Sunday, July 16, 2006
FOURTH ANNUAL JOKE SERMON: THE LAUGH SHALL BE FIRST
Matthew 6:16-18,34

Before I begin the sermon, I want to tell you how pleased I am with our Senior Minister Elect, Jim Keck. From my perspective, the transition is going better than I expected, and I had very high expectations. We are truly having a good time together as colleagues. He is filled with energy and loves this congregation and staff. With Jim, and now with John Cummins joining him as Minister of Music, this congregation will achieve new levels of excellence in ministry. Jim will be even happier this week because Karen, his wife, and his two sons, Alex and Bryce, arrive in a few days.

This is my fourth joke sermon. A few days ago, I was telling someone who is not a member of this congregation about this annual event. She was surprised but thought it was a good idea. However, she asked, "What do laughter, humor, and fun have to do with the Christian faith?" It's a good question. There are some practical answers and some theological ones.

The practical answers are these: I have a lot of jokes that I've never had a chance to use in a sermon. I also know a lot of jokes that cannot be used in a sermon. Some of you have sent me some of those. I've also discovered that a joke sermon improves church attendance for at least one weekend.

Here are some of the theological reasons for a joke sermon. First of all, as more than one critic of religion has noted, people who claim to be religious frequently give the appearance of not having any fun in life. They tend to be grim and serious. You get the idea from observing them that religion is meant to be dull, boring, and lacking in fun and laughter. I believe that the most wasted day of all is one in which you have not laughed.

Jokes and laughter keep you from taking life, yourself, and even your religious faith too seriously. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warned against being grim, gloomy, and self-righteous, especially in your religious rituals. He said, "When you fast, do not look dismal like the hypocrites." One evening last week, I was watching our television program, and I noticed that many of you were almost too serious. Maybe it was because you were listening to the sermon so intently. I hope today to see more smiles.

Too many people see their Christian faith as something that interferes with having a good time and enjoying life. Their religion takes the joy, fun, and laughter out of life.

Quite the contrary is true. To have a deep and abiding faith in God is meant to give 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 laugh) and be glad in it." I believe that to be a follower of Jesus should lead you to enjoy life in God's creation here and now. I agree with the first question and answer in the Westminster Catechism: "What is the chief end of human beings?" In other words, why were you created? The answer: "To glorify and enjoy God forever."

I like to imagine God as the sort of energy that is most keenly experienced when people are enjoying being together, having fun, and filled with laughter. In the teachings of Jesus, being in the presence of God is described as being like a joyous banquet where everyone is invited and having a good time. The banquet hall is filled with feasting and laughter.

In the gospel stories, Jesus is described as one who enjoyed a good time. When he was present, he was the life of the party. His critics accused him of being a glutton and a winebibber. He carried with him an atmosphere of goodwill. He said, “Be of good cheer. Let not your hearts be troubled. Do not be anxious. Do not be afraid. I have come that you might have life and have it more abundantly.”

I am also aware of the dangers involved in preaching a joke sermon. The preacher can be seen as making a fool of himself. But I am comforted by the fact that the Apostle Paul urges us to be “fools for Christ.” Another danger is that there are no truly new jokes. Now with the internet, jokes are easily passed on to others. However, a good joke always bears repeating.

There was a man who was a new inmate in prison. He noticed in the evening after the lights were turned off, a prisoner would call out a number and everyone would laugh. Then another inmate would call out a different number and again more laughter. He asked his cellmate what was going on. It was explained to him that most of them had been in prison for a long time and so they had all their favorite jokes numbered. So rather than retelling a joke, someone would call out a number, and knowing what the joke was from the number assigned to it, all laughed. The new prisoner thought he would give it a try. He had noticed that the number 9 usually got the most laughter. So he called out “9,” but no one laughed. He asked his cellmate, “What happened?” His cellmate said, “It’s all in how you tell ‘em.”

I enjoy old sayings, old wisdom. Here are a few with different conclusions:

- Before you criticize someone, you should walk a mile in their shoes. That way, when you criticize them, you’re a mile away, and you have their shoes.
- Give a man a fish and he will eat for a day. Teach him how to fish and he will sit in a boat and drink beer all day.
- The early bird gets the worm. The second mouse gets the cheese.
- If you lend someone $20 and never see that person again, it was probably worth it.
- Some days you are the bug. Some days you are the windshield.
- The quickest way to double your money is to fold it in half and put it back in your pocket.

I also enjoy unusual questions. Here are some that puzzle me:

- If money doesn’t grow on trees, why do banks have branches?
- If a deaf person goes to court, is it still called a hearing?
- Can a hearse carrying a corpse drive in the carpool lane?
- Why do people say, “slept like a baby,” when a baby wakes up every two hours?
- How important does a person have to be before that person is considered assassinated instead of murdered?
- Why do priests, rabbis, and ministers only get together in jokes?

Someone said to me, “I’m not an organ donor, but once I gave a piano to the Salvation Army.”

An individual trying to understand the nature of God asked God some questions. “God, how long is a million years to you?” God said, “A million years to me is like a minute.” Then the person asked, “How much is a million dollars worth to you?” God said, “A million dollars to me is like a penny.” The person thought for a moment and asked, “God, can I have a penny?” And God cheerfully said, “Sure, in a minute.”

An elderly 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 don’t really want to do that,” he said, “the pastor is really boring.” “Do you happen to know who I am?” she asked. “No,” he said. “I’m the pastor’s mother,” she answered indignantly. “Do you know who I am?” he asked. “No,” she answered. “Good,” he said.

This one you’ve heard before, but it needs retelling. On my numbering system, it’s number 12.

A well-worn $20 bill and a $1 bill are traveling along a conveyor belt at the Federal Reserve Bank to be retired. As they moved along the conveyor belt, they struck up a conversation. The $20 bill reminisced about its travels all over the country. “I’ve been to Las Vegas, to fancy restaurants in New York, and even on a cruise to the Caribbean.” “Wow,” said the $1 bill, “You’ve had an exciting life. My life’s been boring. All I have done is go to church, go to church.” Then the $20 bill asked, “What’s a church?”

Here’s one for our new Minister of Music, John Cummins. Three grave diggers decided to dig up Beethoven’s grave. When they did, they found him erasing his 5th Symphony. “Beethoven,” they cried, “What are you doing?” Beethoven looked up and said, “I’m decomposing.”

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 that I would be attracted to you.”

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 by saying, “Good morning, child of Satan.” Respectfully she answered, “Good morning, father.”

Here’s another version of the creation story found in the book of Genesis that biblical scholars have recently discovered from ancient manuscripts. Eve is talking with God. She said, “God, I have a problem.” “What’s the problem, Eve?” “I know you created me and provided this beautiful garden and all of these wonderful creatures, but I’m not happy.” “Why is that, Eve?” “I’m lonely.” “Okay,” said God. “I will create a man for you.” “Man? What’s a man?” “A flawed creature with many bad traits. He will probably lie, cheat, and be vain and won’t always be easy to live with. But he will be bigger and like to hunt and kill things. I’ll create him in such a way that he will satisfy your physical needs. He won’t be as smart as you and will need your advice to think properly.” “Sounds all right,” said Eve, “but what’s the catch?” “You can have him on one condition.” “What’s that condition, God?” “As I said, he’ll be proud and arrogant and self-admiring... so you’ll have to let him believe that I made him first. And it will have to be our little secret... you know, woman to woman.”

Here’s a kind of sad yet funny story. An elderly man lay dying in his bed when he suddenly smelled the aroma of his favorite sugar cookies wafting up the stairs. He gathered enough strength to get out of bed. Leaning against the wall, he slowly made his way out of the bedroom. With even greater effort, he forced his bony fingers to grab the handrail and he went down the stairs, one stumbling step at a time.

With labored breath, he leaned against the door frame, gazing into the kitchen. Were it not for death’s agony, he would have thought himself already in heaven. There on the kitchen table, spread out on wax paper, were dozens of sugar cookies. Was it heaven? Or was it one final act of love from his devoted wife of 60 years, seeing to it that he left this world a happy man?

Mustering one final effort, he lunged toward the table, landing on his knees. His parched lips were slightly parted. The inviting taste of the cookie was already in his mouth, seemingly bringing him back to life. His aged and withered hand shakily made its way toward a cookie at the edge of the table, when suddenly it was smacked with a spatula by his wife. “Stay out of those,” she said, “They’re for the funeral.”

A minister was giving a children’s sermon during the Christmas service. “Who was the mother of Jesus?” he asked. Without hesitation, many voices shouted back, “Mary.” “That’s right. Now who can tell me the father of Jesus?” There was silence. Then a young girl boldly announced, “It’s Virge.” There were several seconds of silence and she added, “You know, Jesus’ parents, Virge and Mary.”

A man I know was not very regular in his church attendance. One Easter Sunday, he was coming out of church, and the minister was standing at the door shaking hands. He pulled my friend aside and said, “You need to join the army of God.” My friend replied, “I’m already in God’s army.” The minister said, “Then how come I don’t see you except at Christmas and Easter?” My friend whispered back, “I’m in the secret service.”

The laugh shall be first. Amen.