

***Psalm 148 with Hymn #240, Alleluia, Alleluia! Give Thanks
1 Corinthians 15:50-58***

April 23, 2017

Holy Humor Sunday/The Sacrament of Baptism

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.

As Harvey Knowles would say, this is a true story! Several years ago, a minister colleague officiated at a funeral shortly after arriving at his new church. The funeral was for the grand matriarch of the congregation. The sanctuary was packed and the service was dignified. My friend walked out of the sanctuary ahead of the pallbearers with the casket and the family members. As the family got in their cars in the funeral procession, the funeral home director invited my friend to ride with him in the hearse. "Since you're new in town," he said, "I thought you might want to ride with me to the cemetery." My friend thankfully accepted his offer.

It was a very hot summer day. The windows were rolled down in all of the cars in the long line, with the funeral home lead car, the hearse, and the family cars at the head of the line. One of the other funeral home men got into the lead car and tried to crank it — one, two, three times. Nothing happened — the engine wouldn't turn over. My friend said everyone was sitting in their cars, windows open, waiting and sweating. Then the funeral home man popped the hood on the lead car, got out and walked around to look under the hood, fiddled with some wires, then stuck his head out from under the raised hood and shouted in a very loud voice, "Yep, she's dead alright!" My friend said the funeral home director just put his head on the steering wheel of the hearse. And, yes, the matriarch's family members heard it all!

Then there's the story about the bagpiper who was asked to play at the graveside service for a homeless man who had no family or friends. He was to be buried in a little cemetery way out in the country. The bagpiper got hopelessly lost and arrived at the graveside an hour late. There was no one there but some diggers and other crew members, who were sitting on the ground eating their lunch. The piper apologized for being late, went over, looked in the grave, and saw that the vault lid had already been put in place. He didn't know what to do, so he started playing. The more he thought about this homeless, friendless man, the more emotional he got and so he played his heart out. The diggers and workers put down their lunches, gathered around the piper, and started crying. Then the piper started crying. When he finished playing "Amazing Grace," he walked back to his car. He was still embarrassed about being an hour late, but he felt good about sending the poor man off with such an honor. As he opened his car door, he heard one of the diggers say, "I never seen nothin' like that before and I've been putting in septic tanks for twenty years!"

Laughing in church? Who would have thought it possible with a bunch of Presbyterians? In Marilynne Robinson's wonderful novel, *Gilead*, Rev. John Ames, the congregationalist minister in Gilead, Iowa, observes, "It is an amazing thing to watch people laugh, the way it sort of takes them over. Sometimes they really do struggle with it. I see that in church often enough. So I wonder what it is and where it comes from, and I wonder what it expends out of your system, so that you have to do it till you're done, like crying in a way, I suppose, except that laughter is much more easily spent."¹

I don't recall ever seeing a book called *The Wit and Wisdom of John Calvin*. Our forefather in the faith has the reputation of being dour and stern. We tend to think of Calvin as embodying H.L. Mencken's definition of "puritanism," "the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy." But Calvin 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 to their child. 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 said 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

Even if we're anchored in heaven and trust in the resurrection hope in Jesus Christ, we want to hang on to life as long as we can. Three friends from the local congregation were asked, "When you're in your casket, and friends and congregation members are mourning over you, what would you like them to say?" Artie said, "I would like them to say I was a wonderful husband, a fine spiritual leader, and a great family man." Merle said, "I would like for them to say I was a wonderful teacher and servant of God who made a huge difference in peoples' lives." Don said, "I'd like them to say, 'Hey, look! He's moving!'"

Of course, sometimes the shoe's on the other foot. Did you hear about the mountain woman whose husband died? He wasn't a good husband — he drank and ran around on her and was very demanding. When he died, the neighbors came to the cabin and put his body in a pine box. Six men picked up the box to carry him to the cemetery on the hill. As they were going down the steps, one of the men stumbled and that caused all of them to lose their balance. They dropped the pine box, which slid down the rest of the steps and smashed into a tree. Turns out, her husband wasn't dead after all, and the jolt of the crash revived him. He lived another ten years and treated her even worse than before. When he really did die, the same neighbor men came to the cabin to carry the box out to the cemetery. When they got to the front door, the woman said, "You boys be careful on those steps, ya hear?"

It's true that sometimes we fear death so much, we let death define our lives even before we die. But we are Easter people! And, as Easter people, we can celebrate the good news — the joyful news — the laugh-provoking news that Christ is risen from the dead! Even if, as 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 for hundreds of years. In fact, in many traditions, the entire Easter week is full of practical jokes between pastors and parishioners, including 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

We don’t make fun *of* God — we laugh 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. Can you imagine how this minister felt? He used a standard liturgy for funerals. In order to make each service personal, he used the Find and Replace command on his computer to replace the name of the deceased from the previous funeral with the new name. He never had any problems until the day he got up to officiate at Edna’s funeral. Two weeks earlier he had led the funeral for Mary Jones, a beloved member of the congregation. The day before Edna’s funeral, he had 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”!

Then there’s the minister who was happy when his children gave him a card on his 64th birthday. Excitedly they told him, “Open it. There’s a message from God on the inside.” The minister was especially pleased that his children finally appreciated all of his many years of faithful ministry. Then he opened the card and read, “See you soon!”

The apostle Paul calls death “the last enemy to be destroyed.” (I Cor. 15:26) In his great resurrection chapter, Paul encourages believers with the good news that “in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.” But Christ’s being raised from the dead isn’t just for Jesus’ benefit. Because God raised him from the dead, we have the hope and promise of the resurrection to eternal life. That’s why we can celebrate and rejoice, yes, even laugh — even in the storms of life. Because of what God has done in raising Jesus from the dead, “Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (1 Cor. 15:54-57)

We rejoice on this Bright Sunday because of our resurrection hope and because we come to the baptismal font to celebrate with Corey, Mary Stewart, and William. The apostle Paul says, “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a

death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.” (Romans 6:3-5)

After a gully-washer of a rainstorm had filled all of the holes in the yard full of water, a young mother looked out the kitchen window and watched her two boys playing in the puddles. The big 5-year old brother grabbed his 3-year old brother by the back of the neck and shoved his face into the hole full of water. When he pulled him back up, the little brother was sputtering and dripping wet and laughing. The mother was horrified and ran out in the yard. “What are you doing to your little brother?” she angrily asked. The big brother looked at her and said, “We were just playing church, mommy.” “Playing church?” the mother asked. “Yes,” he said, “and I was just baptizing him . . . in the name of the Father, the Son, and in the hole-he-goes.”

Baptism is all about God’s grace. There’s nothing magic about me putting the water on William’s head this morning. We don’t believe that God just started loving William the minute the water hit his head. We believe God has always loved and will always love William — and the rest of us — even though we have done nothing to deserve that love and forgiveness. That’s what we call grace . . .

. . . which reminds me of the town that was so small there was only one church. The pastor was also the town barber, so he could make some extra money. There was a man in town who never went to church. He had worked hard, saved carefully, and invested wisely. One day he woke up and said, “I can afford to have someone shave me from now on.” So he went to the barber shop to get a shave. The preacher was out visiting church members, but his wife, Grace, told the man, “I usually shave the customers anyway. Have a seat.” She gave him a nice, clean shave. “How much?” he asked when she finished. “\$25.” The man thought \$25 was kind of steep; maybe he could only afford to get shaved every other day. He paid and left.

The next day he woke up, rubbed his hand on his face, and realized his face was as smooth as the day before, which was just as well since he had paid \$25. The same thing happened on the second day, and the third day. While it was nice not to have to pay \$25 each day to get shaved, the man was confused and kind of troubled. So he went back to the barber shop. This time the preacher was there, so the man asked why his face was still so smooth four days later. The preacher looked at the man and said, “Brother, you were shaved by Grace — and once shaved, always shaved!”

It might seem strange to talk about death and dying when we baptize someone, especially a little baby. But the two go together; as Paul says, in baptism we die to sin and are raised to new life in Jesus Christ. That new life is possible because in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has defeated the powers of sin and death in our lives. When we put water on the baby’s head, we can imagine God having the last laugh on death and asking, “Where, Oh death, is your victory? Where, Oh death, is your sting?”

Having joy in our lives and laughing at ourselves and because of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ in no way diminishes the reality of pain and suffering and sadness in our lives. In fact, it’s because we know so much of pain and suffering in our lives that the promises of baptism and resurrection can bring so much joy and laughter.

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.” I reckon I’d better heed his advice, otherwise I’ll be like the preacher who, after preaching a very long, very dry sermon, announced that he wished to meet with the church board following worship. The preacher went back to the meeting room and waited for the others. However, the first man to arrive was a total stranger. “You misunderstood my announcement,” said the minister. “This is a meeting of the board.” “I know,” said the stranger, “but if there is anyone here more bored than I am, I’d like to meet him.”

Friends, we are Easter people! Rejoice and be glad! Let’s join 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: God of new beginnings and resurrection power, fill our souls with laughter which chases away our long faces, chuckles which wipe frowns off our brows, great guffaws which shatter hardened hearts. Fill us with the joy of your Holy Spirit so we can celebrate the last laugh on death. Amen.

NOTES

¹Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004).

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

³“Holy Humor Sunday,” at www.salemucccampbelltown.org.