

"FILLED WITH LAUGHTER"
AUGUST 20, 1989

Have you ever wondered why the Gospels never mention the laughter of Jesus? Or have you ever noticed that almost all of the Biblical references to laughter are negative?--or at least not as positive as they could be? For example, when messengers of the Lord appeared to Abraham and the elderly Sarah overheard them saying that in a year she would have a son, she laughed. And when the Lord asked her why she laughed, she denied it, the scriptures say, "because she was afraid." What was wrong with laughing at such an apparent absurdity? She was beyond the years of children, we are told, what was wrong with laughing? In this case, it was that the laughter spoke of her doubting the Lord's word.

In Scripture, laughter is often a sign of scorn, "The wicked plots against the righteous," says the Psalmist, "and . . .the Lord laughs at him; for He sees his day coming." (Psalm 37).

And even here, in this morning's text, the laughter mentioned is not laughter that comes from glee or play, but rather from the restoration of the fortunes of Zion. It is the laughter of vindication, not of humor.

Jerry Clower, in his book, Ain't God Good! wrote, "I'm convinced there's just one place where there's not any laughter, and that's hell."

I firmly believe that humor and laughter is a gift from God, that it is good, that it contains and shows us truth, and that there is healing to be found in laughter. And I also believe that there is a great deal of humor in the scriptures.

I believe that laughter is created by God. And if it is, in fact, created by God, it must then be one of those facets of life that God looked upon before seeing that, ". . .it was very good." The point has been made that "we never have to teach children when to laugh; we have to teach them when not to laugh." (Robert Parrott in The Ontology of Humor) Laughter IS good, it is a part of what we are as God's creatures.

But I confess, I can imagine someone asking, "If the Bible doesn't talk about laughter and humor in this gleeful sense, why deal with it and make implications about God's creation that might not be scripturally legitimate?" It's a reasonable question. There was an occasion in seminary when my overactive imagination caused me to ask my Old Testament Professor, "If there had been an eleventh commandment, what do you imagine it might have been?" to which he replied,

"If you spend too much time dealing with what is not in scripture, you'll never get around to dealing with what IS in scripture." Good advice. But the fact remains that I believe there is a great deal of humor in the Bible--even silliness. Take these passages for example: from the book of Proverbs--"Like a gold ring in a swine's snout is a beautiful woman without discretion." Sure there's a point to be made there, about our appearances being consistent with our character, but the comparison makes me laugh everytime I read it.

I love this passage from 2 Kings--

"He (Elisha) went up from there to Bethel; and while he was going up on the way, some small boys came out of the city and jeered at him, saying, "go up, you baldhead (or get out of here baldy) go up you baldhead!" and he turned around, and cursed them in the name of the Lord. And two she-bears came out of the woods and tore forty-two of the boys."

Obviously a passage meant to be used when we speak about disciplining children.

And I especially like the picture Scripture paints of Abraham bargaining with God for the people of Sodom. "Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city;" says Abraham, "wilt thou then destroy the righteous with the wicked? . . . far be it from thee to do such a thing. . . Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?" Boy he was nervy. And when God says, "If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will spare the whole place for their sake." Abraham comes back with, and I paraphrase, "Okay. What if you find forty five." And Abraham negotiates all the way down to ten righteous men.

There is humor in the Bible and there should be humor in our lives. Robert Louis Stevenson wrote, "There is no duty so understressed as our duty to be happy." That's not to say we should always be happy. As the Writer of Ecclesiastes says, there is "a time to weep and a time to laugh." Perhaps there is a duty to be happy now and then, because our humor, good or bad, has an impact on those around us.

I am convinced that there is truth to be found in humor and laughter. Stories and jokes make us laugh when they point out our inconsistencies, thereby showing us truth. I went on a canoe ride while at family camp, with my dear and charming wife, whom, at the time, I considered to be the worst canoer on the planet. Looking back, I understand now that she wasn't the worst, she was the second worst. And I, who spoke with such authority on that day, was her mentor. The experience is funny to me now because I see the inconsistency in myself, acting like the expert as I

unintentionally led our canoe into one hazard after another. Humor that points out our inconsistencies can teach us truth.

A friend pointed out to me recently, just how dumb sheep are. He told me how they can't figure out how to back up when they wander into wire fences and so on. They are dumb animals. And my friend went on to say, "When Jesus suggested we are the sheep of his flock, he was not being entirely complimentary. I wonder if Jesus smiled when he spoke to his disciples about being sheep--and I wonder even more, if such a joke was ever intended, did the disciples get it.

I wonder if Jesus ever told Roman jokes--you know, like: how many Romans does it take to change a chariot wheel? Two, one to round up unwilling Jews and the other to whip them until they are done. Jesus could have told truth through such jokes. But there's no record of such a thing. Here I go again, speculating on what isn't in scripture.

Jesus did use humor. Hear these words of Jesus,

"In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor regarded man; and there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, 'Vindicate me against my adversary.' For awhile he refused; but afterward he said to himself, 'Though I neither fear God nor regard man, yet because this widow bothers me, I will vindicate her, or she will wear me out by her continual coming.'"

Jesus used his stories to convey truth. Even funny stories. In humor we can learn truth.

And we can also be healed through laughter. No less than a dozen books in the last decade have concerned themselves with the values of laughter to our health. Laughter has power. It can heal us, but it can hurt us too.

We've all heard someone say, "we're laughing with you, not at you." There is a big difference between those two kinds of laughter. One can hurt, and one can heal.

Victor Borge has said that "Laughter is the shortest distance between two people." That my wife and I can laugh about our canoe trip has been very healing for us. And I say that with some seriousness. Those were tense moments in some ways, especially when it looked like she was going to hit me with her paddle. For awhile the experience put some distance between us, and seeing the humor and being able to laugh about it has eased that tension and brought us closer once again.

The laughter spoken about in the Psalm is more than

simply the laughter of vindication, as I mentioned earlier. It is also a laughter of healing--it is a laughter that follows restoration and allows a people--the people of Zion--to look ahead to brighter days. To move onto healing. And in a spiritual sense, healing is brought about when we see the gap between what we are and what we ought to be. When we say someone has a good sense of humor, we are, in effect, saying, they can sense with clarity how different we humans are from what God created us to be. They can see how inconsistent or prideful or ridiculous we can be. (Parrott p.20)

Frederick Buechner sees much of the Bible in this light. Of biblical stories, he says, "[they] can be read as jokes about God in the sense that what they are essentially about is the outlandishness of God who does impossible things with impossible people."

The Psalmist wrote, "The Lord has done great things for us; we are glad." In showing us what we truly are, poor canoers, or sinners in the most painful sense of that word, humor can work to heal us by giving us a glimpse of what we could be. It shows us truth and allows us to make use of another of God's great gifts: laughter.

A young lady played a lullaby on the piano, while a young child sat next to her on the piano bench.

The four year old said softly, "pretty sounds, pretty sounds."

Which caused the older friend to ask, "Do you think music is the prettiest sound?"

After a moments meditation the child replied, "No. Laughing is the prettiest sound."

"The Lord has done great things for us; we are glad."

AMEN