

Living a Life of Joy: Lighten Up!
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October 1, 2017

Nearly every Sunday I can still feel the butterflies before I preach. After preaching for several years now, I can still get a little nervous over the enormity of the call to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ. No pressure right! During one of my first times ever preaching, a mentor of mine reminded me that if I'm not a little nervous throughout my entire career, then I'm doing something wrong. I can remember the time when I was preaching at my college church when Bishop Duecker came up to me after the sermon and said, "There's always next time. Keep working on it!" He was being encouraging! Luckily, here at Meridian Street, I have the choir to help me lighten up before worship. You should hear us back in the robe room before worship. Peggy's yelling at them to be quiet. I'm trying to find the words to pray. And usually someone is in the corner making a joke. They're a great bunch! They are also full of, let's just say, humor. Our choir has a lot of fun.

This morning, as we continue our sermon series based on *The Book of Joy* by the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, we're looking at the pillar of humor. If you want to have joy, it's important to smile, laugh, and have a sense of humor. We have a lot of fun during our staff meetings. If you ever sit in on our meetings on Tuesday morning or walk by the offices, we do a lot of laughing. In fact, last week I really wanted Steve to use Peggy as the prime example of humility, as the staff got our choir director a birthday card that had a pop out crown that she wore all week, including during choir practice. I need to ask John if she wore it at home. I thought about using a few new hymns this morning, like "Laying Down Our Crowns" or "We Fall Down, We Lay our Crowns at the Feet of Jesus". We laugh a lot, but we're still working on humility as a staff.

If we are grounded in humility, we easily move into humor. When we take ourselves less seriously and look at others with the same interest and value, we can see things completely different. Our pillars of joy so far have been acceptance, humility, and humor. They are all in the category of pillars of the mind. They are a way to see life and the world. I realize that it might seem to be sacrilegious or irreverent to be talking about humor or even laugh in church. For many reasons, the world looks at the church as a serious people. They are the ones who are concerned with serious topics like sinfulness, evil, and a crucifixion.

As *The Book of Joy* points out, the word humility and humor come from the same Latin word *humus* meaning earth, soil, or humanity. It is true that suffering and joy will be found in life and often they are closely aligned. It is crucifixion and resurrection. It is crying and laughing. It is suffering and joy. All of these emotions can and should coexist. Reinhold Niebuhr, the theologian and author, once wrote, "Humor is a prelude to faith, and laughter is the beginning of prayer." It's alright to smile and sing in church. It's appropriate to laugh and pray during worship. In fact, I think it should be encouraged.

The Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu are two people who know great joy and great laughing. In fact, they both chuckle all the time. I have had the fortune of seeing both of these great holy men in person. While giving lectures, if you can even call them that, they just laugh and laugh.

They even poke fun at themselves. A story is told in the book about the time the Dalai Lama visited Belfast in Northern Ireland after the Troubles. He attended a private meeting between victims and the perpetrators of violence. As you can imagine, the atmosphere was very intense. As the meeting began, a former Protestant militant spoke of how when he was growing up he was told by the other loyalists that what they did in opposition to the Catholics was justified because Jesus was a Protestant not a Catholic. Knowing that Jesus was, of course, a Jew, the Dalai Lama laughed so hard that he completely changed the atmosphere.

There are times where humor can be used to change the atmosphere. Other times, it could be used to see the absurdity of our prejudices and hatred. It can be used to help someone lower their defense mechanisms or even lose their anger. Still there are other times where it reminds us to take ourselves less seriously. Humor reminds us that we're not in control. If we allow ourselves to be humbled, we will be invited by God to laugh at ourselves as we recall our limitations and weaknesses. Only then will we be able to see the blessings that God has given us, even in the midst of our own shortcomings.

It's like those Psalms we have in the Bible. They are full of human emotion, I think that's why I connect with the Psalms so much. Anglican Bishop and author, NT Wright, wrote a book on the Psalms. In it he wrote, "*[The Psalms] are full of power and passion, horrendous misery and unrestrained jubilation, tender sensitivity and powerful hope. Anyone at all whose heart is open to new dimensions of human experience, anyone who loves good writing, anyone who wants a window into the bright lights and dark corners of the human soul—anyone open to the beautiful expression of a larger vision of reality should react to these poems like someone who hasn't had a good meal for a week or two. It's all here.*"

Psalms 126 is a community prayer, when the Israelites celebrated the time of the deliverance of Zion, of Jerusalem. When that happened, their mouths were filled with laughter and their tongues with shouts of joy. Everyone saw what the Lord has done. All the nations saw what God had done. It was also a prayer in the present for the future. They prayed that the Lord would continue to restore their people again and again to hope and joy. It seemed like a dream, too good to be true, when God returned Zion's exiles. They laughed, they worshiped, they sang, they couldn't believe their good fortune and yet look at what God could do. Look at what God did. It's not what they were able to do or even imagine, it was even better.

This pillar of joy is all about the ability to laugh at the fact that God is way bigger than we can ever imagine and there is humility and humor in confessing that. It's all about laughing at the moments when I think I have faith and God all figured out, then God laughs at me and I in turn can laugh at that. I realize that this pillar of joy is not about laughing at another person. No, it's not about finding humor in other people's situations or even our own hardships. There's a lot happening in our nation and even for some of us in our lives that's not humorous.

We are continuing to be a divided people, systemic racial injustice continues to exist, violence, the talk of war, natural disasters, or even our own personal challenges of illness or job loss; those things aren't funny of course, but as we pray about these things and consider God's call on our lives to respond, we can find joy in the freedom of giving God our hardships and knowing that we have faithfully responded. The obstacle to joy that is paired with humor is actually frustration

or anger. It can be easy to slide into frustration or anger, but what we learn from people like the Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu is that through it all, we can love, forgive, find joy, and laugh our way through it all. These two men have been oppressed and have suffered, yet they are able to cope by using humor and finding joy.

It's a way to cope, but it's also a way not to become bitter or angry as we participate in the long road of the mission of God and seeking justice in world. I was introduced to a new spiritual discipline this week during our Monday morning Bible study. It is the discipline of reading the funny papers. Maybe that could be a way to lighten up and even embrace as a spiritual discipline. Do you ever notice how children can bring the gift of joy and laughter? Our kids, grand kids, and children running around the church with half eaten doughnuts in their mouths can make us laugh. My son makes me less serious, worry less at times (and worry more at others), and as my wife likes to say, Zechariah makes me lighten up. That's a gift.

When we face challenges or frustrations or our own shortcomings, which will happen from time to time or all the time, we can do so with humility and humor. We can lighten up, knowing that God is with us. We can smile and proclaim, "The Lord has great things for us and we are filled with joy." It's alright to laugh at yourself from time to time. As the Archbishop said, "Learn to laugh at yourself. It's really the easiest place to begin. It's about humility. Laugh at yourself and don't be so pompous and serious. If you start looking for the humor in life you will find it. You will stop asking, Why me? And start recognizing that life happens to all of us. It makes everything easier, including your ability to accept others and accept all that life will bring."

It's good to laugh from time to time, even during worship, even as we receive Holy Communion. When I was in Zimbabwe a few years ago, I can still remember the Methodists in that nation talk about worship across the African continent. They worship all day long. They gather with great joy for a long time. In fact, they dance. As they come up for the offering, they dance. As they come forward for Holy Communion, they dance, with smiles and laughter and rhythm. The way you could tell those of us American Methodists in the church apart from the African Methodists had nothing to do with race. The American Methodists don't dance.

This morning, as we gather around a dinner table, we are reminded of the silliness and beauty of amazing grace found in a meal. We gather at the table on this World Communion Sunday, recognizing that Christians around the world are gathering around the table with us. It humbles me to think about that and it's almost comical that our common connection is one of a potluck of bread and juice, where we bring with us our sinfulness, our regrets, our sadness, our despair, we lay our crowns down, for some of us literally, and are given in return the eternal blessings of grace, forgiveness, and love. At this table we can say with sincerity "The Lord has done great things for us." May our mouths be filled with laughter. May our tongues sing songs of joy.

Let us pray:

Lord, grant us joyful hearts and a holy sense of humor. Please give us the gift of faith, to be renewed and shared with others each day. Teach us to live this moment only, looking neither to the past with regret, nor to the future with apprehension.

Let love be our guide and our lives filled with joy. We offer this prayer, our humor, our jokes, our lives, and worship to you in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Benediction:

Friends, may we go for in laughter; may we go forth in grace.

Keep the Lord in your heart and a smile on your face.

And may the blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, bless you and keep in you in joy this day and forevermore. Amen.