Book 10

Sunday September 6, 1981

"GOD HAS A SENSE OF HUMOR" Matthew 6:6-18, 25-34

Some time ago a columnist wrote an article in the newspaper which deplored the lack of humor and laughter in religion. He wanted to know why many so-called religious people are always so grim and serious. He had a point. Too often religious is thought of as being dull and stern, unsmiling and downright boring.

I still remember years ago in the second parish I served how surprised one person was that a minister could laugh, tell funny stories and generally have fun. She had always thought of religion and ministers as being serious and lacking a sense of humor.

Unfortunately, much of religion is that way. The newspaper columnist was right! However I don't believe that's the kind of religion that is described in the Bible, nor is it the kind of religion that Jesus taught and practiced.

C.S. Lewis in his popular book, "THE SCREWTAPE LETTERS" which is composed of a series of letters from a senior devil named Screwtape to a junior devil named Wormwood, who has just been assigned to tempt and try to weaken the faith of a new Christian, notes that good humor and laughter are not the enemies of a strong religious faith, but rather the opposite.

Good humor and the laughter which goes with it, is a gift from God and the enemy of the devil. Therefore, Screwtape tells the junior devil, Wormwood, that he should not think of good humor and laughter as being on their side, but rather on the side of God. In other words, God has a sense of humor and thus laughter, fun, joy, festivity, are built into creation. They are the enemy of the devil. There is laughter in heaven, but no laughter in hell.

On the first day of history, the Bible tells us, the morning stars sang together. The creation is good and is filled with joy and happiness. As we sang this morning in the opening hymn, "Joyful, joyful, we adore thee, God of glory, God of love." And in the second verse, "All thy works with joy surround thee."

Every new springtime breaks forth into a gaiety of flowering meadows and sparkling streams. And all of us know

that there is an unspeakable gaiety in human relationships; a gaiety that issues in laughter when people enjoy being together.

In fact when friends are together, we have all noticed how even the smallest witticism produces laughter and this is because the witticism itself is not the basic cause, but rather the joy of being together. Someone has described laughter as feeling good all over and showing it in one place.

As babies we smile and laugh before we talk. And all of us know how much of a fuss we make over the first time the baby smiles and then laughs, and how hard we try to make the baby smile. We seem to instinctively know the importance of good humor and laughter.

So, laughter, fun, and festivity are a part of God's creation. There is even a comic side to nature. A row of penguins looks for all the world like the speaker's table a some fancy banquet. The small boy rightly exclaimed at the first sight of a camel, "I don't believe it." George Buttrick liked to say that no somber God could ever have made a bull-frog or a giraffe.

Laughter is a part of creation. It's another way of saying that God has a sense of humor. Children laugh as birds sing because they are made that way. Human beings are by nature creatures who not only work and think, but sing, dance, pray, tell stories, and celebrate. Notice the universal characteristic of festivity in human life. No culture is without it. When festivity, and the laughter, joy and good humor that go with it disappears from a culture, something universally human is endangered.

Jesus Christ knew that God has a sense of humor and thus Jesus himself enjoyed laughing, telling stories, good humor and festivity. He was a happy person who enjoyed life in God's world because he knew that God is with us and that God loves all the world and us. Laughter and joy are an affirmation of life in this world. The Christian faith is good news, not bad news.

Although the word, "laughter," is never used in direct relationship to Jesus in the New Testament, there are a number of evidences that Jesus laughed and had a good

sense of humor. He was a frequent guest at parties and wedding feasts. People don't ordinarily invite a sour-faced, sad, grim person to a party, at least not more than once. Remember the labels pinned on Jesus by his critics? He was called a wine-bibber and a glutton, labels which come from those who resent a person who eats, drinks, and laughs and has all the appearances of enjoying life.

I'm convinced that Jesus was a vital, exhuberant, radiant person. Thus the crowds heard him gladly. And he was a friend of children, so much so that the disciples thought they had to pry children away from him. Children, above all, like a person who is happy and has a good sense of humor.

Furthermore, Jesus must've laughed when he told many of his stories and the people who heard some of the stories no doubt also laughed. Can you imagine, for example, a man straining his water for a gnat, (one of his parables) and then swallowing a camel, without noticing it? Or imagine a person trying to remove a speck of dust from his friend's eye while a plank is hanging out of his own? Or a woman going to the trouble to light a lamp and then hiding it -under the bed or a basket, instead of putting it on a lampstand? I can almost hear the laughter as Jesus told his parables. He also knew that humor can be used in an effective way to get a point across.

In fact the figure of Christ as a clown has deep historical roots. Even in the Biblical portrait of Christ there are elements that can easily suggest clown symbols. Like the jester, Christ defies custom and crowned heads. Like a wandering troubador he has no place to lay his head. Like the clown in the circus parade, he satirizes existing authority by riding into town replete with regal pageantry on a donkey, when he has no earthly power. Like the minstrel he frequents dinners and parties.

Laughter and a good sense of humor are vital for us as Christians and as human beings. Here's what they do for us.

1. First, humor, comedy, satire and the laughter that goes with them carry profound truth. This was certainly true in the case of the parable which Jesus told, and this is why in every age the humorists and the comics are part of

the conscience of a society. With their satire, they show the foolishness of our pretensions and actions. We often do take ourselves too seriously. Thus newspaper columnists like Art Buchwald, Russell Baker and Erma Bombeck, remind us with their writings how ridiculous we are many times in our decisions and actions. They show us how comic life often is in the most common events. We do strain for a gnat and swallow a camel.

I remember in the 1950's when one of the main social issues in this country was segregation vs. integration. Harry Golden, a Jewish newspaper publisher in North Carolina, proposed to solve the integration problem with what he called the "Vertical Plan." He noted that "vertical segregation was all but ended--that is, black and white stand at the same grocery counter and supermarket; deposit money at the same bank teller's window; pay phone and light bills to the same clerk; walk through the same dime and department stores and stand at the same drugstore counters.

He pointed out that it is only when black and white people sit down that segregation takes place. So in the 1950's Harry Golden proposed that legislatures and school boards pass rules that would provide only stand-up desks in the public schools, no seats. Since no one pays the slightest attention to the vertical black individual, this would solve the problem.

2. Secondly, in addition to bringing us truth through the comic, a sense of humor and the laughter that goes with it, also provides a needed perspective on life. It has to do with more than just being funny. As does our Christian faith, a sense of humor, the comic, remind us that nothing in this life should be taken too seriously. The world is important, but not ultimately so. We are in the world, but not of the world. Or as St. Paul put it, "the foolishness of God is wiser than all of us, and the weakness of God is stronger than all our power."

So like the clown, the person of faith can laugh at the pretence of the prince or anyone who over-rates his or her importance because he or she knows we are all human beings and will return one day to the dust. And even more than that, the person of faith can laugh at her own laughing.

In the Bible we are told that God laughs at the wicked because God forsees their downfall. God knows they can't win in the long run. The point where our Christian faith and a sense of humor and laughter meet is not that both see the world as unreal, but that the world and this life should not be taken with ultimate or final seriousness. Only God deserves that kind of attention. Thorton Wilder once said that "the comic tradition in the theatre carries the intention of exposing folly and curbing excess." It carries that tradition within life itself.

Do not misunderstand. The comic perspective on life is not necessarily the opposite of seriousness and dedication. The opposite of the comic perspective is resignation--giving up. The person with a comic perspective, with a sense of humor, can laugh at those who ferment wars and at the same time work for peace.

And of course there's a close relationship between the comic and the tragic. Much humor is based on tragedy. This is particularly true of slapstick comedy. Emmet Kelly became famous as the sad-faced clown--a tragic figure. Rodney Dangerfield causes us to laugh with him as he describes how he gets no respect. We've had the same experience.

Ministers like to tell the story of being in the hospital as a patient for three weeks. For a while it looked quite serious. Then the Moderator of the church tried to cheer me up. She said, "We don't want you to worry about a thing. Last night at our Board meeting, we voted 10 to 9 to pray for your recovery."

I remember saying to a policeman who wanted to give me a ticket for parking overtime--"please don't give me a ticket for parking overtime, I'm just a poor preacher." "I know," said the police officer, "I've heard you."

I remember one time that I was late for a dinner meeting at which I was supposed to give the invocation. The woman who was in charge was very disturbed and finally asked her husband to give the opening prayer. He was visibly shaken, but stood firmly and announced reverently: "As there is no clergyman present, let us thank God."

3. Thirdly, we need a sense of humor because laughter is the music of the soul and the action of laughter can work miracles. It balances body with spirit. A joyful person brings forth peace, healing and light. In his best-selling book, "Anatomy of An Illness," Norman Cousins relates how the action of laughing played a crucial role in the healing process of his own life. Although as Mr. Cousins notes, "nothing is less funny than lying flat on your back with all the bones in your spine and joints hurting," he got the films of many "Candid Camera" shows and was even able to get his hands on some old Marx brothers films.

It worked. He said, "I made the joyous discovery that ten minutes of genuine belly-laughter had an anesthetic effect and would give me at least two hours of pain-free sleep. When the pain-killing effect of the laughter wore off, we would switch on the motion picture projector again, and not infrequently it would lead to another pain-free sleep period. Sometimes the nurse read to me out of a collection of humor books.

Cousins is certain that the action of laughing actually effected his whole body chemistry for the better. It enhanced his system's ability to better fight the inflammation.

Laughter and the joy that goes with it are a vital part of human life. It helps also to be able to laugh at ourselves. I know I sometimes have trouble finding the appropiate thing to say. I ran into one of my former parishioners when I was in St. Louis last weekend. "How's your wife," I asked. "Oh, she's in heaven," he replied. "I'm sorry," I answered. Then I thought to myself that that didn't sound right, so I said, "I mean, I'm glad." Somehow that didn't sound right either. Finally, I blurted out, "Well, I certainly am surprised."

I particularly enjoy the sense of humor of older people. I called on one of our members a few years ago, a woman of 99 years of age. As I left, I said cheerfully, "I hope I will be able to come back next year to celebrate your 100th birthday. " "Why shouldn't you?" she asked, "You look fairly healthy to me."

I believe God has a sense of humor. Laughter is hope's last weapon. As Christians we can laugh and be joyful because life, despite its darkness and tragedy is ultimately in

in God's hands. "Be of good cheer," said Jesus, "I have overcome the world." Be of good cheer, laugh! Amen.