

JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Find Joy Again! (Holy Humor Sunday)

1st Thessalonians 5:16-18

Sunday, April 24, 2022

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I heard about a man from the U.S. who took his family to Jerusalem for a vacation during the Easter holiday. While they were there, his mother in law suddenly died. So, the man went to talk to someone to make arrangements for her to be flown back to the states. The official he spoke to said it would cost \$5000 to fly her back and only \$150 to bury her there in Israel.

The man thought for a minute, and then decided he wanted to fly her back. The official responded, "You must have really loved her!" The man replied, "No, it's not so much that. You see, I heard a story about a man a long time ago who was buried here and on the third day he rose from the dead, and I just can't take that chance!"

(If you are sitting next to your mother in law today, just shake your head in protest right now. I want you to be able to get through our potluck dinner!)

It is good that we laugh today – this Sunday after Easter. In the Greek Orthodox tradition, the days after Easter are devoted to telling jokes. They tell jokes and just laugh their hearts out. They feel they are imitating the cosmic joke that God pulled on Satan in the Resurrection. Satan thought he had won, and was smug in his victory, smiling to himself, assuming he had the last word. God said, "Not so fast!" God raised Jesus from the dead, and life and salvation became the last words. And so the sound of Easter is not a giggle. It is not a chuckle. It is a big, hearty belly laugh. Why? God has the last word! So laughing is a very holy act!

One Easter a priest and a taxi driver both died and went to heaven. St. Peter greeted both of them at the pearly gates.

St. Peter then led the taxi driver to a mansion. It had everything you could imagine from a bowling alley to a big swimming pool.

The taxi driver was overwhelmed. He thanked St. Peter and ran into his mansion.

Next, St. Peter led the priest to a rough old shack with a bunk bed and a little old television set.

The priest was very disappointed and said, "Wait a second Pete! Shouldn't I be the one who gets the mansion? I mean, I was a priest, went to church every day, and preached God's word."

St Peter said, "Yeah, that's true, but when you preached, people slept. When the taxi driver drove, everyone prayed."

Well, on this Holy Humor Sunday I hope you don't sleep during this message. I hope you will give yourself permission to laugh and be filled with joy. After all, joy is one of the fruits of the spirit. And I don't know about you, but I think we all need some joy and laughter as we live these days.

When I was a child, I recall my parents watching the show *HeeHaw*. A few of you may remember that show. It was a variety of show of sorts with skits, comedy, and bluegrass and country music.

HeeHaw also had Grady Nutt. Grady was a Baptist preacher and a comedian. Grady Nutt had a saying, "Laughter is the hand of God on the shoulder of a troubled world."

That's where I want to begin as we focus on God's gift of joy. **Laughter is the hand of God on the shoulder of a troubled world.** Laughter is a gift of God, a gift that we need in these days.

There is something about humor that brings us to life, that gives us a shot of joy that our souls are desperate for. The Bible makes reference to this:

The writer of the Proverbs wisely expressed: **A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a downcast spirit dries up the bones. (Proverbs 17. 22)**

The prophet Isaiah: **I will greatly rejoice in the Lord.**

The psalmist: **Our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy.**

And the Apostle Paul, writing to the Thessalonians:

Rejoice always. Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. -1st Thessalonians 5:16-18

“This is God's will for you...”

A group of theologians and scholars once cornered the great Christian thinker C.S. Lewis and asked him, “What is the most important theological discovery you have ever made?” Lewis smiled and responded, “I exist to enjoy God's enjoyment of me.”

Did you hear that? God enjoys you! God wants you to enjoy him, to enjoy life, to enjoy the world He has created, to enjoy the people He has put in your life. Scripture backs up God's call to enjoy life in 1st Timothy 6:17: “Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.”

A long, long time ago a group of people in the church got together and thought it was important to put together a list of the most important beliefs of Christianity. They called it “Catechism.” But they soon discovered that the list was too long and difficult to memorize, so they came up with a “Short Catechism.” This was to be a summary of the key beliefs of our faith.

Do you want to know how this shorter catechism begins? “What is the chief end of humankind? To glorify God and enjoy Him forever!”

I come across so many people who won't allow God into their lives because they think God is going to make them give up fun. Many misguided Christians have perpetuated this nonsense. They give off the impression that to become a Christian means the party is over – that being spiritual means being miserable. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, to become a Christian means the party is just beginning. When you have the joy of Christ in your heart you can't help but smile and have a good time.

If you don't believe me, come by the church office during the week. Chances are you will hear singing, laughing, and people having a good time. My number one rule for the staff is to have fun. Ministry is supposed to be fun. I have the most fun job in the world! I get to tell people how much God loves them and that God's love can help them live better lives. How much fun is that?

God created us to play and to enjoy the life He created! I would go so far as to say that God requires us to have fun. The Bible tells us as much in our text for today. I hope you allowed the scene in our text to wash over you. Jesus was teaching when a bunch of playful kids ran toward him. The sour disciples were appalled. You can imagine their reaction. “Children ought to be seen and not heard. Where are their parents? Can't they see these kids are interrupting Jesus? Get these kids out of here!” The Bible says that Jesus became very angry at the disciples. He felt the kids were treated unfairly. He said, “What are you doing? Let the children come to me. Don't get in their way. In fact, unless you can receive the Kingdom like these kids, you will never be able to enter it.”

What did Jesus mean by this bold statement? Children are receptive, dependent and trusting. They bring nothing but themselves and their joy. Jesus says that unless we are able to receive God and His Kingdom like that we will never understand God or life. Wow!

G.K. Chesterton was a profound Christian writer who inspired C.S. Lewis. He wrote something that I have never been able to forget. He wrote that “God is the last child left in the universe.” He said the rest of us have just lost our joy. I have thought a lot about those words and I believe Chesterton was on to something. When we read Genesis, we see that joy radiated through God as He created the universe. When God created you and me, there was great joy in His heart. For example, do you think when God thought about creating a daisy, He just said, “Um, daisies be”? I don't think so!

Tony Campolo talks about the time when his grandson was just a little boy and he would play with him on his knee. He would bounce him up and down, lift him up into the air, and bring him down to the ground. Campolo said that every time he would do this his grandson would say, “Do it again, Pop! Do it again!” And Campolo would do it again. Of course, his grandson would say to him once more, “Do it again, Pop! Do it again!” Campolo says that when God created that first daisy something childlike inside the heart of God said, “Do it again! Do it again!” And after the 4th and 5th daisy God said to himself, “Do it again! Do it again!” And after the 50 billionth, trillionth daisy God was jumping up and down, clapping His hands saying, “Do it again! Do it again!” We have a God of joy, fun, and play!

But something happened to our world. We lost our joy. We lost our sense of fun and laughter. Sin and cynicism crept in and caused us to lose our ability to play. God wanted us to get our joy back, so He decided to come to us in Jesus Christ. One of the things God said to us in Jesus was, "I have come that you might have life and have it in all of its abundance" (John 10:10).

In Jesus God was showing us His joyful personality so that we would get our joy back. At first, the world really did not know how to respond to this. We see an example of this in Luke 7 when Jesus speaks to the Pharisees, the supposed experts of the Jewish Law. They thought they knew everything there was to know about God. Jesus comes along and says, "You just don't get it. I come eating, drinking and having a good time and you accuse me of being a glutton, drunkard and a friend to sinners and tax collectors." Someone once said that basically Jesus was accused of being a party animal! They thought Jesus was playing too hard. They thought they had figured God out, but they hadn't. They thought God was not into fun, games, and play, but they were wrong. They just could not see that Jesus was trying to get us to enjoy life again.

Do you know what Jesus first miracle was in John? It occurred in a small town called Cana at a wedding party. Now, a wedding party back then could go on for an entire week! Jesus was invited to this party. So, I want you to appreciate this. One of the first scenes of Jesus in John is not him teaching in the plains or holding a sick person's hand; it is Jesus at a party! Well, after a few days they ran out of wine. What do you think Jesus did? Help clean up and say goodnight? No! He told some folks to fill several large jars with water and he performed his first miracle by turning all that water into wine. So, Jesus' first miracle in John was not healing the sick, feeding the hungry, walking on water, or raising the dead. His first miracle was making 180 gallons of wine so a party could continue!

You can read the story of Jesus turning the water into wine over and over again. You can send it to scholars and theologians trying to find some great theological point, but you will never find it. The great truth of that story is this: sometimes Jesus did things for fun! Jesus was showing us how to get our joy back and for our joy to be full.

I think of it this way. When I was a little boy and would get grumpy and grouchy, my dad had a clever way of changing my mood. He would not lecture me. He wouldn't tell me that I should be grateful for what I had and not complain. He would get on the floor with me

and find a place just above my belly button and blow air bubbles on my tummy. He would do it until I smiled and gave into laughter.

Quite simply, this is what God did for us in Jesus. God got down on our level and embraced us so that we might get joy back in our lives.

So, you have homework to do. This week your homework is to go out and let yourself be loved. Go hack at a golf ball. Take dance lessons and learn how to dance. Turn on your favorite song and sing like no one is listening. Go rent Caddy Shack (the edited, TV version!) and laugh your way to joy!

I came across a wonderful quote from an 85-year-old woman from the hill country of Kentucky. I believe these words express what I am trying to communicate today:

"If I had to live my life over again, I would dare to make more mistakes next time. I would relax. I would be sillier. I would take fewer things seriously... I would eat more ice cream and less beans. I would have more actual troubles but fewer imaginary ones. You see I am one of those people who lived seriously and sanely hour after hour, day after day. I've been one of those persons who never went anyplace without a thermometer, a hot water bottle, a raincoat, and a parachute. If I had to do it over again, I'd travel lighter."

What would you say if you had to finish this sentence: "If I had to live my life over, I would..."? Don't wait to experience God's joy in your life. Do it now! Learn to play again. Every moment is a gift. This is why we call it "the present." Enjoy God's enjoyment of you. Enjoy your life, have fun and play. When you do, you will be very close to the Kingdom of God. Amen.



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