

**Philippians 4:4-7**

**Psalm 126**

**April 3, 2016**

***The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper***

*Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC*

## **A TIME TO LAUGH**

***Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.***

From time to time, Lee Woodard entertains us in Opening Assembly with what he calls “Beings Human.” Lee gives us a light-hearted start to our Sunday morning by telling a few jokes (many of which are real groaners!).

Every time Lee shares “Beings Human,” he reads Proverbs 15:13 from Eugene Peterson’s translation of the Bible called *The Message*: “A cheerful heart brings a smile to your face; a sad heart makes it hard to get through the day.”

As people who have heard wonderful news from the angels – “Behold, I bring you good news of great joy for all the people; to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior” (Luke 2:10-11) and “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.” (Luke 24:5) – we can certainly be glad and rejoice without a guilty conscience. [I really wanted to say we **should** be glad and rejoice, but that seemed kind of heavy and obligatory. But that’s what I think!]

St. Augustine, the 4<sup>th</sup> century bishop and theologian, said, “A Christian should be an alleluia from head to foot!”

Martin Luther, the 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformer, wrote, “If you’re not allowed to laugh in heaven, I don’t want to go there” and “You have as much laughter as you have faith.”

Our forefather in the Presbyterian faith, John Calvin, reminds us that “We are nowhere forbidden to laugh.”

And Elton Trueblood, a 20<sup>th</sup> century American Quaker theologian and author, and chaplain to Harvard and Stanford, warned, “Never trust a theologian who doesn’t have a sense of humor.”

Yet, we Presbyterians have the reputation of being rather dour Christians. Surely you’ve heard us referred to as the “Frozen Chosen.” The Right Reverend William A. Brown, Bishop of the Southern Episcopal Diocese of Virginia in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, once told a Calvinist clergyman, “A Presbyterian will do anything an Episcopalian would. He just wouldn’t

enjoy it.” H. L. Mencken, a journalist and satirist in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, once defined Puritanism as “the haunting fear that someone, somewhere may be happy.” Somebody edited Mencken’s phrase and described a Calvinist Presbyterian as “someone who lies awake at night worrying that someone, somewhere may be having a good time.”

Which reminds me of the man who, instead of lying awake at night worrying, had trouble staying awake in church. One particular Sunday, Gladys attended church services. The sermon seemed to go on forever and many in the congregation fell asleep. After the service, to be social, Gladys walked up to a very sleepy looking gentleman and, in an attempt to revive him from his stupor, extended her hand in greeting and said, “Hello, I’m Gladys Dunn.” “You’re not the only one,” said the man.

Speaking of long sermons, did you hear about the young minister who stood in the pulpit, looked out at the congregation, and noticed that the General Presbyter from the presbytery was in attendance? The new minister preached for all he was worth that day. After the service was over, the minister was shaking hands with the General Presbyter. “How did you like my sermon?” asked the young minister. “Young man, it was like the peace and mercy of God,” said the General Presbyter. As the young minister started to puff up with pride, the General Presbyter continued, “It was like God’s peace in that it passed all understanding and it was like God’s mercy in that I thought it would endure forever.”

Speaking of God’s peace, mercy, and mighty acts, today’s psalm reminds us why God’s people have reason to laugh and rejoice: “When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy.” (Psalm 126:1-2) Why laugh and shout for joy? Because the Lord has done great things for us, and we rejoiced.

But today’s psalm isn’t just about what God has done for God’s people in the past, as if that wasn’t enough. God’s future holds the promise of turning tears into joy and weeping into shouts of joy. (Psalm 126:5-6) “Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.”

Last Sunday, we heard about Mary Magdalene “going out weeping” to the tomb early on a Sunday morning because her Lord was dead. At the end of the story, however, we heard about Mary Magdalene “going home with shouts of joy” as she excitedly shared the good news with the disciples, “I have seen the Lord!”

The psalmist talks about God restoring the fortunes of Zion being a reason for laughter and shouts of joy. This Easter season is all about God

restoring our fortunes by his grace and mercy through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

Speaking of God's grace, did you hear the one about the man who died and went to heaven? St. Peter met him at the pearly gates and said, "Here's how it works. You need 100 points to make it into heaven. You tell me all the good things you've done, and I give you a certain number of points for each deed, depending on how good it was. When you reach 100 points, you get in."

"Okay," said the man. "I was married to the same woman for 50 years and never cheated on her, even in my heart." St. Peter said, "That's wonderful. That's worth three points." "Only three points?" asked the man. "Well, I attended church all my life and supported its ministry with my tithe and service." "Terrific," said St. Peter, "that's certainly worth a point." "One point!" cried the man. "Okay, how about this? I started a soup kitchen in my city and worked in a shelter for homeless veterans." "Fantastic," said St. Peter. "That's two more points." "TWO POINTS!" shouted the man. "At this rate, the only way I'm gonna get into heaven is by the grace of God." St. Peter smiled and said, "Come on in!"

The old saying goes, "If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans." God must have a sense of humor – after all, he created us and the hippopotamus! But God pulled a good one on Abraham and Sarah when he promised them they would have a child in their old age. Sarah was eavesdropping behind the tent flap, and when she heard God's promise, she laughed to herself and said, "After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?" When God asked Abraham why Sarah laughed and doubted his promise, Sarah denied it and said, "I did not laugh," because she was afraid. But God said, "No, but you did laugh!" And when old Sarah gave birth to the child of the promise, he was named "Isaac," which means laughter. Sarah said, "God has brought me laughter. All who hear about this will laugh with me. Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse a baby? Yet I have given Abraham a son in his old age!" (Genesis 18:12-15 and 21:6-7)

As the note in the bulletin says, today is known as Bright Sunday or Holy Humor Sunday, with roots in the ancient Christian tradition of continuing our Easter celebration with "days of joy and laughter," because Easter was God's practical joke on the devil by raising Jesus from the dead.

Speaking of death and resurrection, did you hear about the three ministers who were sitting in a local coffee shop talking about death and dying? One of them asked, "What do you want people to say about you at your funeral?" The Presbyterian minister said, "I'd want people to say, 'He

was a great and compassionate humanitarian who cared about those in need.” The Methodist minister said, “I’d like for people to say, ‘She was a good mother and wife, a woman whose life was a fine example for others to follow.’” The Baptist minister said, “I’d like for people to remember me for my fine sermons and church growth.” An old farmer sitting at the next table over was listening to everything the ministers were saying. He leaned over and said, “That’s all well and good, preachers, but I’d rather hear ‘em say, ‘Look, he’s breathing!’”

The psalmist says laughter and joy come because God has restored his peoples’ fortunes. And, the psalmist says, weeping will turn into shouts of joy when God restores our fortunes in the future. That’s the Easter message! Because of what God has done in the past in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we can live confidently in the present and for the future.

So, what can we do in response to this laugh-inspiring, joy-giving good news that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead?

Well, we might not want to be like the Christian barber who had been thinking he would share his faith with his customers more. One night in prayer he decided to witness to the first customer who walked in the next morning. Soon after he opened his shop, the first man came in and said, “I want a shave.” The barber said, “Certainly, I’ll be with you in a minute.” He went to the back of the shop and prayed, “Lord, I’m going to witness to this man, so help me to know just the right thing to say. Amen.” Then the barber quickly came out with his sharp razor in one hand and his Bible in the other hand. He cheerfully said, “Good morning, sir. I have a question for you. Are you ready to die?”

Sad to say, all too often our response to God’s great acts of mercy and power in the past is to be like the climber who fell off a cliff. As he tumbled down, he caught hold of a small branch wedged in the rock. “HELP! IS THERE ANYBODY UP THERE?” he shouted. A majestic voice boomed through the gorge, “I will help you, my son, but first you must have faith in me.” “Yes, yes, I trust you!” cried the man. “Let go of the branch,” boomed the voice. “WHAT?” cried the man. “ARE YOU CRAZY? LET GO OF THE BRANCH?” The voice said, “Trust me, son. Let go of the branch.” There was a long pause, and then the man shouted again, “IS THERE ANYONE ELSE UP THERE I COULD TALK TO?”

Or how about the Sunday School teacher who was talking to her class full of 10-year old boys? “Would you give \$1,000,000 to the missionaries?” she asked. All of the boys eagerly said, “Yes!” “Would you give \$1,000?” Again the boys yelled, “Yes!” “How about \$100?” the teacher asked. “Oh,

yes we would,” they all agreed. “Would you give just one dollar to the missionaries?” she asked. All of the boys shouted “Yes!” except for Johnny. The teacher noticed Johnny clutching his pocket and asked him, “Johnny, why didn’t you say ‘yes’ this time?” Johnny stammered, “Well, I **have** a dollar!”

Well, it’s time to wrap up this sermon. Several years ago, I was at a class cookout at Wallace Elementary School. The man standing next to me introduced himself and said, “You’re the preacher at Wallace Presbyterian Church, right?” He told me he was a lay preacher at a small church out in the country near Harrells. He admitted he could get rather long-winded in his sermons. He told me that one Sunday he preached a very long sermon. Afterwards, as he was shaking hands with the congregation, a little lady in her 90’s came up to him and said, “Preacher, you know what they say. Sermons are like biscuits – they’re both better with shortening!”

In the book of Ecclesiastes we read, “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance.” (Ecclesiastes 3:1, 4)

Life brings us many reasons to weep and mourn. We all know how true that is! God gives us reason to laugh and to dance, because he raised Jesus Christ from the dead and has promised us the same for the future.

In a few minutes we will come to our Lord’s table for the sacrament. In the words of invitation you will hear, “This is the joyful feast of the people of God.” Yes, the Lord’s Supper is a holy and reflective time, but it also reminds us of the joyful heavenly banquet we are promised by the Lord. As we eat the bread and drink the cup, we live out Psalm 126 – we remember how God has restored our fortunes through Jesus Christ, and we live in hope for the present and the future, that God will restore our fortunes as he does great things for us.

During a children’s sermon on Communion Day, the minister was talking about the meaning of communion. He said, “The Bible talks of Holy Communion being a ‘joyful feast.’ What does that mean? Well, ‘joyful’ means happy, right? And a feast is a meal. So a joyful feast is a happy meal. And what are three things we need for a happy meal?” One of the children piped up and said, “A hamburger, fries, and a small drink!”

No hamburger, fries, and small drink at this joyful feast today – but we taste and see God’s grace and mercy, God’s great things, as we take the bread and cup in this “happy meal.”

And just because today is Major League Baseball's Opening Day, here's one about a long-suffering Chicago Cubs fan. The Cubs haven't won the World Series since 1908.

A Cubs fan dies and goes to hell. When he gets there, the devil comes over to welcome him. The Devil then says "Sometimes it gets pretty uncomfortable down here." The man says, "No problem. I'm from Chicago." So the Devil goes over to the thermostat, turns the temperature up to 100, and the humidity up to 80. He then goes back to the Chicago man to see how he's doing. To the devil's surprise, the man is doing just fine. "No problem...just like Chicago in June," the man says.

So the Devil goes back over to the thermostat, and turns the temperature up to 150, and the humidity up to 90. He then goes back over to see how the Chicago man is doing. The man is sweating a little, but overall looks comfortable. "No problem. Just like Chicago in July," the man says.

So now the Devil goes over to the thermostat, turns the temperature up to 200, and the humidity up to 100. When he goes back to see how the man is doing, the man is sweating profusely, and has taken his shirt off. Otherwise, he seems OK. He says, "No problem. Just like Chicago in August."

Now the Devil is really perplexed. So he goes back to the thermostat, and turns the temperature down to MINUS 150 DEGREES. Immediately, all the humidity in the air freezes up, and the whole place becomes a frigid, barren, frozen, deathly cold wasteland. That's right – Hell freezes over!

When the Devil goes back now to see how the Chicago man is doing, he is shocked to discover the man is jumping up and down, and cheering in obvious delight. The Devil immediately asks the man what's going on. To which the Cubs fan replies..... "THE CUBS WON THE WORLD SERIES!!! THE CUBS WON THE WORLD SERIES!!!"

***Let us pray: God of joy, breathe on us with your Holy Spirit, fill our souls with the laughter which chases away doubt and fear, so we can celebrate the last laugh on death; through our risen Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.***