

What if He Chuckled?

Does the Jesus of your biblical imagination laugh? When you consider the purpose of the incarnation, of God becoming human in the person of Christ, is joy-bringer an apt description? Do you consider humor a gift from God equal with that of wisdom, patience or discernment? Today we are returning to an ancient tradition known as "Holy Humor Sunday" or "Risus paschalis" -- the Easter laugh.

Here is how some of the ancients' wrote of this humor, this joy:

St. Francis of Assisi advised: "Leave sadness to the devil. The devil has reason to be sad."

Meister Eckhart, a 13th-century Christian mystic, wrote: "God laughed and begat the Son. Together they laughed and begat the Holy Spirit. And from the laughter of the Three, the universe was born."

Martin Luther wrote: "God is not a God of sadness, but the devil is. Christ is a God of joy. It is pleasing to the dear God whenever thou rejoicest or laughest from the bottom of thy heart."

John Wesley said: "Sour godliness is the devil's religion."

The custom of these celebrations and silliness may be rooted in the musings of early church theologians like Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa, and John Chrysostom that God played a practical joke on the devil by raising Jesus from the dead.

So, please allow me a moment to share a joke:

A pastor was speaking to a group of second-graders about the resurrection of Jesus when little Johnny asked, "What did Jesus say right after He came out of the grave?"

"Well, Johnny," the pastor explained, "the Gospels do not tell us what Jesus said."

The hand of one little girl shot up. "I know what He said: He said, 'Tah-dah!'"

Imagine the giggle or chuckle that would have accompanied the "tah-dah!". Perhaps you're wondering about a joke, or joking during worship. Please consider the words of Episcopal Bishop William C. Frey of Ambridge, PA: "What, after all, is a joke? Isn't it something that turns the tables on the expected, something that hinges on the unpredictable or unreasonable? There's nothing more unreasonable than the resurrection of Jesus. And to believe in it is to be part of that huge practical joke that God plays on those who trust blindly in the sufficiency of human reason to unravel all problems and to answer every question." "Easter is the morning when the Lord laughs out loud, laughs at all the things that snuff out joy, all the things that pretend to be all-powerful, like cruelty and madness and despair and evil, and most especially, that great pretender, death. Jesus sweeps them away with His wonderful resurrection laughter."

With this sense of humor, or joy, I invite you to imagine with me some passages of Scripture where perhaps Jesus laughed, or maybe chuckled. Understand that we have translated words but seldom

words describing the emotion with which they were spoken. I know this may be a challenge to some of you, so please just be willing to consider – could there have been a chuckle, maybe?

Let's begin with the passage we pondered last Sunday:

John 20: 22 -- When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them "receive the Holy Spirit"

Think about it – it is much like the breath of God over the waters at creation. Only this is a new creation. And who says that breath was just a gentle "whoooooo"? It might have been an eruption of laughter! "Haaahahaha! Boy, did we fool death!"

Speaking of fooling death, what about when Jesus called out to Lazarus in John

John 11:43-43 – "I know that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said this, he cried out with a loud voice "Lazarus, come out."

The Bible does tell us that in verse 38, when Jesus first comes to Lazarus' tomb, he is greatly disturbed. What he is disturbed at is unclear, it could be the conversation he had just finished with Mary, or his own tears, though I think not. It could have been at the crowd, their attitudes or expectations. Yet isn't it possible that the sheer joy of knowing that death was not the end, the wonder of displaying the mighty power of God could bring a chuckle to the words "Come out"?

Speaking of calling out – what about when he called out the Devil in the wilderness?

Matthew 4:1-10 "Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written: "'He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'" Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me."

Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'"

I imagine Satan as deadly serious, yet can see that Jesus may have been having just a little fun, sparing with the one he knew he had come to defeat. Could he have chuckled, not sarcastically, but with the joy of the ultimate truth?

If it is possible that Jesus may have chuckled with the devil, then surely he must have shared a laugh or two with his disciples.

Matthew 14:15-16 "When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." Jesus said to them, "they need not go away, you give them something to eat."

Matthew 18:23-22 "The Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times."

Imagine telling someone we know well and care about deeply that they are expected to do something outrageous, telling this as truth but also in deep love and affection. Wouldn't, couldn't a chuckle accompany the words, showing that the impossible-ness, without God's help, is understood?

I was astounded at the number of passages I could imagine with a chuckle, once I put my mind to it. Yet I also wonder at my surprise, as I have often said that laughter and tears are both gifts from God, and know well the physical benefits of laughter.

Dr. Lee Berk and fellow researcher Dr. Stanley Tan of Loma Linda University in California have been studying the effects of laughter on the immune system. To date their published studies have shown that laughing lowers blood pressure, reduces stress hormones, increases muscle flexion, and boosts immune function by raising levels of infection-fighting T-cells, disease-fighting proteins called Gamma-interferon and B-cells, which produce disease-destroying antibodies. Laughter also triggers the release of endorphins, the body's natural painkillers, and produces a general sense of well-being.

Cultural anthropologist Mahadev Apte says "Laughter occurs when people are comfortable with one another, when they feel open and free. And the more laughter [there is], the more bonding [occurs] within the group," Sounds a lot like what the church is to be and becoming.

So ends this Holy Humor sermon – or does it end, should it end? Perhaps we should all imagine God, Father, Son & Spirit, chuckling, shout "tah-dah", and take seriously the call of Corinthians 1:18-27 to be fools for Christ, Lord knows our world can use a good laugh.

Please bow with me as I share The Clown's Prayer" of Smiles Unlimited, a clown ministry in hospitals, nursing homes, and prisons, based in Indianapolis

"Lord, as I stumble through this life, help me to create more laughter than tears, dispense more happiness than gloom, spread more cheer than despair. Never let me become so indifferent that I will fail to see the wonder in the eyes of a child or the twinkle in the eyes of the aged. Never let me forget that my total effort is to cheer people, make them happy, and forget, at least for the moment, all the unpleasant things in their lives. And, Lord in my final moment, may I hear you whisper: "When you made My people smile, you made Me smile." Amen.