

Jon-Erik Misz

Preached on: April 30, 2017

"Holy Humor"

PRAYER

*God of knock knock jokes
Open the door to our hearts
Eternal prankster
You always have the last laugh
May it not be at our expense this morning
Amen*

So a day like today can be kind of awkward. We've got people wearing funny hats and costumes and telling jokes. And on this Holy Humor Sunday, we've asked you to come here and laugh. But that can be pretty hard. Laughter often means vulnerability.

On a purely surface level, the act of laughing can include making high pitched squeaky noises, snorting, crying... it's not a pretty picture. To do that in front of another person takes that relationship to another level. And on a deeper level, laughter is a way of building connections with others.

The comedian George Carlin once said, "No one is ever more herself or himself than when they really laugh. Their defenses are down. They are completely open."

The science of laughter tells us that laughter is more than a reaction to something we find funny. It's a form of social communication and letting those around us know that we understand them. This is why people are 30 times more likely to laugh around other people than by themselves. And this is why couples that can laugh more often have higher levels of satisfaction in their relationship and stay together longer.

I've been fascinated with the concept of laughter my whole life. When I was really young, my mother tells me that I was captivated with old Warner Brothers cartoons. She said that I would take a broom and creep around the house like Elmer Fudd saying, "Shhh... it's wabbit season." I grew up watching stand-up comedians. I became engaged in theatre in school. And then I became a middle school youth pastor. And there's a certain level of comedy you must enjoy to be sustained in that role.

And for some reason, I think that the ultimate peak of humor is food-based puns.

Like... what do you call a fake noodle?
An im-pasta

Or... what does a nosey pepper do?
Gets jalapeño business

Or what did the chickpea say when it called off sick?
I falafel

Yeah, I know those are pretty corny, but I was on a roll.

Ok, I'll stop. But humor simply fascinates me.

It wasn't until I began my work as a therapist, though, that I really became invested in the concept of humor. As a therapist, I often see people in the midst of the darkest seasons of their lives. I had assumed that because of this, I would spend much of my days crying alongside others. But I've quickly discovered that I am often beginning and ending my sessions in laughter.

And I think laughter in those spaces is so powerful because rather than hiding some of the pain, it embraces it.

And one thing that I hope to share with my clients is that although it's hard, it's ok to laugh too.

The Bible identifies in several passages the tension between laughter and grief. Proverbs 14:13 states, "Even in laughter the heart may ache, and the end of joy may be grief." In the Beatitudes, Jesus proclaims, "Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh."

Laughter and pain sometimes collide.

One evening, while working as a chaplain, I met a 17 year old girl. Earlier that night she was attempting to light a cigarette while driving her car when she lost control of the vehicle. The car crashed through a guard rail and plummeted upside down into a lake. Her window was open, so water quickly began filling the car. She shared with me that she saw a "friend from heaven" pull her out of the car and tell her to never give up. She then swam 20 yards to shore. I met her in the trauma room and contacted her parents to let them know to come to the hospital. I handed the phone to their daughter who kept repeating to her mother, "I never gave up. I never gave up." When her parents arrived, the situation was still rather intense. I worked with the girl to recap the story, and as we kept telling it, it became more and more elaborate. First she swam 20 yards, then it was 100 yards and she was battling sharks to get to the top, as she was dragging the car behind her, while rescuing a baby dolphin. And as we engaged in this ridiculous story, the mood of the room shifted, and we all began to laugh.

This family still had a long way to go and a lot more recovery, but in that space and time, we understood that it's ok to laugh.

In the chapter before our text this morning, Abraham hears from God that he's supposed to have a child. And the first thing he does, is fall facedown and laugh. Because it's a pretty ridiculous situation. At this point, Abraham is 100 years old. Sarah is 90. Abraham even tries to correct God, saying, "I think you mean Ishmael, my other son. You don't really mean I'm going to have another." But God assures that they are to have a child and call him Yitzak, (Isaac), "he laughs."

For some reason, Abraham neglected to tell Sarah of this news that she would be with child at 90 years old. Maybe he forgot. I feel like this medical miracle might be an important part of the conversation when you tell your wife you ran into God that day. So I also wonder if Abraham still has his doubts. Maybe he doesn't want to get Sarah's hopes up, just in case.

But Sarah is clever. She finds a way to get her news.

As this vignette unfolds, Abraham is sitting outside of the tent when he finds God appearing as three strangers. Now here's where I think Abraham might be Mennonite because the first thing he does is wash their feet and offer them food. Abraham is engaging in a conversation with these visitors when the conversation turns to be about Sarah.

Now Sarah is outside of the tent listening along when she hears the prophecy that she will be a mother. And at this point, she has the same reaction as Abraham... she laughs. But then the story changes. Sarah is asked if she laughed, and she denies it. The text says, "She was afraid, so she lied."

We never learn what she was afraid of. Laughing in front of God? The prophecy being false? The prophecy being true? Beginning to raise a child is a lot to take on at that age, and she admits that she and her husband are exhausted.

Those of you who have experienced the pain of desiring to have a child and being unable, you know that the grief and fear do not disappear as soon as you receive good news.

Laughter and pain sometimes collides.

And for Sarah, at this moment, her pain interrupted the absurdity. It was as if she didn't want God to see her like that. So vulnerable, so human.

God never rebukes her in her laughter. God never tells her or Abraham that their laughter is inappropriate. Instead, God invites her to laugh.

And one year later, Sarah is holding a child, admitting that God has brought her laughter. And she encourages us to laugh with her, even in the presence of God. It's ok to laugh.

I have a dear pastor friend who shared with me of a time he visited Taize in France. Taize is a monastic community that has about 3000 people from all over the world gather together

each week to spend time in worship, music, silence and prayer. They have 3 services a day, and in each service they spend about 20 minutes in silence. So this friend shares of an experience he had during one of their services. 3000 people were gathered in this sanctuary and were entering into a lengthy period of silence. A few minutes into the silence, A man a few yards away began to experience a burst of holy wind. And as he passed gas, there were about 3000 people astutely listening. There was a beat of awkward silence, then a laughter began to grow. And it swelled in this space intended for silence.

He shared this experience with me like it was some profound moment.
Really? When someone passed gas in church?

He said it was a moment when humanity came crashing into holiness. And it was one of the most spiritual experiences of his life.

So this morning, I'd like to enter into a time of silence and whoever feels so inclined to pass gas, you may do so...

Ok, I won't do that, but I want to end with one more story of coming to God with the full vulnerability of humor.

A few years ago, I was invited by a friend to see his baptism. This was a dear friend who I met in high school when he was a devout atheist. We often engaged in dialogue about our faiths, so when he shared that he was going to be baptized, I couldn't miss it. When I arrived for the service, I found him, face beaming. He was dressed in all white to identify that he had been made new. And later in the service, he stepped into the still waters and shared his testimony. He was lowered into the pool and emerged with a victorious grunt. He lifted his hands up into the air and pumped his fists like he was in a Rocky movie. And then he realized what he had just done. You see what happens with all white clothing is, when it gets wet, it becomes very see-through. His arms went from up to down as he covered his body. He was quickly then covered with a towel, but the whole scene was one of complete vulnerability, humor and passion.

It was one of the most deeply spiritual moments of my life.

Laughter is a form of communication. Not just with each other, but with God. When we laugh in the presence of God, we are opening ourselves up to God seeing us in our truest, sometimes most inappropriate form.

Some of you came here this morning experiencing a lot of deep pain. Maybe your experiences match Abraham and Sarah as they wrestle with the limitations of their own humanity through age and parenting.

When you're ready, it's ok to laugh. Because in that laughter, you are meeting God as your most vulnerable, truest self.

God wants to know you, so God has brought you laughter. May we laugh together.