

Life in the Spirit 9: *Laughter—The Closest Thing to the Grace of God*

Luke 11:1-13

Nan Adams preached this sermon July 25, 2010, the 17th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year C,
Trinity Presbyterian Church, Pensacola, FL.

“Laughter is the closest thing to the grace of God.”

This is a quote from Karl Barth, a Swiss Reformed theologian whom critics hold to be among the most important Christian thinkers of the 20th century. His theological writings have been enormously influential to the ways you and I think about God. Born in Switzerland 1886 and passing away in 1968, Barth’s life spanned the rise and fall of Hitler. Teaching in Germany at the beginning of the Third Reich, he had to leave Germany in 1935 because he refused to swear allegiance to Hitler, something for which he was subjected to public trial. He went back to Switzerland and accepted a professorship in Basel, where he stayed until his retirement in 1962. Before leaving Germany though, Barth was largely responsible for the writing of the Barmen Declaration, one of our denomination’s eleven confessions found in our Book of Confessions, the confession for which Dietrich Bonhoeffer was hanged.

Laughter? How did this highly-respected theological academic who lived through the slaughter of the First World War, the atrocities of the holocaust in the Second World War, and the world’s aftermath of Cold War, come up with *laughter* as the thing closest to the grace of God?

Daniel Migliore, professor of systematic theology at Princeton Theological Seminary and a Barthian scholar, has reflected that “laughter was deeply etched in Barth’s theology and spirituality.”¹ Laughter deeply etched – how can this be?

Many years ago, Elton Trueblood, a Quaker, wrote a book entitled, *The Humor of Christ*. In it he talks about how easily we miss the punch lines of the Hebrew and the Greek texts because we are not enveloped in that story-telling culture from birth – the world of Old Testament stories and the ways stories were kept alive in the days of Jesus. He also says we miss the punch lines because we can’t see Jesus’ facial expressions, the twinkle in his eye, or hear his tone of voice. Through the ages, Trueblood contends, Christ has been viewed as “mild in manner, grave in speech, and serious almost to the point of dourness.”² The tragedy of the crucifixion has become so central in our thoughts that we have come to see the sad picture as the whole picture. We set aside how Jesus and the disciples scandalized the religious leaders of the day by the way they ate and drank together, and the way they welcomed women among their circle of friends – how could they not have had fun? Could the Man of Sorrows also be the Man of Joys? Yes, Trueblood argues, because “pain and complexity necessitate humor, which expresses so well the paradoxes of life.” He even suggests that, “It is not possible to have genuine humor without...high seriousness and a sense of the deeply tragic.”³

Barth, American Presbyterianism’s foremost Reformed theologian since John Calvin, would agree. Barth “had not just a sense of humor, but a theology of humor”⁴ woven into the whole of his theology and practice of Christian freedom in response to God’s grace. His theology of humor can be summarized briefly with three points:

First, humor for Barth is often and perhaps primarily self-directed. “There is Christian freedom to laugh at ourselves, to recognize the incongruity and disproportion between the sinners we still are and the saints we prematurely claim to be, and thus to recognize ever and again the miracle of our being graciously accepted, valued and honored by God.”⁵

One of the highlights of my ministry career was the day Navarre Presbyterian organized as a church within the PCUSA denomination. Hundreds of people – members, friends, family, esteemed colleagues, even news crews from the Pensacola News Journal and WEAR TV3 – gathered for the day of celebration. The worship service was moving along beautifully, like clockwork, when suddenly it wasn’t. There was a distinct lull in activity, an

unplanned pause, before we realized that we'd forgotten to get out the offering plates. We were meeting in a middle school cafeteria for the first five years of the church's existence which necessitated that we store everything we used for worship in closets behind the stage. Someone jumped up from the congregation, disappeared behind the stage curtains – "crash" went an aluminum offering plate as it flew out of the closet and landed on the floor – before reappearing with the said offering plates for the ushers.

That was embarrassing enough. However, we had trained our children to take up the offering on that special day. My child was 8 years old at the time. As she came around the front of the congregation – me sitting there in the front row surrounded by all my esteemed colleagues – she held the plate out and motioned to me a heaping mound of content, then gave me a "thumbs up" sign – as if to say, "Good take, Mom – real good take!" I could've died.

Of course, everyone that could see this gesture laughed. And on reflection, the building up of the Navarre congregation was for the most part a joyous enterprise. I'm not sure the day event would've been complete without unexpected laughter.

Second, true humor "presupposes rather than excludes the knowledge of suffering."⁶ Just like for Trueblood, Barth sees that humor takes suffering seriously but refuses to give it the last word.

And third, for Barth humor is grounded in the grace, faithfulness, and promise of God. Humor is part of the freedom which is ours to exercise thanks to the grace of God in Jesus Christ. It is a sign of liberation and release rather than bondage and resignation. Grace creates what Barth calls "liberated laughter – laughter made possible by the memory of God's faithfulness, the present foretaste of God's new creation, and the hope in the fulfillment of God's promises." In other words, "the grace of God in Jesus Christ is beautiful, and it radiates joy and awakens humor."⁷

I think we can find an example of Jesus' humor in our text for this morning.

"Teach us to pray" the disciples ask Jesus, and he takes their request seriously. He honors their question like a friend would by giving them the words of a prayer they may pray, especially if they don't think they know what to pray. Finding the right words somehow seems seriously important.

The American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr was preaching for a vacationing pastor in New England during the Second World War. Following the sermon Niebuhr prayed a brief little prayer, something he scribbled down on the edge of his sermon before he came into the sanctuary. Afterwards, a worshipper approached Niebuhr telling him how much that prayer had meant. Niebuhr, thinking nothing of it, pulled out of his Bible the little scrap of paper and gave it to him. The next year that worshipper used that prayer in Christmas cards. Others picked it up and used it and reused it until it has become doubtlessly one of the best known prayers in this country. As soon as I speak the words, you will recognize it; some of you know it by heart: *God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference.*

Just a few words scratched out on a summer morning, but the right words can make such a difference. Later, after the prayer was so widely published, Niebuhr himself was not even sure whether he had composed it himself or remembered it from somewhere else.⁸ Was it his? Someone else's? To whom does a prayer belong? It's *our* prayer. The act of praying it aloud gives it to us. It's our prayer simply because it seems to speak truth to the condition of our lives when we sit in the intimate presence of our God.

Jesus gives his disciples the words of what the Church calls "The Lord's Prayer." You noticed in the reading of the gospel lesson that this version of the Lord's Prayer is different from the one we pray. We usually pray the version found in Matthew, but Matthew sets the scene with Jesus differently. In Matthew the disciples don't ask about prayer. Instead, Matthew seems concerned that the church is not taking prayer seriously enough,

so he provides instruction: "Don't pray like those people over there with big words and fancy rhetoric. Don't pray like those people who pray loudly in public and try to attract so much attention. Pray like this."

In the Gospel according to Luke, however, Jesus has people gathered around him who do take prayer seriously. They ask him how to pray, and he tells them: "When you pray, say: *Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial.*"

O, so that's how to pray, the disciples nod solemnly. *That's* how to pray.

Luke's version tells us that Jesus can see how serious they are, how very, very serious. So Jesus goes on to tell the disciples a story.

You want to know about prayer? he says. Suppose your friend comes unexpectedly to visit late at night. Your friend has been out on the road all day and half the night with nothing to eat, so what are you going to do? Well, you're going to feed him something, aren't you? Isn't that what friends do for each other?

Sure, the disciples nod their heads. We know about friendship. That's what any friend would do!

There's a problem, however: you don't have anything in the house to eat, Jesus says. The refrigerator is empty, the pantry is bare. What are you going to do? You think, I'll go to my other friend – the one that lives next door. Surely they've got something I can give these friends to eat. What are friends for, anyway? So you run next door.

"Next door is your typical first-century Palestinian friend bedded down in his typical first century Palestinian home. It has one room. Mom, dad, all six children, half a dozen chickens, the dog and a goat all sleep in the same room. That's the way it is if you live like most people lived. If you were wealthier, you had a spare bedroom for the goat."⁹

So you go pounding on the door asking for bread. What's your friend going to do? He's going to give you some bread, isn't he? If he won't give you bread just because you're such good friends, he'll give you bread just to get rid of you because if you keep pounding on the door you'll wake up the dog and if that happens everyone is finished sleeping for the night. Of course, you'll get what you ask for!

It is a funny story that Jesus tells here. It's *intended* to be funny. Jesus tries to get the disciples not to take themselves too seriously on this subject of prayer.

We, of course, insist on being very serious. Biblical commentators and preachers down through the ages have written with somberness about this parable. "Does this mean that we have to knock and knock? That God gives only grudgingly to us? That God gives us daily bread only to be rid of the nuisance of us?" we ask.

Good grief, Jesus says, don't you get it? Do you know anything at all about friendship? That's what most of prayer is about: having a friend. So begin by thinking of God as a great friend.

Think about what it means to have a friend, a really good friend – someone who not only communicates well with you, but respects you and your opinions, even if they don't always agree with their own. Someone who knows you well enough to see your faults, and loves you anyway. Someone you just enjoy being with – whether you've got a lot to talk about or not. Someone with whom you can share your hopes, your dreams, your joys, your fears.

And when you're sharing your hopes with this friend, don't your dreams grow bolder and more imaginative and seem more possible than ever? When you talk about your fears they don't seem as dark and awful as they did before. Isn't that the way it is with a friend?

With a friend you feel—how can I say it?—more yourself. You feel better about yourself. More alive, stronger. You remember who you really are. Alone you can forget so many things and get wrapped up in the play of old, harmful tapes – the ones that replay every disappointing thing you ever said or did. With a friend you remember who you are and why you are and where you're going and what it all matters. Being with friends reminds you of things like that.

Sometimes you say something incredibly stupid or you do something incredibly stupid, and friends forgive you for being incredibly stupid. Sometimes the relationship even grows stronger because of that brokenness and the healing that follows. Friendships, like people, as Hemingway said, grow "strong at the broken places."

You know about having a friend. You've probably started a conversation saying, "I don't know anyone else I can talk to about this, but..." Could prayer be like that?

Have you ever started a conversation or ended it saying, "You know, I really don't have anything much to say, I just wanted to be with you." But "with you" means everything. Could prayer be like that?

When we get together with friends we laugh a lot. In fact, I think that's a hallmark of true friendship – how much we laugh with one another. Isn't that how most of us have learned to laugh loudest and best and most freely – those deep, side-splitting belly laughs? Could prayer be like that?

Back in March of this year, NPR host Renee Montaigne interviewed Desmond Tutu and one of the questions she asked him was this: "Have you found that your relationship to God has changed as you've grown older?" Tutu relied, "Yes. I am learning to shut up more in the presence of God. You know, previously, I mean, and I still do, you have a kind of shopping list that you bring to God. But more and more, I think you are trying to grow in just being there. Like when you sit in front of a fire in winter, you are just there in front of the fire, and you don't have to be smart or anything. The fire warms you."¹⁰ And there's an indescribable joy, even a laughter that wells up as you are warmed.

Jesus seems to think laughter is a big part of our relationship, our friendship with God. So he tells this comic story of a friend pounding on a neighbor's door at midnight. To people who want to take prayer seriously, Jesus tells a shocking story suggesting that to take prayer seriously may be not to take prayer so seriously after all. Maybe, just maybe, we don't need so much somberness. Maybe God doesn't have to be approached with precise strategies and special words. Maybe, says Jesus, prayer could be like this: Suppose you had a friend who came to you at midnight. What would you do?

I think it's just that easy – just that graceful – just that "full of joy and gentle laughter."¹¹ Maybe after all, laughter *is* the closest thing to the grace of God. Amen.

NOTES

1. Daniel L. Migliore, "Karl Barth: Theologian With a Sense of Humor," *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* Vol. 7 No. 3 (1986), 276-279.
2. Elton Trueblood, *The Humor of Christ*, (San Francisco: Harper, 1964), 17.
3. Ibid., 29.
4. Ibid. Migliore, 277.
5. Ibid.
6. Karl Barth, *The Holy Spirit and the Christian Life: The Theological Basis of Ethics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 511.
7. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, Volume II Part 1: The Doctrine of God: The Knowledge of God; The Reality of God*, 655.
8. Richard Fox, Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 290.
9. Patrick J. Wilson, from his sermon, "Laughing Through the Prayers: Luke 11-1-13," preached at Williamsburg Presbyterian Church, Williamsburg, Virginia. These indented paragraphs are direct quotes and the surrounding description is edited and paraphrased.
10. "Desmond Tutu, Insisting We Are 'Made For Goodness'", National Public Radio's *Morning Edition*, March 11, 2010.
11. Ibid., Wilson.