Sunday, July 20, 2003
FIRST ANNUAL JOKE SERMON: DON'T QUIT LAUGHING
Mark 6:30-32

At least once a year on the radio program Prairie Home Companion, the host, Garrison Keillor, fills the entire show with one joke after another. If you have ever heard that annual program, it's hilarious. I've purchased every tape recording of these programs that I can find, and when I'm driving on a long trip, there's nothing more enjoyable than listening to one joke after another. So the idea came to me last week: why not preach an annual joke sermon?

There are a number of good practical and theological reasons for beginning this tradition. The practical reasons are these: first, I have a lot of jokes that I've never had the chance to use in a sermon. I also have a lot of jokes that cannot be used in a sermon. Second, I thought it might improve church attendance in the summer.

The theological reasons are these: first of all, as one newspaper columnist noted, people who claim to be religious frequently give the appearance of always being grim and serious. You get the idea from them that religion is dull, stern, lacking in humor, and downright boring. You wonder, where is the joy, the laughter?

Jokes and laughter can keep you from taking life, yourself, and even your religion too seriously. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warned against being so grim, gloomy, and self-righteous, especially in our religious practices. He said, "When you fast, do not look dismal like the hypocrites."

There is the story about a young boy who was asked what he thought God was like. He said that it seemed to him that God is the sort of being who is always snooping around to see if anyone is enjoying himself and then trying to stop it. That's still the idea too many people have about God, about religion in general, and especially the Christian faith. Too many people see religion as something that interferes, something that stops you from having a good time or enjoying life — something that takes the joy, fun, and laughter out of life.

Quite the contrary is true. To have a deep and abiding faith in God gives you a joyful outlook. One of my favorite Bible verses is, "This is the day that God has made. Let us rejoice (let us have fun) and be glad in it." As I have said in previous sermons, the Christian way, with its Jewish heritage, has three basic guidelines: Life is good! Be happy now! Let it go! Having a sense of humor, being able to laugh, undergirds these three principles. I like to picture God as the sort of energy that is always seeking out people who are enjoying themselves and joining them in their laughter. God created you for joy. In the New Testament of the Bible, to be in the presence of God is described as being like a joyous banquet where everyone is having a good time. The banquet hall is filled with laughter.

Many observers of all the species that inhabit the earth have pointed out that among all of God's creatures, human beings are the only ones who both laugh and weep, for we are the only ones who are aware of the difference between the way things are and the way things ought to be. In those delightful moments when we are struck with the incongruity of this world, humor and laughter take place. 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.

There are things going on today in the world that make you want to cry, and it is precisely in these times that you also need to laugh. Laughter has healing qualities within it.

In the scripture reading from Mark's gospel, the disciples were being very serious. They gathered around Jesus and told him all the things they had done and taught. He had previously sent them out two by two, and now they were reporting back to him. Jesus then said, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest awhile," for many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. I like to think that he took them apart so they could tell jokes and laugh. They had worked hard. Now they needed to relax and have fun. They were being too solemn.

You also need to laugh because life is funny, especially if you can laugh at yourself. Now, let's get to some jokes, some of them religious in nature, others not religious. If you've heard them before, I hope you will laugh anyway. Here's a joke a musician told me, and it wasn't Jack Levick, although it's the kind of joke he prefers. Three grave robbers decided to dig up Beethoven's grave. When they did, they found him erasing his Fifth Symphony. "Beethoven!" they cried. "What are you doing?" Beethoven looked up and said, "I'm decomposing!"

Children say funny things quite naturally. Following the baptism of his baby sister in church, Jonathan sobbed all the way home in the back seat of the car. His dad asked, "Jonathan, what's wrong?" There was no answer. He asked again. No answer. When his dad asked the third time what was wrong, Jonathan said, "That minister, he said he wanted us brought up in a Christian home, but I want to stay with you guys."

A parent told me she was teaching her daughter the Lord's Prayer. When the time came for the little girl to say it all by herself for the first time, she carefully said every word, and her mother swelled with pride. As she was nearing the end, she said, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us some e-mail."

I overheard two of our church members arguing about which one of them was the most religious. Finally, one said to the other, "I'll bet you five dollars that you can't say the Lord's Prayer." The other replied, "I'll take that bet." He began to pray, "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep." Before he could finish, his friend replied, "Here's your five dollars. I didn't think you could do it."

I also overheard two church members talking after a worship service one Sunday morning. One woman said to her friend, "The minister kept talking about the epistles this morning in the sermon. I'm embarrassed to admit that I don't know what the epistles are." Her friend replied, "That's easy. The epistles are the wives of the apostles."

A mother was preparing pancakes for her two daughters, Sarah, 5, and Rebecca, 3. The girls began to argue over who would get the first pancake. Their mother saw the perfect opportunity for a religious lesson. She said, "If Jesus were sitting here, he would say, 'Let my sister have the first pancake, I can wait.'" Sarah turned to her younger sister and said, "Rebecca, you can be Jesus."

Life is funny. Do you ever wonder about weird things? I do. Last week I wondered, "Why do priests, ministers, and rabbis only get together in jokes?" I also wondered, "Are members of the Hammond family organ donors?" Someone said to me, "I'm not an organ donor, but once I gave an old piano to the Salvation Army." Here's another question that's been bothering me. Who was Absorbine Sr.? I have on my desk a legal pad. I wonder, is there an illegal pad?

I've noticed also how names for products change. I went into a department store for pajamas, and they are now called "sleepwear." Swimsuits have become "swimwear," and shoes and socks, "footwear." There's "leisurewear," "sportswear," and "evening wear."

Not only do names of products change, but definitions also change. Last week on the flight back from Amsterdam to Minneapolis, the flight attendant stated that "in the event of a water landing," we were to use our seat cushions as flotation devices. I didn't know a Boeing 747 could land on water. Speaking of flying, someone told me that chewing gum would keep my ears from popping while flying. They were right. Now if I can figure out a way to get the gum out of my ears. I've also wondered, if something in the future is canceled, what is canceled? What has really happened? Something that didn't occur yet is now never going to occur at all. Does that qualify as an event?

Sometimes in a television commercial, they tell you that a product is "good for headaches." I don't want something that's good for headaches. I want something that's bad for headaches and good for me.

Here's some humorous trivia. Did you know that if you put the words "the" and "IRS" together, it spells "theirs"?

Middle age is difficult to define. But one person said, "It's when you pick your cereal for the fiber, not for the toy."

Life is funny! When someone tells me they're going to fix a chicken, I always think, maybe it isn't really broken. Maybe it just needs a little oil.

Now let's change the subject. Marriage is something you grow to appreciate as you mature.

Groucho Marx said, "I was married by a judge.... I should have asked for a jury."
Phyllis Diller said, "Never go to bed mad. Stay up and fight."
A man said to his wife one day, "I don't know how you can be so stupid and beautiful at the same time." The wife responded, "Allow me to explain. God made me beautiful so you would be attracted to me. God made me stupid so I would be attracted to you."

A backwoods mountaineer one day found a mirror which a tourist had lost. Looking into it, he said, "Well, if it ain't my old dad. I never knew he had his picture took." He took the mirror home and sneaked into the attic to hide it. But his actions didn't escape his suspicious wife. That night while he slept, she slipped into the attic and found the mirror. "Hmmm," she said as she looked into the mirror, "So that's the old hag he's been chasing."

Speaking of women, Andy Rooney, who always ends the TV program 60 Minutes with a brief commentary, had this to say about the advantages of older women:

"As I grow in age, I value women who are over 40 most of all. Here are a few reasons why. An older woman will never wake you in the middle of the night to ask, 'What are you thinking?' She doesn't care what you think."

"If any older woman doesn't want to watch the game, she doesn't sit around and whine about it. She does something she wants to do, and it's usually more interesting. Older women are generous with praise, often undeserved. They know what it is like to be unappreciated. Women

get psychic as they age. You never have to confess your sins to an older woman. She already knows."

I remember calling on an older woman in an assisted living center. It was her 99th birthday. As I was preparing to leave, 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 pretty good to me."

Speaking of the wisdom of older women, there is the story of an elderly woman who died. In her will, she specified that no male pallbearers were to be used in her funeral, only women. In her handwritten instructions for her funeral service, she wrote, "They wouldn't take me out while I was alive, so they are not going to take me out when I'm dead."

Some years ago, I was visiting a church that I had previously served as pastor. I was visiting with a man that I had not seen for a long time. "How's your wife, Mary?" I asked. "Oh, she's in heaven," he replied. "I'm sorry," I answered. Then I thought to myself, that didn't sound right, so I said, "I'm glad." He looked at me kind of puzzled. Then, trying to be as sensitive as possible, I blurted out, "Well, I certainly am surprised." That didn't sound right either.

A minister who was fond of strong beverages was given a bottle of cherry brandy by a waggish parishioner on the condition that it would be acknowledged in the church newsletter. The next issue of the newsletter said, "The pastor wishes to thank Mrs. Jones for her gift of fruit and the spirit in which it was given."

A minister's daughter returned home at 3 a.m. from a dance, far later than her curfew time. Her father greeted her sternly at the door with, "Good morning, child of Satan." Respectfully, she answered, "Good morning, Father."

The hostess for the banquet was disturbed. Her minister was late, and he was to give the opening prayer. Finally, she asked her husband to fill in. He was visibly shaken, but stood firmly and announced reverently, "As there is no clergy present, let us thank God."

I was once asked to give the commencement speech at a high school. Right before we went on the platform, the principal said to me, "Otis, think of yourself as the body at an Irish wake. They need you to have the party, but no one expects you to say very much."

There was a guy who stopped at a traffic light and saw that the car ahead of him had a "Honk if you love Jesus" bumper sticker. Playing along, he gently beeped his horn. The elderly woman driving the car in front stuck her head out the window and yelled back at him, "Open your eyes, you jerk! Can't you see the light's still red?"

That's enough jokes for this first annual joke sermon. The important point is: don't quit laughing. Here's a closing poem about not quitting:

When things go wrong, as they sometimes will,
When the road you're trudging seems all uphill,
When the funds are low and the debts are high,
And you want to smile, but you have to sigh,
When care is pressing you down a bit,
Rest if you must — but don't quit.

Laugh! Amen.