Sunday, July 10, 2005
THIRD ANNUAL JOKE SERMON: LIFE IS FUNNY
Matthew 6:16-18,34

Last week, I was telling someone who is not a member of this congregation that I was going to preach my third annual joke sermon this weekend. She thought that was a good idea but then asked, “What do laughter, humor, and jokes have to do with the Christian faith?” I told her it was an excellent question. I also told her I would try to answer that question in the first part of the sermon this weekend and invited her to be present at one of the worship services. I hope she accepted my invitation.

Years ago, a newspaper columnist wrote an article that deplored the lack of humor, laughter, and joy in religion. He wanted to know why many so-called religious people are always so grim and serious. He had a good point. Too often, religion is viewed as being dull, stern, 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 always thought of religion, and especially ministers, as being serious and lacking a sense of humor. Unfortunately, too much of religion is that way. However, that’s not the kind of religious faith that is described in the Bible, nor is it the kind of faith that Jesus taught and lived.

God created life to be joyful. The Psalmist wrote: “This is the day that God has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.” You’ve heard me say many times before in sermons that one of the best summaries of the Sermon on the Mount, which is a collection of the teachings of Jesus, can be stated in three, three-word sentences: “Life is good. Be happy now. Let it go.” Laughter is a response to the joy in life. The further fact is, life is funny. Life is also sad at times. Life is complex. Life is difficult. Life is unfair. Life is what you make of it.

C.S. Lewis, in his book The Screwtape Letters, which is a series of imagined letters from a senior devil named Screwtape to a junior devil named Wormwood, who has been assigned to tempt and try to weaken the faith of a new Christian, notes that good humor, laughter, and joy are not the enemies of a strong Christian faith but rather the opposite.

Screwtape tells the junior devil, Wormwood, that good humor and laughter are gifts from God and the enemy of the devil. Therefore, he should try to keep the new Christian from having fun and laughing. Screwtape reminds Wormwood that God has a sense of humor, that life is funny, and that laughter, fun, joy, and festivity are built into creation. Laughter has within it strong healing powers. There is laughter in heaven, but there is no laughter in hell.

E. E. Cummings wrote: “The most wasted of all days is one without laughter.” I am also convinced that laughter is an important ingredient in preserving our form of representative government. Will Rogers said years ago, “I don’t tell jokes. I simply watch the government and report the facts.” I believe the United States is a great country because of our sense of humor. We can laugh at pretentiousness. We can admit that life is funny. It is no accident that our culture has produced some of the world’s greatest comedians.

Life is funny. People are funny. Being in the ministry is funny. In Marilynne Robinson’s wonderful novel, Gilead, the main character, a minister named John Ames, begins a letter to his young son in 1956. Early in the book, he writes this to his son: “That’s the strangest thing

about this life, about being in the ministry. People change the subject when they see you coming. And then sometimes those very same people come into your study and tell you the most remarkable things."

I've found that to be true. People also tell you some of the funniest things. Here are some examples. Years ago, in my first church near Chicago, a woman came to me complaining about her husband. She said, "That man is so stupid. He was stranded on an escalator when the power failed. A priest tried to talk him down. At the mall, he went up to a map that said, 'You are here,' and he wondered how they knew. One of our children asked him to spell Mississippi, and he said, 'The river or the state?'"

One day, at a party, another woman was describing her husband to me. She said, "His idea of a seven-course dinner is a six-pack and a bologna sandwich. The last time I asked him if we could eat out, we ate in the garage. He staggered out of a bar one night, threw up on a cat, and said, 'I don't remember eating that.'"

An older man said to me, "You know you're old when your walker has an airbag, they've discontinued your blood type, your liver spots show through your gloves, your birth certificate is on a scroll, somebody compliments you on your alligator shoes and you're barefoot, and your favorite drink is Metamucil. However, one thing great about getting old is that you can get out of all kinds of social obligations simply by saying you're too tired."

Another person said to me, "Always be nice to your children because they are the ones who will choose your nursing home."

Yogi Berra said, "If you don't know where you are going, chances are you will end up somewhere else."

Several years ago, I had parked downtown, and as I was returning to my car, I knew the parking meter time was about to expire. As I approached my car, there was a police officer writing a parking ticket and putting it on my windshield. I said to the officer, "Can you forgive me? I thought I had time left, and after all, I'm just a poor preacher." He paused, looked at me, and said, "I know, I've heard you."

One Sunday, I was serving as the guest minister in a local church, and I noticed in the printed order of worship something with which I was unfamiliar. Since the worship service had already begun, I was unable to ask anyone about it. So when we reached that particular moment, I swallowed my pride and asked from the pulpit, "What do I do now?"

Someone in the congregation answered, "You say something and we respond." Embarrassed, I admitted, "For the first time in my life, I'm speechless." And the congregation responded, "Thanks be to God."

Life is funny. People are funny. You've probably noticed how obituaries have changed in the newspapers. You can find out all sorts of things about people that you never knew. They all sound so good. Here's an example of an obituary that might be true but which you will never see:

"Uncle Bill had a tough life. He drank excessively. One time, he was so hung-over he had to consult a cottage cheese carton to determine the approximate date. At parties, he was the designated drinker. When stopped and tested by police, he usually set the breathalyzer on fire.

Refusing to drive when he was sober, in the mornings, he rode to work on an electric floor buffer, claiming the one drawback was the time he wasted traveling from side to side. He died an unhappy man."

Obituaries can be amusing, and so can epitaphs on gravestones. Here's one from an old English cemetery tombstone: "Here lies Johnny Yeast. Pardon me for not rising." Another one said, "Harry Edsel Smith: Looked up the elevator shaft to see if the car was coming down. It was."

Life is funny. People are funny. Here are some things I wonder about. When people use the phrase "call it quits," why do they use the plural? It would make more sense to say, "I'm going to call it quit."

Why does it take longer to get somewhere than it does to come back?

If a safe is unlocked, is it still a safe?

Wouldn't it be fun if, all at once, everybody just forgot everything they knew?

Here's something you can't do by yourself: practice shaking hands.

Why is it the only time you ever hear the word "figment" it's in relation to the imagination? Aren't there any other kinds of figments?

I asked a woman, "Are you a Presbyterian?" She said, "No, I'm a member of another abomination."

Have a nice day. You've said it. I've said it. You've had it said to you. It's a phrase with good intentions. Suppose, however, when one person says, "Have a nice day," the other may be thinking, "I've just been diagnosed as having hypertrophic cardiomyopathy, and I'm coughing up thick black stuff." In this case, the well-wisher's words will fall on deaf ears.

A day is a long time. Maybe it would be better to say to someone in the early morning, "Have a satisfying mid-morning." I believe in getting someone off to a good start. Or at noontime, you could say, "I hope your midday and early afternoon will be filled with unfettered joy and many delights." As the day draws to a close, you might say, "Enjoy your sundown."

A distinguished-looking older woman walked into the local country church. The friendly usher greeted her at the door and helped her up the flight of stairs. "Where would you like to sit?" he asked politely. "The front row, please," she answered. "You really don't want to do that," the usher said. "The pastor is really boring." "Do you happen to know who I am?" she inquired. "No," he said. "I'm the pastor's mother," she replied indignantly. "Do you know who I am?" he asked. "No," she said. "Good," he answered.

After a worship service at a church here in Lincoln (not First-Plymouth), a mother told her friend how she finally got her fidgety seven-year-old son to sit still and be quiet. About halfway through the sermon, she leaned over and whispered, "If you don't be quiet, the minister is going to lose his place and will have to start the sermon all over again." It worked.

A priest was coming back to the rectory one evening in the dark. He was accosted by a robber who put a gun in his back and said, "Your money or your life." As the priest reached into his

coat pocket for his billfold, the robber saw his priestly collar and said, “I see you’re a priest. Never mind. You can go.” The priest, surprised at this unexpected show of piety, tried to reciprocate by offering the robber a candy bar that he remembered was in his pocket, to which the robber replied, “No thank you, Father, I don’t eat candy during Lent.”

An elderly gentleman had serious hearing problems for a number of years. He went to an audiologist and discovered that he was able to be fitted for a set of hearing aids that improved his hearing to almost 100%. He saw the audiologist a month later and told him his hearing was wonderful. The audiologist said, “Your family must be pleased that you can hear again.” He said, “I haven’t told my family yet. I just sit around and listen to the conversations. I’ve changed my will three times.”

A Sunday Church School teacher was watching her class members while they were drawing. She would occasionally walk around to see each child’s work. As she got close to one little girl who was working diligently, she asked what she was drawing. The girl replied, “I’m drawing God.” The teacher paused and said, “But no one knows what God looks like.” Without missing a beat or looking up from her drawing, the girl said, “They will in a minute.”

A young minister was asked by the local funeral director to conduct a graveside burial service at a local cemetery for a person who had died and had no family or friends. The minister had never been to this cemetery before and got lost on the way. Eventually, a half-hour late, he saw a backhoe and its crew, but the hearse was nowhere in sight and the workers were eating lunch. The diligent minister went to the open grave and found the vault lid already in place. Taking out his book, he began to read the graveside service. Feeling guilty because he was late, he added some extra words and prayers. As he was returning to his car, he overheard one of the workers say, “I’ve been putting in septic tanks for twenty years, and I’ve never seen anything like that.”

Life is serious, but life is also funny. Thank God for laughter and joy and its healing power. Amen.