Sunday, January 26, 1992
HOLY HUMOR
Luke 4:14-21

There is a story about a schoolboy who was asked what he thought God was like. He replied that, as far as he could make out, God was "the sort of person who is always snooping around to see if anyone is enjoying himself and then trying to stop it." Unfortunately, this is still the idea too many people have about God, about religion in general, and especially the Christian faith — that it is something that interferes, something that stops you from having a good time, something that takes the joy, fun, and laughter out of life. In fact, some very religious people seem to act that way.

But having a deep and abiding faith in God is quite the opposite. What do I think God is like? As far as I can make out, God is the sort of person who is always snooping around to see where people are enjoying themselves so that God can join them. God created us for joy. In the New Testament, the Kingdom of God is described as being like a joyous banquet where everyone has a good time. As the answer to that first question in the Westminster Catechism reminds us, "The chief end of human beings is to glorify God and enjoy God forever." To enjoy God means to have joy here and now as well as forever.

It follows, then, that to be joyful includes having a sense of humor and the ability to laugh, and being a Christian includes all of these.

C.S. Lewis, in his popular book The Screwtape Letters, which the Adult Discussion Group that meets between the worship services is now studying, writes about the importance of humor and laughter for Christians. As you may know, The Screwtape Letters contains 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 destroy the faith of a new Christian. In one letter, Screwtape reminds Wormwood that good humor and laughter are not the enemies of strong religious faith, but rather the opposite.

Good humor and laughter are gifts from God and are enemies 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. Screwtape points out, "Fun is closely related to Joy — a sort of emotional froth arising from the play instinct. It is very little use to us. It can sometimes be used, of course, to divert humans from something else which the Enemy would like them to be feeling or doing; but in itself it has wholly undesirable tendencies; it promotes charity, courage, contentment, and many other evils." In other words, God has a sense of humor. Joy, fun, and laughter 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 creation, the Bible tells us, the morning stars sang together. The creation is good and is filled with joy and happiness. Every new springtime breaks forth into a gaiety of flowering meadows and sparkling streams. All of us have experienced the fun and joy of good human relationships. When friends are together, we've all experienced how even the smallest witticism produces laughter, and this is because the joke 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 work at trying to make the baby smile and laugh. We seem to instinctively know the importance of good humor and laughter.

Laughter, fun, humor, and festivity are all part of the goodness of God's creation. There is even a comic side to nature. A row of penguins looks for all the world like a line of men in tuxedos. Upon seeing a camel for the first time, a child said, "I don't believe it." George Buttrick said that no somber God could ever have made a bullfrog 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 and fun in human life. No culture is without it. When festivity, and the laughter, joy, and good humor that go with it disappear from culture, something universal is endangered.

Jesus knew about people who take life and their religion too seriously. In the Sermon on the Mount, he warned against being so grim, gloomy, and self-righteous, especially in our religious practices. He said, "And when you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites."

William Willimon, in his book And the Laugh Shall Be First, wrote: "Among all of God's creatures, human beings are the only animals who both laugh and weep — for we are the only animals who are struck with the difference between the way things are and the way things ought to be. In those priceless moments when we are struck with the incongruity of this world, humor results. A stern, smug gentleman slips on a banana peel and ends up sprawled on the sidewalk; W.C. Fields throws a pie in the face of a haughty woman in an evening gown; a mischievous peasant puts the cruel landlord in his place — we laugh."

In these moments when the human situation is exposed, when the so-deadly-serious ones are made to look like fools, Christians sing with Mary before us that such fun is the divine result of a God who "has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts...has put down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of low degree."

Holy humor is at work when we are put in our place, and hopefully, we learn to laugh at ourselves, as well as laughing with others. And whenever we become self-righteous, pompous, know-it-alls, we need to be put in our place.

Justice takes place, says Jesus, when God puts all of us in our place when the first end up last and the last move up to the front of the line. Thus, there is something fundamentally good and holy about our humor.

It should be noted that not all humor is good and holy. There are some kinds of humor and jokes that are mean and insulting — ethnic jokes, racial slurs, sexist put-downs, when we laugh at others rather than with them, and when we are not able to laugh at ourselves and our mistakes and self-righteousness.

In all holy humor, however, there is truth. And yet many religious people seem to want to avoid humor, laughter, and fun, especially in church. Maybe it's because we think in church we come face-to-face with so many serious problems — injustice, sin, hate, hunger. And we wonder, how dare someone laugh in the midst of such seriousness?

People who like to think of themselves as so serious about justice, so concerned about the attainment of righteousness, are often guilty of taking themselves too seriously, of taking too much credit, of overdoing their righteous indignation. As Jesus said, “They only see the speck in another person’s eye, but do not see the log in their own eye.” Reinhold Niebuhr said somewhere that the very essence of sin is to take ourselves too seriously.

If the essence of sin is to take ourselves too seriously, then the essence of grace is to receive the gift of laughter, especially when the joke is on us, particularly when the most laughable incongruities consist of the gap between who we are and who God would have us be.

It is no accident that both revolutionaries and tyrants are noted for their lack of humor. Dictatorships and totalitarian governments see humor and laughter as their enemies. There wasn’t much humor in the Soviet Union under Stalin and the dictators who followed him, and what there was had to be hidden. There isn’t much public humor today in Cuba under Castro. The tyrant cannot tolerate any suggestion that he or she is not invincible, omnipotent, and makes no mistakes. The revolutionary cannot stand the possibility that perhaps the revolution is filled with a variety of mixed motives and that the results of the revolution will never be pure but will be as mixed as the tyranny the revolution seeks to overthrow. Humor puts down the mighty from their thrones.

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

First, humor, comedy, satire, and the laughter that goes with them carry profound truth, and that kind of humor is holy because truth is holy. This was certainly true in the parables that Jesus told, and this is why in every age the humorists and comics are part of the conscience of a society. Satire shows the foolishness of some of our pretensions and actions. Newspaper writers like Art Buchwald, Russell Baker, and Erma Bombeck remind us with their writings how ridiculous we are in some of our decisions and actions. They show us how comic life often is in the most common events. We do, as Jesus said, “strain for a gnat and swallow a camel.”

Secondly, humor can be holy because, in addition to bringing us truth through comedy, humor provides a needed perspective in life. It is more than just being funny. Our Christian faith and humor both 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. 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.”

Like a clown, the person of faith can laugh at the pretense of anyone who overestimates their importance because the person of faith knows that we are all human beings and will one day return to the dust. As the Book of Proverbs says, the person of faith can “laugh at the times to come.”

In the Bible, we are told that God laughs at the wicked because God foresees their downfall. God knows evil can’t win in the long run. Thornton Wilder once said, “The comic tradition in the theater carries the intention of exposing folly and curbing excess.” It carries that tradition in life itself.

There's also a close relationship between the comic and the tragic. Much humor is based on tragedy because it gives us a way of laughing at our misfortune, which helps us transcend it. Emmet Kelly became famous as the sad-faced clown — a tragic figure.

Ministers like to tell the story about another minister who was in the hospital for three weeks and almost died. Then the Moderator of the church came to visit and tried to cheer up the minister. She said, "We don't want you to worry about a thing. In fact, last night at our Board meeting, we voted 10 to 9 to pray for your recovery."

Thirdly, humor can be holy because laughter is the music of the soul, and the act of laughing can work miracles. Laughter can be healing, as Norman Cousins discovered and wrote about in his book, Anatomy of an Illness. Laughter brings the body and spirit into harmony.

Humor and laughter also connect people. When we can laugh together, we are joined in spirit. We've all experienced being in a tense situation in a group, and then someone says something funny. We laugh together, and the tension is released.

All of this is why holy humor is deeply rooted in the tradition of the church. According to Conrad Hyers, who wrote And God Created Laughter: The Bible as Divine Comedy, an unusual custom developed in the early Greek Orthodox Christian tradition. On the day after Easter, clergy and laity would gather in the church to tell stories, jokes, and anecdotes. This was considered the most fitting way to celebrate the big joke that God had pulled on Satan in the resurrection. A similar custom has been preserved in some rural Slavic areas where, on the day after Easter, folk dancing and feasting take place in the churchyard.

In an attempt to recover this ancient tradition, the managing editor of the Minneapolis Catholic Bulletin sponsored a religious joke contest after Easter a few years ago. Here are two examples of those that were published:

It's the first Easter Sunday, and the Apostle John excitedly approaches the Apostle Peter. He tells him the good news and the bad news. "Give me the good news first," Peter says. "The good news is that Jesus has risen just as he promised," John tells him. "That's terrific," Peter replies. "But what's the bad news?" "He's still pretty steamed about last Friday," answers John.

The contest winner was this one: A young woman was talking with the Virgin Mary in heaven and asked her if she could ask a personal question. Mary agreed. "Mary, I noticed that you always look sort of sad in the statues and pictures of you holding the baby Jesus," said the young woman. "Why were you sad?" Mary pulled the young woman aside. "I've never told this to anyone before," she whispered, "But I was kind of hoping for a girl."

Holy humor. As Christians, we can tell jokes, laugh, and be joyful because life, despite its darkness and tragedy, is ultimately in God's hands. "Be of good cheer," said Jesus, "I have overcome the world." Be of good cheer. Laugh. Amen.