as they resumed their embrace as the guests laughed in delight, I gave God an imaginary High Five!

What a delightful way to crash a party!

I tell you this story to make a point. Humor is a divinely inspired gift. Think of it. Is there anything more pleasing than a room full of people laughing; when all are surprised by something wonderfully touching and they are fully taken up by a sense of joy?

Humor helps us come together as a people. It has a way of grounding us, providing perspective that is desperately needed for times like these. Humor helps us endure tough times, because it brings balance to life.

This is of course the point of the writer of Ecclesiastes.

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: ²a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to break down, and a time to build up; ⁴a time to weep, and a time to laugh...God made everything suitable for its time.

Surely we have plenty to feel sad about, concerned about, or fearful of in these rather trying days. Where do we find the balance we desperately long for? Our faith provides many gifts of God's Grace to show us the way. One of them is humor.

Where have we gotten this idea: that our faith has to be so utterly serious? That church cannot be fun and filled with laughter and celebration?

Religion is typically seen as dour, finger-wagging, and way too serious by non-believers and maybe even by some of us. Yet it was not meant to be this way! John Wesley, founder of the United Methodist church once said, "A sour religion is the devil's religion".

There have been bright spots. Churches in the fifteenth century used to celebrate the Sunday after Easter as *Risus Pas chalis* or "God's Joke"; the "Easter Laugh"—in other words Easter was seen as God having the last laugh over death and evil. As a part of this service, the priests would deliberately include light hearted stories and jokes in their sermons. After the service, people would gather to play practical jokes on one another or tell funny stories. I could just imagine them offering the right hand of fellowship with hidden joy buzzers in hand!

It may come as no surprise that the observance of this holiday was officially outlawed by Pope Clement X in the seventeenth century. There was far too much fun being had in church I guess and so it was clamped down. What a shame! Humor belongs in church because it brings balance.

Honestly, that is one of the reasons why I love serving all of you...you are quick to laugh! Even at things I didn't expect to be so funny! For me, the sound of a congregation really laughing is the song of a spirit filled people who are open and ready to embrace all of life and one another.

Humor and grace go together. Being convinced that God loves us just as we are is all the more meaningful; so we can see clearly just how absurd we can all be at times.

Not surprisingly, the root word for “humor” in Latin is “earth” or “down to earth.” It is the same root for the word *humility*. Humor allows us to take a look, an honest and unflinching look at ourselves, to see our most basic of needs and frailties that we carry with us and to recognize where we have been blessed in those places.

In the book *Clowning in Rome*, the late Henri Nouwen wrote about all that he observed and experienced on a six month visit to Rome. In it he wrote these words about the circus, and the church, and life.

“The real story was told by the clowns. Clowns are not the center of events. They appear between the great acts, fumble and fall, and make us smile again after the tensions created by the heroes we came to admire. We respond to the clowns not with amazement but with understanding, not with tensions but with laughter. Of the heroes we can say, ‘How do they do that?’ Of the clowns we say, ‘They are like us.’ The clowns remind us with a tear and a smile that we have the same weaknesses. Thus whenever the clowns appear we are reminded that what really counts is something more than the spectacular and the sensational. It is what happens between the scenes.”

Friends, we live, most of our lives, between the great scenes, in all the incongruities and inconsistencies and ambiguities of life, and if we look at those scenes with divine eyes, with the gentle eyes of faith, we will be able to laugh. And we need to laugh because deep down we know that life is often like a three-ring circus, one irony piled on another, one hardship and heartache after another, and humor is one way that the human spirit responds to such things.

Our faith proclaims this truth. Paul called the cross “foolishness” and claimed that, “When I am weak then I am strong.” He also said, “The foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom.” The ability to laugh at ourselves, even life itself, is a recognition of the absurdity of a puffed up ego that cannot laugh at itself.

Yes, there’s more than laughter; humor is inadequate by itself to deal with the great scenes and the ultimate incongruities. We need faith, trust in the One who overcomes the harshness and brings light to the shadows of this world. Trust and perspective that proclaims, “For everything there is a season and a time for every purpose under heaven.”

And so, as we live out this claim, let us take a moment to smile at one another, and maybe share a laugh or two in God’s name as we continue our journey together.

Listen for the birds to let their song remind you.