

LAUGHING AS A RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY
a sermon by Rev. Elizabeth L. Greene
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Call To Worship

The Bible tells us that a merry heart does good, like a medicine.

Samuel Butler, elaborating, says, “A sense of humor keen enough to show [people their] own absurdities as well as those other people will keep [us] from commission of all sins, or nearly all, save those that are worth committing. (Peter, 185)

Contemplation

Comedian Steve Allen says, “[Humor] is... a remarkably useful thing in the context of the whole process of human communication in that it is an aid to the expression of other emotions and to the transmission of important messages of spiritual, political, educational or commercial nature. It is, come to think of it, an absolute necessity in the maintenance of sanity.”

Lawrence Peter, famous author of *The Peter Principle*, received an important life lesson early in his teaching career. At the end of a class, a student came up to him and said, “Dr. Peter, you must be greater than Einstein.” Dr. Peter putting on a suitably modest-yet-proud demeanor, replied, “Oh?” The student continued, “I don’t understand Einstein very well, but I don’t understand you at all.” (Peter, x and 3)

Reading

Does laughter bring us nearer to God or signify being filled with the Holy Spirit? Exuberant worship, sometimes featuring laughter, has cycled in and out of favor, having a place in the heritage, if not current practice, of many denominations....

“Laughing revivals” offer an intriguing contemporary manifestation of this “old time religion” that provide fascinating case studies in the power of contagious laughter. In the article “Laughing for the Lord,” *Time* magazine (15 August 1994) reports the growing popularity of “laughing revivals” among many groups, including the otherwise reserved Anglicans....

The visitation of the Holy Spirit to members of the contemporary congregations is signaled by the spread of laughter through the group, followed in some by falling to the floor, sobbing, shaking, twitching, speaking in tongues, and even roaring. (Provine, 134,5)

Sermon

The Dairy Association's huge success with the campaign "Got Milk?" prompted them to expand advertising to Mexico. It was soon brought to their attention the Spanish translation read "Are you lactating?"

Pepsi's "Come Alive With the Pepsi Generation," in Chinese translated into "Pepsi Brings Your Ancestors Back From the Grave".

Frank Perdue's chicken slogan, "It takes a strong man to make a tender chicken" was translated into Spanish as "it takes an aroused man to make a chicken affectionate.

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After having been commissioned by God to take a survey of how man was doing on Earth, St. Peter now stood before his boss ready to present his findings.

"Tell me, St. Peter, what have you found out?" God asked.

"I'm very sorry to have to tell you this, but the people are behaving in a sinful manner. There's drugs, alcohol, murders, you name it—a regular Sodom and Gomorra. But the worst is this obsession with practicing the act of procreation in ways other than the one way prescribed by You. According to my survey, 88% of the population is doing it. I'm afraid it has reached epidemic proportions.

"Hmmm," God said thoughtfully, "do you have any recommendations as to what should be done to put an end to this terrible problem?"

"I think we should send a message to everyone on Earth who engages in this behavior. The contents of that message should tell them exactly what will happen to them on Judgment Day if they do not stop it," replied St. Peter.

"That is an effective solution," God stated, "but I think that instead of punishing those who practice it, we should reward those who refrain from it. Let's send a letter that's personally signed by me to each one of these good people." And so they did.

Do you know what the letter said? --No?

Hmmm, So, You didn't get the letter either, huh?

“What,” you may be saying to yourself (especially if you are new), “have I gotten myself into? Is this an evening at the Funny Bone, or a morning at church? Don’t Unitarian Universalists take their faith seriously?”

Well, as a matter of fact, we do. We respect the major differences among individuals, as they sojourn toward the Holy, toward truth as it unfolds. We embrace those differences: “All God’s critters got a place in the choir.” At the same time, we understand that there are deep needs shared by all people as they walk the holy human journey, and a UU congregation seeks to address those even as it respects diverse viewpoints.

One of the things we know is that a religious faith is about the well-being of its followers. And we all know that the beneficial effects of laughter have been known at least since 1979, when Norman Cousins wrote about checking out of the hospital and into a motel, where he watched funny movies, laughing many times a day. He found relief from pain, and he found healing (remember: “heal” and “whole” and “holy” all have the same root).

But In my reading recently, I ran across a book by a neuroscientist who sheds doubt on the cherished hypothesis about laughter and health. William Provine, writing in 2000, analyzes a whole lot of studies, concluding,

Research on medicinal laughter, like many other promising enterprises..., will pay a price for the burst of early exuberance with a backlash of undue pessimism.... In the wake of overly optimistic predictions in the style of Norman Cousins..., we are probably entering a downward phase, as disillusioned investigators realize that the necessary science is neither as easy nor as obvious as first anticipated ... (206,7)

Oh dear. If I maintain my long-held hypothesis that humor is part of making meaning in life, of being healed, becoming whole—those fundamental religious jobs—if I maintain that it is part of our spiritual journey to find things to laugh about, then am I betraying the modern divinity of science? What if I want to tell a joke as a reminder of

humility, of the importance of not making assumptions? Am I fooling myself? What if I want to tell this joke about pride and assumptions?

A burglar broke into a house one night. He shined his flashlight around, looking for valuables, and when he picked up a CD player to place in his sack, a strange disembodied voice echoed from the dark saying, "Jesus is watching you."

He nearly jumped out of his skin, clicked his flashlight off, and froze. When he heard nothing more after a bit, he shook his head, promised himself a vacation after the next big score, then clicked the light back on and began searching for more valuables. Just as he pulled the stereo out so he could disconnect the wires, clear as a bell he heard, "Jesus is watching you."

Freaked out, he shined the light around frantically, looking for the source of the voice. Finally, in the corner of the room, his flashlight beam came to rest on a parrot. "Did you say that?" he hissed at the parrot.

"Yep," the parrot confessed then squawked, "I'm trying to warn you."

The burglar relaxed. "Warn me huh? Who are you?"

"Moses," replied the parrot.

"Moses?" the burglar laughed. "What kind of stupid people would name a parrot 'Moses'?"

The bird answered, "Probably the same kind of people that would name a Rotweiller 'Jesus'."

Of course we will not stop telling jokes as part of our religious life. (As a matter of fact, Dr. Provine really does know how beneficial humor is. Right after the words I read to you, from his last chapter, there is an appendix entitled, "Ten Ways To Increase Laughter In Your Life." [209])

Life is hard. Life is absurd. Life is filled with unfair events that cause very real suffering. Life is full of our own dumb actions and bad choices, that cause very real suffering. My heart overflows so very often, as I see these universal truths of the human condition acted out every day.

Laughter is not a denial of life's seriousness.

If we can create and appreciate humor—making up situations in which our suffering, our wondering, our unbearable longings, our human despairs, take laughably unexpected twists, we can enter the lightness of laughter. If we laugh (even though sometimes crying at the same time), we are more likely to find our center, wherein dwells the Holy as we experience it. If we can genuinely see the absurdity of the human condition, our suffering is likely to be lightened. As one writer says, “Humor is the sense of the absurd which is despair refusing to take itself seriously.” (Peter, 73)

For instance, sexuality is one of humankind's most powerful forces, for good and ill: we laughed at the joke about God's letter to sexual sinners. It is said that future historians will be able study at the Gerald Ford Library and the Jimmy Carter Library and the Ronald Reagan Library—and the Bill Clinton Adult Bookstore.

An extremely serious moral, religious, emotional, and spiritual subset of sexuality is infidelity in intimate relationships. It is universal to the human condition, and has caused rapture and despair, and heartache, and fury, and forgiveness—and growth—for millennia. A very important part of me knows all that, speaks and acts accordingly. Nevertheless, I laughed when I heard about the man who came home to his wife and said, “Honey, you'll never believe what I just heard! The supervisor of this building has had sex with every woman in this apartment house except one!” She thinks for a minute, then says knowingly, “And I'll bet it's that stuckup Mrs. Bixby on the third floor.”

Sexuality is perhaps the second most troubling subject to us absurd humans, with death coming in first. Death, aging, and the threat of death are probably the most

religious and the most serious subjects in the whole catalog of human concerns. Every single one of us has come up against death and bereavement, more or less directly. I would be horrified to the tips of my toes if I thought any who mourn, felt that I—or we—pass their losses off lightly. But, like all humans through time, we also laugh, just as we weep. We laugh and wince at the truth of Woody Allen’s saying, “It’s hard to view one’s own death objectively and still carry a tune,” (Peter, 92) or “I don’t mind the idea of dying—I just don’t want to be there when it happens.”

Since I am in the “aging” population—increasingly aware of mortality—I can relate with impunity the titles of ‘60s re-releases, accommodating Baby Boomers and others feeling a little older and missing great old tunes:

Roberta Flack: “The First Time Ever I Forgot Your Face”
Herman’s Hermits: “Mrs. Brown, You’ve Got a Lovely Walker”
The Beatles: “I Get By With A Little Help From Depends”

If it is true, as UU minister Forrester Church tells us, that religion is about being born, knowing we are going to die, and figuring out what to do in between, it should not surprise us that religion is the subject of many, many jokes. Because spirituality is a truly serious subject, it is vital to cultivate a lightness of spirit about it. There is the danger of fanaticism in those who are unhumorously earnest about religion, a self-righteousness that can lead to very terrible deeds. And so, we do our best to lighten up.

For instance, many of us know that ministry is a dangerous profession. We ministers are given a good deal of respect, and it is all too easy to confuse the authority vested in us with our real selves. A little gentle ridicule never hurts us.

After a church service on Sunday morning, a young boy suddenly announced to his mother, "Mom, I've decided to become a minister when I grow up."

"That's okay with us, but what made you decide that?"

"Well," said the little boy, "I have to go to church on Sunday anyway, and I figure it will be more fun to stand up and yell, than to sit and listen."

Or there was the Sunday morning when a mother went in to wake her son and tell him it was time to get ready for church.

He replied, "I'm not going." "Why not?" she asked.

"I'll give you two good reasons," he said. "One, they don't like me, and two, I don't like them."

His mother replied, "I'll give YOU two good reasons why you SHOULD go to church. One, you're 54 years old, and two, you're the pastor!"

Church bloopers are always a good source for laughing at the serious business of religion. The following are alleged to be genuine statements written by children about the Bible:

The Jews were a proud people and throughout history they had trouble with the unsympathetic Genitals.

St. Paul cavorted to Christianity. He preached holy acrimony, which is another name for marriage.

Jesus was born because Mary had an immaculate contraption.

Not just religion in general gets the humorous treatment. Each faith tradition has its own self-mocking jokes. We UU's understand ourselves that questing, doubting and exploration—things we are quite serious about—are foundation stones of Unitarian Universalism, and therefore also subject to absurdity. We also know that our tendency to react *against* things rather than to affirm is subject to joking, as is our emphasis on science and reason, our habit of keeping the options open, even our embracing of many positions.

There are a lot of "how-many-(religious tradition)s-does-it-take-to-change-a-light-bulb jokes. I, personally, will not tell the ones about the Presbyterians or Catholics or

charismatics, because those are not my traditions. Telling jokes about other people often looks perilously close to ridicule. I can, however, tell you how many UUs it takes.

None. We make this declaration instead:

We choose not to make a statement either in favour or against the need for a light bulb. However, if in your journey you have found that a light bulb works for you, that is fine. You are invited to write a poem or compose a modern dance about your personal relationship with your light bulb (or light source, or non-dark resource) and present it next month at our annual light bulb Sunday service, in which we will explore a number of light bulb traditions, including incandescent, fluorescent, three-way, long life, and tinted, all of which are equally valid paths of luminescence.

There is a web site I recommend, with thousands of UU jokes available.

(<http://www.sb.org/stoney/uujokes.html>) I am assuming that the man who created and maintains it is a Unitarian Universalist. I hope so, because if he is, he has the right attitude: a person who cares enough about his faith to poke fun at it.

What two things do UUs and Dracula have in common?
They both have origins in Transylvania and they both shy away from the cross.

There was a bad car accident. A woman is lying in the street, covered in blood, and someone in the crowd shouts, "Call a priest!"

The woman opens her eyes and asserts, "I'm a Unitarian."

The bystander yells, "Call a math teacher!"

Many Unitarian Universalists listen to Garrison Keillor's radio show *Prairie Home Companion*, in which he frequently pokes fun at us. In one, two cowboys are having a conversation:

And I wouldn't mind hearing the rest of that poem you wrote, Mister.

You liked that?

I liked that line about cattle being like lost souls. Are you Unitarian, by any chance?

I've considered becoming one sometimes.

There's a couple hundred of us Unitarians here. Durango is a sacred city to us.

I didn't know that.

We believe it was near here that God appeared to the prophet Mona and gave her the Ten Suggestions.

Unitarian Universalists struggle a bit with Easter. We understand that it is archetypal, that it expresses the universal longing for—hope for—expectation of—transformation. We, too, want to celebrate the triumph of life over death. At the same time, we have experienced it as an expression of one specific religious tradition—one that many of us no longer adhere to. So we struggle, to put that particular holiday into our own perspective. Here's a UU Easter song, composed by someone with tongue firmly in cheek. (Remember, this is making fun of us, *not* of Christianity!)

Jesus Christ may or may not have risen today, Alleluia.

Whether or not he did is pretty difficult to say, Alleluia.

Let's discuss all sides of the issue thoroughly, Alleluia.

We can take a vote! And then we'll see, Alleluia.

And finally:

A confused nine-year-old UU boy goes up to his mother and asks, "Is God male or female?"

After thinking a moment, his mother responds, Well, God is both male and female."

Still confused, the boy asks, "Is God black or white?"

"Well, God is both black and white."

Brow still furrowed by confusion, he asks, "Is God gay or straight?" and mom replies, "God is both gay and straight."

At this the boy's eyes finally light up with understanding and he triumphantly asks, "Is God Michael Jackson?!"

I invite you to visit the web site. I invite you to practice the religious discipline of seeing the absurd side of your life, in all its human triumphs and tragedies. I invite you to laugh compassionately at yourself and your cherished beliefs, so that you will have a perspective that keeps you from laughing unkindly at others.

Sources consulted

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