

John 11:17-27 1 Corinthians 15:50-58 April 16, 2023

Holy Humor Sunday

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

GOD HAS THE LAST 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.

After our Wednesday morning Bible study on March 22, at which we talked about the story in John's gospel when Jesus brought Lazarus back from the dead, Ann Carter told me a good, true story. As he was being examined by his pediatrician, a little boy began to tell the doctor about a Bible story he had learned in a children's Bible class. The good doctor gave the little boy his undivided attention as the boy said, "This man died and his sisters were very sad." The doctor listened sympathetically and asked, "Then what happened?" "Well," the little boy said, "Jesus came to visit the sisters and he cried with them." "That was kind of him," said the doctor. "Then what happened." "Well," said the little boy, "Jesus went to the grave and yelled, 'Lazarus, come out!'" "Wow!" said the doctor. "And then what happened." The little boy said, "Then we had cookies!"

It's always good to have cookies! Actually, that's not a bad way to follow up the story of Lazarus. After all, John tells us in his gospel, after Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, he went to a town called Ephraim, where he stayed with his disciples until it was time to travel to Jerusalem for the Passover. John tells us, "Six days before the Passover, Jesus went to Bethany, the home of Lazarus whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him." (John 12:1-2) Who knows? Maybe they had cookies for dessert!

The story about the little boy and cookies reminds me of another Sunday School story. As Holy Week approached, the third grade Sunday School teacher decided she would find out what her students knew about Easter. She asked her class, "Boys and girls, who can tell me what Easter is about?" Susie raised her hand and the teacher called on her. "Easter is when the whole family gets together and eats turkey and dressing and pecan pie and gives thanks." The teacher was a bit dismayed at the answer, but kindly said, "No, Susie, that's Thanksgiving." Billy raised his hand and said, "Easter is when the whole family gets together and decorates the tree and gives each other presents." Again, the teacher graciously said, "No, Billy, that's Christmas." The teacher was starting to feel kind of discouraged at this point. Had the children not learned anything from her? Jane said, "I know. Easter is when everyone wears green and looks for four-leaf clovers so they'll have good luck all year long." "Oh my," thought the teacher. "I should never have asked this question." Then Jimmy said, "I know what Easter is all about." The teacher was hesitant to call on Jimmy because he never paid attention in her Sunday School class and was always getting into trouble. So, with some trepidation, the teacher called on Jimmy, who said, "Easter is about when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey and the people waved palm branches and called him King." The teacher was surprised, but also very pleased. Jimmy continued, "Then Jesus ate

supper with his disciples but one of them turned him in to the religious people. They nailed him to the cross and he died.” The teacher could hardly believe her ears. “Then what happened, Jimmy?” “Well,” he said, “on Sunday morning, some women went to the tomb and they saw Jesus come out of the tomb.” “Not exactly right,” thought the teacher, but close enough. “And how does the story end, Jimmy?” Jimmy said, “Well, Jesus saw his shadow and went back into the tomb and they had six more weeks of winter!”

Laughing in church? Who would have thought it possible with a bunch of Presbyterians – you know, “the Frozen Chosen”? A few years ago, I was leaving the house to head to the church for a session meeting. When I told Nancy goodbye, she said, “Have fun!” I said, “What? Did you say, ‘Have fun’?” Nancy grinned and said, “Why not? Who said you couldn’t?”

I don’t recall ever seeing a book called *The Wit and Wisdom of John Calvin*, our forefather in the Reformed and Presbyterian faith. Calvin has a reputation of being stern and dour. We tend to think of Calvin as embodying H.L. Mencken’s definition of “puritanism,” you know, “the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy.” Elton Trueblood, 20th century Quaker theologian and author, said, “Never trust a theologian who doesn’t have a sense of humor.” In fact, in 1964, Dr. Trueblood published *The Humor of Christ*, in which he wrote, “To many readers, the idea of Christ as humorous is surprising or even mildly shocking.” One review of Dr. Trueblood’s book said, “*The Humor of Christ* inspires Christians to redraw their pictures of Christ and to add a persistent biblical detail, the note of humor. Throughout the Gospels, Christ employed humor for the sake of truth and many of his teachings, when seen in this light, become brilliantly clear for the first time. Irony, satire, paradox, even laughter itself help clarify Christ’s famous parables, His brief sayings, and important events in His life.”¹

I don’t know if John Calvin could tell a good joke or not, but he certainly knew the joy that being in Christ can bring to this life. In 1547, he wrote a letter to a friend whose wife had given birth. Calvin said he would be glad to spend an hour laughing with them in order to make their baby laugh. He wrote, “for that is after all the first sound we make in the beginning of our lives; and we can only really laugh once we have left this life.” The old saying goes, “He who laughs last, laughs best.” As one writer has put it, John Calvin could have written that himself. In 1522, with his life full of troubles and worries, Calvin wrote, “It is good that we are anchored in heaven, for otherwise we would never be able to sail safely through these storms.”²

The great Protestant Reformer Martin Luther, who loved life and his Lord, wrote, “If you’re not allowed to laugh in heaven, I don’t want to go there.” That reminds me of a Family Circus cartoon I saw this week. The two older children, Billy and Dolly, are standing in front of the TV in the den. On the screen is a robed preacher in the pulpit, his hand in the air. Dolly is grabbing Billy’s arm and excitedly saying, “Hear that? People in heaven have ever-laughing life!”

Even if, as Calvin wrote, we are anchored in heaven and, as Dolly says, “People in heaven have ever-laughing life,” we want to hang on to life as long as we can. Three friends were talking one day after they had attended the funeral of the fourth member of their golfing group. One of them asked, “When you’re in your casket, and friends and

church members are mourning over you, what do you want them to say about you?" Artie said, "I would like them to say that I was a wonderful husband, a fine spiritual leader, and a great family man." Merle said, "I would like for them to say that I was a wonderful teacher and servant of God who made a huge difference in the lives of many people." Don said, "I'd like them to say, 'Hey, look! He's moving!'"

It's true that sometimes we fear death so much, we let death define our lives even before we die. It's also true that, even though we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ on Easter Sunday, we sometimes have trouble remembering the power and the truth of the Easter promise of the resurrection once Easter Sunday has come and gone. It's kind of like the three buddies – a doctor, a lawyer, and a preacher – who were deer hunting on a very cold day. They had been out all day and hadn't seen a single deer. They were discouraged and had just started packing up to head back to their truck, when a magnificent buck with a huge rack of antlers suddenly emerged from the trees, about 75 yards away. At the exact same moment, all three guys raised their rifles and fired and the buck dropped on the spot. They excitedly ran to the spot, each of them convinced he had fired the fatal shot. Of course, they started arguing about who could claim the kill. Pretty soon, the argument got very heated and the three friends were close to trading blows. Just then the game warden came up and asked, "What's the problem?" They explained the dilemma and the game warden said, "Let me take a look." He went over to the buck, bent down, looked it over, and quickly came back to the group. "It's the preacher's," he said. The doctor and lawyer couldn't believe it. They were lifelong hunters and the preacher had only been hunting for about a year. "How do you know that?" they asked the game warden. "Well," he said, "at first I wasn't sure, because there was only one bullet hole. But then it dawned on me that it must be the preacher's, because it went in one ear and out the other."

We are Easter people! As Easter people, we celebrate the good news, the joyful news, the laugh-provoking news that Christ is risen from the dead! Even if, as John Calvin said, we have to sail through the storms of life, we can do so with the joy that comes from knowing that God has the last laugh in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

Christians in Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant churches have celebrated Holy Humor Sunday – or "Bright" Sunday – a week after Easter Sunday for hundreds of years. In fact, in many traditions, the entire Easter week is full of practical jokes between pastors and parishioners and includes dances and picnics and fun and laughter. The tradition of Holy Humor Sunday is rooted in the thoughts of some of the earliest church theologians such as Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa, and John Chrysostom. They talked about how God played a practical joke on the devil by raising Jesus from the dead. Easter was called "God's supreme joke played on death." These early theologians referred to the "Risus Paschalis," "the Easter laugh."³

On this Holy Humor Sunday, we're not laughing at God. We're laughing with God, because of what God has done for us by raising Christ from the dead. It's good we can laugh at ourselves, because things don't always turn out the way we planned (which is probably what Woody Allen meant when he said, "If you want to make God laugh, tell him about your plans," which is based on an old Yiddish proverb, "We plan, God laughs.")).

Just imagine how this preacher felt! He used a standard liturgy for funerals. In order to make each service more personal, he used the Find and Replace command on his computer to replace the name of the deceased from the previous funeral. He never had any problems until the day he got up to officiate at the funeral of Edna, the matriarch of the church. Two weeks earlier he had led the funeral for Mary Jones, another beloved member of the congregation. The day before Edna's funeral, he used the Find and Replace command to replace the name "Mary" with "Edna" throughout the bulletin. Things were going fine until the congregation got to the Apostles' Creed and recited in unison, "born of the Virgin Edna"!

Maybe he's the same preacher who, when he was in the hospital, was visited by the Clerk of Session. The preacher was touched that the Clerk would come to visit and asked, "So, how are things at the church?" She said, "Okay. I've got some good news and some bad news." "What's the good news?" asked the preacher. "The good news is the session voted to send you a get-well card." That kind of got the preacher choked up and he said, "How nice! What's the bad news?" The clerk couldn't look him in the eye when she said, "The bad news is the vote was 5-4."

Thank goodness I've never done anything quite like Edna's and Mary's preacher, but I did have an interesting experience at a graveside one time. As I was getting ready for the graveside service for a staunch Presbyterian, I used the order of service I had prepared for a previous funeral I had conducted at a church of a different denomination and tradition. Now, I don't apologize for writing out and even reading my liturgy, even the parts I have memorized. I have a responsibility to lead the worshipers as best as I can. Well, I thought I had made all of the necessary changes from the previous service. And everything was going fine until I invited everyone to join in the Lord's Prayer . . . and I heard myself leading the Presbyterians gathered at the graveside, "and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." After the service, the general presbyter of our presbytery came up, shook my hand, and said, "Interesting prayer for a Presbyterian service!"

The apostle Paul calls death "the last enemy to be destroyed. Because God raised Jesus from the dead, we have the hope and promise of the resurrection to eternal life AND we have the strength and power and hope in this life "to sail safely through these storms." That's why we can celebrate and rejoice and, yes, laugh – even in a Presbyterian church!

George Burns said, "The secret of a good sermon is to have a good beginning and a good ending; and to have the two as close together as possible." That reminds me of a conversation I had with a man many years ago in Mrs. Lynn Woods' classroom at Wallace Elementary School. I was there for the class cookout and game day. He and I were waiting in line and he introduced himself. "You're a Presbyterian preacher, aren't you?" When I said yes, he told me he was a lay preacher in a little church near Harrells. He admitted he could get pretty long-winded in his preaching. He laughed and said, "One Sunday I preached for a real long time. After the service, the oldest member of the church, a little lady well into her 90's, came out and shook my hand. She said, 'Preacher, good sermon, but you know what they say . . .sermons are like biscuits. They're both better with shortening!'"

Friends, we are Easter people! Rejoice and be glad! Let's join in with God in having the last laugh over death!

Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!

Let us pray: Good and gracious God, we laugh as a sign of the joy you have brought into the world through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Help us to see light through your eyes – eyes of grace and forgiveness – and help us to laugh when the world presses in around us and we are afraid. Amen.

NOTES

¹Elton Trueblood, *The Humor of Christ* at www.thriftbooks.com.

²Herman J. Selderhuis, *John Calvin: A Pilgrim's Life* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), pp. 212-213.