Sunday, July 18, 2004
SECOND ANNUAL JOKE SERMON: DON'T QUIT LAUGHING #2
Luke 10:38-42

Robert Louis Stevenson believed it was a Christian's responsibility to enjoy life in God's creation here and now. He would've agreed with the first question and answer in the Westminster Catechism: "What is the chief end of human beings?" Answer: "To glorify God and enjoy God forever." Stevenson said, "There is no duty we so much understate as the duty of being happy." Happiness and laughter go together. Adlai Stevenson said, "If I couldn't laugh, I couldn't live."

Unfortunately, too many people have been conditioned to believe that religion belongs in the cloisters and has to do with black robes, long faces, and the absence of laughter. The interpretation of the way of Jesus as dull is an unfortunate distortion of what is found in the gospel stories. Jesus did not make life dull and sad for those who chose to follow him. On the contrary, in the gospel stories, his critics accused him of being a "glutton and a wine-bibber." When he was present, he was the life of the party. People enjoyed being in his presence. He carried with him an atmosphere of goodwill. He said, "Be of good cheer." "Let not your heart be troubled." "Do not be anxious, do not be afraid." "I came to bring life and to bring it more abundantly."

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warned against being grim, gloomy, and self-righteous in your religious practices. He said, "When you fast, do not look dismal like the hypocrites."

He was not a stand-up comic, but he saw the humor of life. Years ago, Elton Trueblood wrote a book with the title The Humor of Jesus. In it, he listed 30 examples of Jesus' teachings where the recognition of the humor is necessary to understand the text. He taught that having a deep and abiding faith in God gives you a joyful outlook. Jesus most frequently used the metaphor of the Kingdom of God as being like a joyful banquet where everyone is laughing and having a good time.

In an award-winning movie produced for the 1964-65 New York World's Fair, the passion of Jesus is portrayed through the story of a clown who represents Jesus. The movie is named Parable. I've seen it many times and am always inspired by it. It's good theology. It's wonderful to know that the God of grace can work through our imperfections and goofs.

Here's a true story of a goof that took place in a church. The congregation was meeting in a borrowed auditorium with stadium seating while its new building was being constructed. It was communion Sunday. For everyone's convenience, there were two communion tables located down in the front of the room and one up at the top of the room in the back. The plan was for everyone to go to the nearest table, pray, take communion, and then return to their seats. The minister got up to explain the process to everyone, as this was not the normal way this congregation did communion. He said, "All of you interested in taking communion may do so as you desire. For your convenience, there are two tables here up front and one up in the rear of the room. So if you don't want to take communion down here in front, you can take it up the rear." Needless to say, my wife and I took communion in the front of the room.

Last summer, my wife and I were visiting our son and his family in Minnesota, and we went to church with them on communion Sunday. In their church, it is the practice for everyone to come to the front and kneel in the chancel, and then the minister and other servers bring the

bread tray and cup tray to each person. Children are welcome. Our four grandsons went forward with us. As the bread tray was offered to our youngest grandson, Justin, he declined by saying, “I’m not hungry.”

One of my favorite Bible verses is: “This is the day that God has made. Let us rejoice (have fun, laugh) and be glad in it.” One of my images of God is that of a powerful loving energy that is always seeking out and expressing itself in people who are enjoying life and laughter.

A theologian was once asked by a solemn questioner whether she thought Jesus ever laughed. She said, “I don’t know, but God sure made me so that I can.” For too many people, the Christian faith is a dull, stuffy, humorless affair — a duty to be carried out rather than a joy to be entered into.

Ralph Waldo Emerson’s eccentric Aunt Mary Moody Emerson once scolded a preacher because she saw him smiling in church. He defended himself by saying, “But I saw you smile too, Miss Emerson.” “Well, possibly you did,” she said, “but it was a sardonic smile.”

The 17th-century pietist, August Franke, would not allow children to smile in orphanages, for he regarded humor and fun as sacrilegious. While it is true that Jesus was also a man of sorrow and well-acquainted with grief, he was at the same time a man of joy. Joy and sorrow both spring from the capacity for deep response and sensitivity. Jesus said, “Weep with those who weep and laugh with those who laugh.” Martin Luther said, “If you’re not allowed to laugh in heaven, I don’t want to go there.”

Yet some people seem to be afraid of joy and laughter. I believe that was part of Martha’s problem in the story read earlier from Luke’s gospel. Jesus was a guest in the home of Martha and Mary. Martha was busy in the kitchen while Mary was enjoying the company of Jesus. She could probably hear them laughing and having fun in the adjoining room. She was not happy with the situation, so she said to Jesus, “Do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.” Jesus answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are distracted by many things. There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.”

I think that, among other things, Jesus was saying to Martha, “Relax! Have some fun! Laugh! Life is funny!”

Life certainly can be funny, and it often happens in church. A minister was introducing the time of prayer and got his words confused. He said, “Let us pray for the down-putting of good and the exaltation of evil.” The worst of it was that nobody seemed to notice the mistake. However, at the end of the worship service, an elderly woman whispered to the minister as she shook his hand, “Keep a close eye on your parish this week, pastor.”

Another minister had a kitten that climbed up a tree in his backyard and was afraid to come down. He coaxed, offered warm milk, and did everything he could think of, but nothing worked. The tree was not sturdy enough to climb, so he decided that if he tied a rope to his car and the other end to the tree and used his car to make the tree bend, he would be able to reach the kitten. He began to move the car forward while checking on the tree through the rearview mirror. Suddenly, the rope broke. The tree snapped upright, and the kitten sailed through the air out of sight.

The minister felt terrible. He walked all over the neighborhood asking people if they had seen the kitten, but he could not find it. A few days later, he was at the grocery store and met one of his church members. He noticed that she was buying cat food. This woman did not like cats, and everyone knew it. So he asked her, “Why are you buying cat food when you don’t like cats?” She said, “You won’t believe this,” and told him how her little daughter had been begging her for a cat, but she kept refusing. Then a few days later, the child begged again, so the mom told her daughter, “If God gives you a cat, I’ll let you keep it.” Then she told the minister, “I watched my child go out into the yard, get on her knees, and ask God for a cat, and really, you won’t believe this, but I saw it with my own eyes. A kitten suddenly came flying out of the blue sky with its paws outstretched and landed right in front of her.”

There was a woman who was trying hard to get the ketchup out of the bottle. During the struggle, the phone rang, so she asked her four-year-old daughter to answer it. “It’s the minister, Mommy,” the child said to her mother. Then she said to the caller, “Mommy can’t come to the phone right now. She’s hitting the bottle.”

On the first Sunday of Church School, a youngster handed his Sunday School teacher a note from his mother. The note read: “The opinions expressed by this child are not necessarily those of his parents.”

Another Sunday School teacher asked Bonnie in her class, “Now tell me truthfully, do you say prayers before eating?” “No, we don’t do that. We don’t have to. Our mom is a good cook.”

A minister was walking along the sidewalk in front of his church, and he heard a prayer being said that surprised him. His five-year-old son and his playmates had found a dead robin. Feeling that a proper burial should be held, they found a small box in which to place the dead bird. They had dug a hole and had chosen the minister’s son to say the appropriate words for burial. He gave his version of what he thought his father usually said, “Glory be to the Father and to the Son and into the hole he goes.”

After a worship service in a church, a mother with a fidgety seven-year-old boy told how she finally got her son to sit still and be quiet. About halfway through the sermon, she leaned over and whispered to him, “If you don’t keep quiet, the minister is going to lose his place and will have to start the sermon over again.” It worked.

A little girl became restless as the preacher’s sermon dragged on and on. Finally, she leaned over to her mother and whispered, “Mommy, if we give him the money now, will he let us go?”

A Sunday School teacher asked her class right before she dismissed them for church, “Why is it necessary to be quiet in church?” Annie replied, “Because people are sleeping.”

Children are always saying funny things. Here are some of their letters to God:

- “Dear God, thank you for the baby brother. But what I asked for was a puppy. I never asked for anything before. You can look it up.”
- “Dear God, if we come back as somebody else, please don’t make me be Jennifer Horton because I hate her.”
- “Dear God, I read the Bible. What does ‘beget’ mean? Nobody will tell me.”
- “Dear God, what does it mean when the Bible says you are a jealous God? I thought you had everything you wanted.”

- “Dear God, my brother told me about how people are born, but it just doesn’t sound right. What do you say?”

One Sunday morning, as the minister was giving the children’s sermon, he reached into his bag of props and pulled out an egg. He pointed to the egg and asked the children, “What’s in here?” “I know,” a child quickly answered, “pantyhose.”

Then, of course, there are those wonderful goofs that occur because of misspelled words or awkward wording in printed church announcements:

- “Bertha Belch, a missionary from Africa, will be speaking tonight in our church. Come hear Bertha Belch all the way from Africa.”
- “The sermon this morning: ‘Jesus Walks on Water.’ The sermon next Sunday: ‘Searching for Jesus.'”
- “Church women, don’t forget the rummage sale. It’s a chance to get rid of those things not worth keeping around the house. Don’t forget your husbands.”
- “Remember in prayer the many people who are sick of our community. Smile at someone who is difficult to love. Say ‘Hello’ to someone who doesn’t care much about you.”
- “Don’t let worry kill you off — let the church help.”
- “Miss Charlene Mason sang, ‘I will not pass this way again,’ giving obvious pleasure to the congregation.”
- “For those of you who have children and don’t know it, we have a nursery downstairs.”
- “Barbara remains in the hospital and needs blood donors for more transfusions. She is also having trouble sleeping and requests tapes of the minister’s sermons.

That’s enough jokes for this second annual joke sermon. Don’t quit laughing. Amen.