

November 24, 2011

Thanksgiving Day

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Genesis 17:15-17; 18:9-15; 21:1-7

Colossians 3:12-17

Luke 12:22-32

A Good Laugh

Many years ago I came across a bit of wisdom that impressed me—and stuck with me. I can't recall whether it was a psychologist or a theologian or simply a person with a lot of common sense—but what they said has the ring of truth. This person suggested that two of the best, healthiest and most invigorating things we can do are:

1. To sing with a group
2. To share laughter together

Simple as that: to sing and to laugh—it works for me!

Now the church certainly promotes and sustains singing with a group—Thanks be to God! The church is one of the few places where we consistently come together to join in song. Our worship life would be greatly diminished without singing.

So I am very thankful for the blessing of singing—and also for the blessing of laughter. Laughter is a good thing anywhere, but I am particularly grateful for the presence of laughter in the life of our congregations. It was not always so. There was a time when laughter in church was seen as irreverent—not nearly as solemn or serious as we ought to be. Yet it was a serious theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, who observed: “The very essence of sin is to take ourselves too seriously.”

If taking ourselves way too seriously is sinful, laughter is a gracious antidote. Laughter allows us to own and admit our shortcomings without being overwhelmed by them.

Bishop William Willimon has said: “Human beings are the only animals who both laugh and weep—for we are the only animals who are struck with the difference between the way things are and the way things ought to be.” That gap can be the occasion for profound tears, but also for hilarious laughter.

Laughter is an indicator of health and vitality. Several years ago at St. James we engaged a consultant to work with us on a capital campaign. The steering committee was gathered at church for an initial planning session. When the consultant came into the meeting he said, “Well, I can tell this is a healthy congregation, because I could hear all of you laughing even before I came in the door.” These days it's not unusual to hear laughter in the course of a worship service—or even at a funeral, as sweet and joyful memories are shared.

It's not a matter of laughing at anybody—humor can be cruel at times—but rather laughing with one another (and with God.)

Martin Luther once said: “The one thing the devil can't bear is laughter.” Why? Because laughter is the fruit of a people living in grace and joy, instead of guilt and despair.

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Now, you wouldn't describe the Bible as a humorous book—there's no shortage of sorrow and suffering and violence and vanity and betrayal. Yet there's more laughter than some may think.

In a technical, literary sense, the bible is, after all, a Comedy—that is, there is a joyful ending to the story, where everything is finally sorted out. The scriptures are not a collection of jokes and one-liners—intended to amuse.

Instead, like Dante's Divine Comedy, the Bible tells a story that inspires and edifies. Many Shakespearean comedies end with a wedding that resolves all the previous conflicts and confusions. The scriptures describe heaven as a wedding feast that has no end.

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Now some people have a hard time picturing Jesus laughing. After all, Christ is our Lord and Savior—and our Judge. But consider some of the outrageous things that Jesus actually said: as a warning against judging others: “First take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye.” Imagine what Saturday Night Live might do with this scenario! “You strain out a gnat, but swallow a camel.” Jesus used humor, in the form of absurd hyperbole, to make his point. Jesus also said, “Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.” Jesus promises us the happiest of unlikely endings.

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Or try keeping a straight face while reading a few chapters in Proverbs. For example:

- “It is better to meet a mother bear robbed of her cubs, than to meet some fool busy with a stupid project.”
- “Smart people keep quiet about what they know, but stupid people advertise their ignorance.” (Politicians take note!)
- “The lazy man stays at home. He says a lion might get him if he goes outside.”
- “Beauty in a woman without good judgment is like a gold ring in a pig’s snout.” (Didn’t somebody talk about a pit bull with lipstick?)

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Or consider Abraham and Sarah, our parents in faith. Those two certainly had their trials and struggles—Moments fraught with fear and trembling. (Like when God told Abraham to sacrifice his only son.) Yet the story of the birth of Isaac is almost like an episode from the TV show, “All in the Family,” as we heard in our first reading from Genesis. Picture Archie Bunker as Abraham, and Edith Bunker as his devoted wife, Sarah.

God tells Abraham, who is 100 years old, that Sarah, who is (only) 90, is going to bear him a son. What does Abe do? He falls on his face laughing at the sheer absurdity of such a notion—“God, you’ve got to be kidding!!”

When Sarah gets wind of this unlikely promise, she also has a good laugh. God hears her laughing and wonders why. In fear of offending the Almighty, Sarah denies that she laughed. But God says, “O, yes you did.” (And He doesn’t seem to mind a bit.)

So when the child is finally born, what can they name him but Isaac, which means “Laughter”? The child of promise is Laughter.

And Sarah concludes, “God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.” And so we do. Down through the generations we laugh with Abraham and Sarah at our human frailties—and God’s great goodness.

Frederick Buechner says of Abraham and Sarah: “They laughed because it suddenly dawned on them that the wildest dreams they’d ever had hadn’t been half wild enough.”

As the saying goes: If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans.

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If human shortcomings and contradictions and vanity are the basis for most humor, the Bible is a rich source for material.

Week by week we gather together to confess our sins, to own up to the error of our stubborn, selfish ways—and in so doing, it becomes possible to laugh at ourselves as well. Thank God we can laugh as well as cry! Seriously!

Humor has a unique capacity to disarm our defenses, and open our eyes and our hearts to the way things truly are. Humor is spiritually subversive, in a healthy and constructive way. It's like daring to say that the emperor has no clothes—and neither do we.

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Ecclesiastes assures there's a season for everything: a time to weep and a time to laugh. Living together in the church, we learn to weep with those who weep—and laugh with those who laugh.

Will Willimon reminds us that, "All laughter occurs in the space between what is and what ought to be!" Which, if you think about it, is where most of us spend a good deal of time.

Of course, life isn't a joke—but laughter is an appropriate and healing response to much of what life brings our way (and what we often bring on ourselves.) To be able to laugh at our own foibles is to see ourselves as our Creator surely does: As incomplete, obstinate, foolhardy, cantankerous and under-achieving—and at the same time, beloved heirs of a marvelous promise.

So, we laugh at and with the likes of Charlie Chaplin, Laurel and Hardy, Sven and Oly, and Abraham and Sarah—because we see our story in theirs.

Humor has a way of putting us in our rightful place, and our place is all in the same boat. To be sure, we don't go through life laughing all the way, but it would be a very dismal journey that included no laughter.

It's the grace of God that puts joy in our hearts, and sets us free to let go and enjoy a really good, eyes-watering, belly laugh. And we can all be thankful for that!

Our Psalm today, (#126) reminds us that together we are living God's holy comedy, where the joyous ending is blessedly assured—and laughter even becomes a form of praise: "When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, then we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy."

There's no use pretending that life can be lived without grief and suffering, yet God's promise is sure: "Those who sow in tears will reap with shouts of joy."

On this Thanksgiving Day, when most of us will be filling our mouths with all sorts of delectable things—may our mouths also be filled with joyous and grateful laughter.

Amen.