

Humor Us!

*Preaching and the Power
of the Comic Spirit*

ALYCE M. MCKENZIE
AND
OWEN HANLEY LYNCH

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Preface to the “Preaching and . . .” Series

Preachers are not just preachers. When they step into the pulpit they are also theologians, storytellers, biblical teachers, pastors, historians, psychologists, entertainers, prophets, anthropologists, leaders, political scientists, popular culture commentators, ethicists, philosophers, scientists, and so much more. It is not that they are expected to be masters of homiletics and jacks of all other trades. Instead it is that when preachers strive to bring God’s good news to bear on the whole of human existence, a lot is required to connect the two in existentially appropriate and meaningful ways.

The Perkins Center for Preaching Excellence (PCPE),¹ directed by Alyce M. McKenzie, has partnered with Westminster John Knox Press to create a book series that contributes to that work in a new way. While homiletical scholarship has long drawn on the full range of biblical and theological disciplines as well as a variety of philosophical and rhetorical disciplines, this series attempts to push the interdisciplinary dialogue in new ways. For each volume, the PCPE brings together as coauthors two scholars—a homiletician and an expert from another, nontheological field to bring that field into conversation with homiletics in a way that offers both new insights into preaching as a task and vocation and new strategies for the practical elements of sermon preparation and delivery.

This volume brings together homiletics (Alyce M. McKenzie) and humor studies (Owen Hanley Lynch). Humor has long played a role in preaching (although, as we will find, there have been many across church history who sought to rid the church and the pulpit of humor). Critical study of humor and its place and function in preaching, however, is fairly new. Indeed, as the authors show, an explosion of multidisciplinary research into humor arose during the last quarter of the twentieth century that coincided with the rise of the New Homiletic. A half-century later, it is time for humor studies to be brought into

conversation with and employed for the betterment of the serious endeavor of proclaiming God’s good news.

O. Wesley Allen Jr.
Series Editor

NOTES

1. Perkins Center for Preaching Excellence at SMU, “Perkins Center for Preaching Excellence: SMU,” n.d., <https://pcpe.smu.edu/>.

Introduction

It's Saturday night, and a stand-up comedian and a preacher walk into a bar. No, wait, that's not a good setup for a joke, for two reasons. First, the stand-up comedian would already be in the bar doing an act on open mic night. Second, the preacher would not be walking into a bar on a Saturday night. She would be at home working on her sermon.

Your authors, one a communications scholar with a specialty in humor studies (Owen Lynch) and the other a preacher and teacher of preaching (Alyce McKenzie), have decided to take a walk together down the halls of history and into today's pulpits, classrooms, workplaces, and comedy clubs, exploring the why, what, and how of humor. Owen is a Catholic from London, England. Alyce is a United Methodist from Pennsylvania. Both teach at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas—Owen at the Meadows School of the Arts, Alyce at Perkins School of Theology.

We have partnered in writing this book because we both think that humor, whether in the pulpit or elsewhere, is a uniquely human capacity that can be used to heal or to hurt. Although it is often considered trivial, humor is a universal and essential part of human social life—hence the saying “Whenever two or more are gathered . . . there is a joke!” Indeed, after crying, laughter is one of the first social vocalizations by human infants.¹ Later in childhood, humor recognition and enjoyment are key indicators of healthy cognitive development.² The erosion of the capacity for humor is an indicator of cognitive decline as

we age.³ It has been shown that humor is a key social attribute in communities in which people live much longer-than-average life span than in other communities.⁴

We also are convinced, each from our different faith backgrounds, that humor is a gift from God, part of what it means to be made in the image of God. Like all good gifts from God, humor is meant to be used and used fully for God's good purposes. Humor is clearly too valuable and powerful a capacity to be trivialized or set aside, especially in the pulpit. That is why we have given the book the subtitle *Preaching and the Power of the Comic Spirit*.

Throughout the book we use several terms that need defining at the outset. One is *comic vision*, by which we mean the certainty of the ultimate victory of positive outcomes over negative circumstances—of life over death, of hope over despair—that encompasses our sermons and our lives as Christians.⁵ The comic vision is the conviction of the unthwartable nature of God's good purposes for creation and humankind, despite present appearances to the contrary. It affirms a celebratory context, not just as a future horizon, but as a present reality.

The term we use throughout the book to describe the inclination to view daily life in light of this comic vision is the *comic spirit*. By it we mean, not a penchant for trivializing important matters, but the openness to noticing and employing humor (and its compatriots joy and laughter) in light of and in the context of the comic vision.⁶

Related to comic spirit is *humor orientation*. This term refers to one's predisposition to recognize, appreciate, and use humor. We return to this term and how it can be measured using the "humor orientation scale" in chapter 2. A premise of this book is that one's humor orientation can be both cultivated and put to positive use in our preaching.

Centuries ago Tertullian, questioning the relationship between philosophy and faith in a treatise countering contemporary heresies, asked, "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?"⁷ In this collaborative book, we address a similar question: "What does humor have to do with preaching?"

Formal works on preaching most often warn against the use of humor in the pulpit, using a reductionist definition of it as opening with a joke that may or may not relate to the sermonic theme or biblical text(s). This warning is not unwarranted, since it is the habit of some preachers to reduce humor to the status of the guaranteed opening guffaw, a way to warm up the crowd at the beginning of the sermon. Or

they may conscript a joke or quip to salvage a yawn-worthy expanse of biblical exegesis, or dive to the depths of self-deprecation in an effort to project a down-to-earth, relatable pulpit persona.

Given the ambiguity about its use in our current homiletical context, we see the need for an in-depth, practical exploration of humor in preaching. Recent research in the field of positive psychology highlights the benefits of humor, noting it can promote empathy, buffer stress, forge connections to the world, and help us cope with the incongruities of everyday life. In recent years, researchers in the fields of communication, linguistics, philosophy, psychology, management theory, rhetoric, and sociology have taken an increased interest in the origins, functions, and impact of humor. Humor is now welcomed into mainstream experimental psychology as a subject worthy of exploration and understanding. *Humor Us! Preaching and the Power of the Comic Spirit* harnesses this research in service of the sermon.

This conversation between preaching and humor is for those preachers who are so skittish about humor that their sermons have become arid lectures. At the other extreme, it is also for preachers who are standup comedian wannabes, yielding to the temptation to be more concerned with the comedy than the content of proclamation. And this book is for all those preachers in between who recognize that a “sense of humor” is essential for personal and social well-being, and who sense that unleashing the positive power of humor could make them better preachers, but don’t quite know how to cultivate and use it.

Readers of this exploration of the use of humor in sermons will emerge able to engage listeners more fully by humorous, even entertaining, means. We make no apologies for that! But our primary purpose is to help preachers enlist the power of humor, in its various forms and functions, in offering our congregations deeper, more challenging, and more delightful engagement with God’s good news in their everyday lives and in the wider world.

Humor Us! is divided into three parts. Part 1, “The Gift of the Comic Spirit,” sets forth the theological context of our project: the conviction that humor is an integral part of both God’s character and of our humanity as made in God’s image. It consists of three chapters dealing with God’s gift of humor, humor as uniquely human, and humor and the *imago Dei*.

Part 2 is titled “The Sermon and the Comic Spirit.” In chapter 4, “Adding Humor to Our Homiletical Toolbox,” we take a look at the

communicational, psychological, and social benefits of enlisting humor in service of the sermon. Chapter 5, “Strategies for Using Humor in Our Sermons,” offers a series of strategies for humor use in sermons, each with an example from recent sermons, both by Alyce and other preachers’ recent sermons. Chapter 6, “Three Theories of Humor,” introduces readers to superiority, relief, and incongruity theories of how humor functions. Chapter 7—“The Two Frames: Comedy and Tragedy”—places preachers’ use of humor in the context of the comic vision: that death will be overcome by life and that we don’t have to wait until the next life to experience joy and laughter. This chapter paves the way for our later treatment of preachers as those who are characterized by a comic spirit, as they become more attuned to humor and gain the freedom and skill to employ it in their sermons. “Foes and Fans: Humor through the Centuries”—chapter 8—is a portrait gallery of humor’s historic detractors and, more recently, its promoters.

Part 3 turns to “The Preacher and the Comic Spirit.” Chapter 9—“The Preacher as Jester, Fool, and Sage”—lifts up three models of historic humorists and highlights what preachers can learn from each type. Chapter 10—“The Preacher as Comic Spirit”—reveals the contribution of humor to the preacher’s faith, self-confidence, and relationship with the congregation. “The Preacher’s Knack for Noticing Humor in Inscape and Landscape” (chapter 11) equips preachers to notice humor in their inner lives (inscape) and their congregational and community context (landscape). Chapter 12—“The Preacher’s Knack for Noticing Humor in the Textscape: Humor-neutics 101”—hones their attentiveness to biblical humor. The final chapter, “The Preacher as Last Comic Standing: Crafting Original Humor,” offers strategies from comics on incorporating observational humor and storytelling into sermons.

Humor Us! can be read on one’s own or studied in groups with other preachers. To maximize its usefulness in varied settings, we have placed “To Ponder” discussion breaks throughout the chapters.

Humor Us! Preaching and the Power of the Comic Spirit grows out of its authors’ shared respect for the gift of humor. In the pages that follow, we unwrap that gift, from both social-scientific and homiletical perspectives, describing the various means by which preachers can exercise their comic spirit. We hope that preachers will learn to use humor better to invite listeners into a shared experience of the presence of God, the Creator and orchestrator of the comic vision, the original and ultimate bringer of life out of death. Now, kindly humor us by reading on!

NOTES

1. Rod A. Martin and Thomas Ford, *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach* (London: Academic Press, 2018).

2. Marti Southam, "Humor Development: An Important Cognitive and Social Skill in the Growing Child," *Physical and Occupational Therapy in Pediatrics* 25, no. 1–2 (2005): 105–17, https://doi.org/10.1080/j006v25n01_07.

3. Wingyun Mak and Brian Carpenter, "Humor Comprehension in Older Adults," *Journal of the International Neuropsychological Society* 13, no. 4 (2007): 606–14, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1355617707070750>.

4. "Blue zones" is a label used to describe regions of the world where a higher-than-usual number of the population live much longer lives. A key and common trait of centenarians within these blue zones is a happy disposition and a keen and eclectic sense of humor accompanied by much shared laughter. See Dan Buettner, *The Blue Zones: Lessons for Living Longer from the People Who've Lived the Longest* (Washington, DC: National Geographic Books, 2010).

5. Many authors, borrowing from Dante's medieval masterpiece, have applied the term "the divine comedy" to the eschatological perspective of our Christian faith: the vision that death, tragedy, and sorrow are to be seen in the context of indestructible life and joy, epitomized for Christians in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. We explore the contrast between the classic categories and plots of comedy and tragedy in chap. 7, "The Two Frames: Comedy and Tragedy."

6. Our choice of the term comic spirit was inspired by Conrad Hyers's *The Comic Vision and the Christian Faith: A Celebration of Life and Laughter* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2003), 10. In another work Hyers states, "Terms such as comic vision and comic spirit point to a certain perspective and attitude toward life that are important to a full humanity. They belong to the image of God in which we are created and to the image of Christ in which we are to be re-created" (*And God Created Laughter: The Bible as Divine Comedy* [Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1987], 6).

7. Wendy E. Helleman, "Tertullian on Athens and Jerusalem," in *Hellenization Revisited: Shaping a Christian Response within the Greco-Roman World*, ed. Helleman (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1994), 361–81.

PART ONE

The Gift of the Comic Spirit

1

God's Gift of Humor

“Laughter is the closest thing to God’s grace.”
—Attributed to theologian Karl Barth (1886–1968)¹

A WORKING DEFINITION OF HUMOR

R. Escarpit, a psychologist, titled the first chapter of his book on humor “On the Impossibility of Defining Humor.”² We would love to begin our study with a laser-sharp, universally accepted definition of humor, but Escarpit is right: humor is a slippery phenomenon to define. It reminds Alyce of a game she used to play with her youth group when she was a youth pastor in Pennsylvania years ago. It was called “greased watermelon football.” A watermelon that had been coated with lard was the football. There is no way the game ever ended well for the watermelon! We have higher hopes for this study of humor for preaching than for it to end up in broken chunks on the ground!

Although there may be no universally accepted definition of humor, we use the following working definition by Hebrew Bible scholar Athalya Brenner to guide our work: *humor* is “the capacity to cause or feel amusement.” A *sense of humor*, then, is “the faculty of perceiving humor and enjoying what is ludicrous and amusing and may express joy, merriment and amusement, but, on the other hand, also mockery, derision and scorn.”³ As individuals, we differ in our personal use and appreciation of humor as well as the degree to which we find things funny. We also differ in how often, when, where, and in what company and type of social situations we attempt to use humor in our everyday

life. This predisposition to appreciate but also to create humor is termed one's *humor orientation* and can even be measured using a humor orientation scale. We talk about this in the next chapter, where we encourage you to assess your own humor orientation.⁴

While all may not agree on a single definition of humor, we can all recognize successful use of humor by the laughter or smile it produces. We know it when we see it. Successful humor can be recognized by the response to it, in that humor requires a receiver or audience to confirm something to be funny or humorous. As Shakespeare stated, "A jest's prosperity lies in the ears of him [*sic*] that hears it, never in the tongue who him makes it."⁵

Part of what makes humor so difficult to define is that humor that is successful in one cultural context may not elicit laughter or even a slight smile in another. Humor is found in all cultures, but *what* is considered to be funny is by no means universal. Opinions about the degree to which something is funny (or not) are relative to individual taste, a particular social group's ethos, and wider social context and cultural mores.⁶ When we repeat something we found to be funny to an audience that does not laugh, we name the problem as "an inside joke" or "You had to be there." But in the right context and the right in-group, humor can evoke laughter that is contagious and binding. When enjoyed by a group, humor invites us to suspend personal agendas and practical concerns that can lead to overseriousness and conflict, and revel in the joke or oddity together as a community, be it a community of two or two thousand.⁷

While our working definition of humor ("the capacity to cause or feel amusement") is simple, we acknowledge the complexity of humor: that while humor is universal to humans, we all have individual humor orientations. Successful use of humor depends on context.

AN APPRECIATION OF HUMOR

Mystic Evelyn Underhill says, "For lack of attentiveness, a thousand forms of loveliness elude us every day."⁸ The same could be said of humor all around us. Humor scholars agree that we create humor when we perceive it. Incongruities and situations become funny when we interpret them as funny. Recognition and appreciation of humor are key to activating it in everyday life. And for that, one needs what is widely referred to as a "sense of humor." We hope this book will sharpen

preachers' ability to both appreciate and create humor, not just in general, but with regard to its homiletical potential.

In a book Alyce wrote several years ago called *Novel Preaching*, she earnestly advised preachers to exercise what she called a "knack for noticing."⁹ She encouraged them to develop the habit of close attentiveness to their inner lives (inscape), outer lives (landscape), and biblical text (textscape), searching for signs of God at work. She is embarrassed to admit that she never once mentioned attentiveness to humor. Looking back, she wonders, *What was I thinking?* to make such a glaring omission. Or, better yet, *What was I not thinking?* She was making the all-too-common mistake preachers make of underestimating humor, reducing it to the opening joke or quips sprinkled over the sermon to spice its otherwise bland exegetical expanses. She was regarding humor as a condiment, rather than a God-given human capacity deserving of a central role in the preparation, content, and delivery (embodiment) of sermons. She had an underdeveloped appreciation for the comic spirit and its role.

Owen came to a deeper appreciation of humor's social role in his first in-depth, yearlong, participatory ethnography (a process where the researcher embeds and fully participates as a member of an organization or social group) of a hotel kitchen.¹⁰ As he worked alongside the chefs, he began to realize how central humor was to their everyday sensemaking and workplace processes. This made him wonder why humor is so often left out as a glaring omission in organizational and ethnographic accounts. He has never encountered a social context where humor is fully absent or trivial. So he paid special attention to humor's use in the kitchen (and many social contexts since), recognizing that humor is a unique form of communication because it elicits an observable response (laughter) demonstrating a common interpretation. When chefs laughed at a joke or made fun of a manager (many times without the manager realizing it), their laughter was shared, uncontrollable, immediate, and impossible to fake. It demonstrated a common understanding among the social actors (the chefs) in their workplace environment. By paying close attention to humor, Owen also began to realize that humor's use was not trivial banter but was a significant part of the social construction of work and professional identity. He focused on it as a communication act that reveals how the chefs (then doctors, teachers, and management consultants) used everyday humor to make sense of their surroundings, shape their labor processes, maintain their professional autonomy and identity, and resist managerial control of their craft.¹¹

We took different paths to get here, but Alyce and Owen have both arrived at a place where we enjoy, respect, and honor humor and the place it has in our lives and our fields. As we shall see in chapter 8, many philosophers, theologians, and preachers across the centuries have not shared such an appreciation of humor. Some of the warnings of these detractors concerning ways humor can do damage need to be taken seriously. But we are arguing that humor, when used respectfully and ethically, is serious business and deserves to play a significant role in the proclamation of God's good news.

Homiletician David Buttrick defines the purpose of preaching this way: "Preaching 'transforms' our identity by giving our stories a beginning and an end. As we locate our lives within the greater narrative of Jesus and his life, death, and resurrection, our story is transformed by this encounter with God-with-us."¹² This is an apt description of the victorious future comic vision folded back into our present-day lives, in which we are called to activate the comic spirit and notice the humor that abounds within and all around us.

HUMOR AS COMPANION TO FAITH, HOPE, LOVE, AND JOY

There is certainly no defense against adverse fortune which is, on the whole, so effectual as an habitual sense of humor.

—Unitarian Minister and Abolitionist
Thomas Higginson (1823–1911)¹³

Conrad Hyers, scholar of religion and humor, notes that "it was an unfortunate omission on the part of the early church not to have included humor among the seven cardinal virtues and humorlessness among the seven deadly sins."¹⁴ We wouldn't elevate humor, wielded by flawed human beings, to the status of a virtue, those godly states of mind and heart Paul in Galatians 5:22–23 calls fruits of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control). While virtues generally have a positive impact, humor is a double-edged sword that can hurt or heal, build up or deride, be used for good or ill.¹⁵ Literary critic Terry Eagleton reminds us that the word "sarcasm" come from an ancient Greek term meaning "to tear the flesh."¹⁶ We affirm, however, that when rightly motivated, humor can be used in a virtuous fashion. Let's consider ways

that humor can help create conditions that activate the virtues of faith, hope, love, and joy.

In terms of *faith*, a sense of humor can help us look beyond our foibles and failures to reliance on a forgiving, gracious God. Indeed, theologian Reinhold Niebuhr viewed humor as a prelude to faith. “What is funny about us,” he said, “is precisely that we take ourselves too seriously.”¹⁷ Humor helps us laugh at ourselves, realize our limitations, and entrust ourselves to God’s life-affirming power in the face of injustice and the prospect of death. In this regard it is closely related to humility, the least respected virtue in our culture, which associates it with weakness, and the most respected virtue in Scripture.

With regard to *hope*, a sense of humor can be a sign of hope even in trials—in the crucible of trial the gold of humor can be forged. It has been empirically demonstrated that humor can positively affect psychological and physical well-being and that a sense of humor is a major component of high-hope individuals.¹⁸ One well-known example is a 2003 study in which researchers reported a significant increase in hopefulness among a control group that watched a humorous video compared to a group that did not.¹⁹

A considerable amount of literature and research on the subject of hope has been produced in the past two and a half decades. As psychologist and renowned hope researcher Charles Snyder has eloquently stated, “A rainbow is a prism that sends shards of multicolored light in various directions. It lifts our spirits and makes us think of what is possible. Hope is the same—a personal rainbow of the mind.”²⁰ Humor is one of those shards of light that can lift our spirits, help us endure what is before us, and imagine possibilities that lie ahead.

Romans 5:1, 3–5 offers a theological context for hope, what we might call Paul’s “hope cycle.” “Therefore . . . we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.” As an aspect of God’s character, humor is part of what the Holy Spirit seeks to pour into our hearts to set in motion a cycle of hope rather than despair.

With respect to *love*, the apostle Paul reminds us, “If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal” (1 Cor. 13:1). Humor without love can devolve into mean-spirited sarcasm and cynicism. But when well-intentioned humor is combined with love, relationships are more likely to flourish.

Humor's role has been studied in initial interactions of randomly paired people within controlled situations to see how it affects the forming of relationships.²¹ In one experiment, a group of people who did not know each other was introduced and placed in a humorous situation while people in a control group were introduced to one another during a nonhumorous task. Those meeting in the humorous situation reported having a higher sense of closeness and decreased uncertainty with each other than those in the control group reported. As Oscar Wilde notes, "Laughter is not at all a bad beginning for friendship."²²

Moving from friendship to romantic relationships, research psychologists have found that what is called "affiliative humor"—humor that is not targeting anyone and is focused on generally amusing topics—leads to satisfaction in couples' relationships in harmonious as well as conflictual situations. By contrast, the use of "aggressive humor"—humor that targets others and puts others down—leads to disaffection and dissatisfaction in the relationship and decreased the likelihood of a dispute being resolved in a satisfactory manner.²³

Avner Ziv has studied humor and its role in marital satisfaction. His work finds that marital satisfaction is related to perception of a partner's humor more than the spouse's own humor. In other words, if you find your spouse funny or think they find you funny (or better yet, both!), your marriage is more likely to make you satisfied.²⁴ Humor and loving connections among humans are closely related.

Owen remembers a student who had a particularly quick wit and took his senior seminar on applied humor research. She had just started dating someone new and confessed she had broken up with her last two boyfriends because there was no "humor chemistry." Owen came up with the idea of her taking her date to a comedy club to see if he and she laughed at the same jokes, and especially if he laughed at female comedians she appreciated. The experiment seemed to turn out well since she and the man became engaged, then married, and at this writing are still living and laughing together.

We have discussed humor in relation to faith, hope, and love. Finally, what about *joy*? Joy is not identical to humor, though they often walk hand in hand. Joy is a state of mind and heart, neither reducible to emotions nor dependent on circumstances. This kind of joy sustains us in the midst of despair. Says the prophet Nehemiah, "Do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength" (8:10). The joy of the Lord is given to us by God, not something we produce from within ourselves.

Theologian, poet, and civil rights activist Howard Thurman offers this eloquent affirmation of the giftedness of joy:

What is the source of your joy? There are some who are dependent upon the mood of others for their happiness. . . . There are some whose joy is dependent upon circumstances. . . . There are some whose joy is a matter of disposition and temperament. . . . There are still others who find their joy deep in the heart of their religious experience. . . . This is the joy that the world cannot give. This is the joy that keeps watch against all the emissaries of sadness of mind and weariness of soul. This is the joy that comforts and is the companion, as we walk even through the valley of the shadow of death.²⁵

While joy is a different gift than humor, humor can be an expression of that gift and can in turn enhance it. C. S. Lewis explores this relationship between humor and joy in *The Screwtape Letters*. He presents a correspondence between two devils: Screwtape, an experienced tempter, and his nephew Wormwood. Screwtape is advising Wormwood on how to tempt his assigned human (“the Patient”) into sin and hell. The senior demon laments the power of humor and joy to sustain the soul: “Fun is closely related to joy,” says Screwtape. There needs to be an element of fun, of joy, of hilarity in the malaise of all the pressures we feel every day. Screwtape calls this dynamic “emotional froth,” explaining that the devil does not know the indwelling cause of such joy and that it produces nothing good for hell’s agenda. In tempting humans, says Screwtape, emotional froth should always be discouraged.²⁶

In his medieval masterpiece *The Divine Comedy*, Dante depicts the residents of hell as experiencing self-love that collapses the soul into a black hole of ambition and insecurity. Hell is a deadly serious place. By contrast, for Dante, the residents of heaven experience the joyous, soul-expansive power of the kind of love that is based on recognition of our own foibles and our need for one another. As Dante exclaimed in approaching the eighth level of heaven, “I seemed to see the Universe alight with a single smile.”²⁷

A sense of humor, with its companions playfulness and laughter, can contribute to a stubborn joy even in desperate conditions, to heaven in the midst of hell. We see such defiance in Christian martyrs cracking jokes on the way to pyre, rack, and chopping block. In the third century, St. Lawrence, being burned to death on a grill over hot coals, is

said to have called out to his executioners, “This side is done. Turn me over and have a bite.”²⁸

To Ponder

In this discussion of the relation of humor to faith, hope, love, and joy, we have identified several ways humor can function in our lives and, potentially, our sermons. Humor can help us to

- Laugh at our foibles and shortcomings.²⁹
- Disrupt rigid social expectations and overseriousness.³⁰
- Recognize our need to rely on God.³¹
- Endure painful circumstances with hope and joy.³²

Which of these statements resonates most with you? Can you think of an example of how it has been true in your life? How you might activate it in a sermon?

HUMOR AS INTRINSIC TO THE CHARACTER OF GOD: GOD HAS A SENSE OF HUMOR!

Humor is an aspect of divine character . . . and an element of the Apostle Peter’s declaration “that you may participate in the divine nature” (2 Pet. 1:4).³³

—Theologian Brian Edgar

Being attuned to humor, playfulness, and a sense of the absurd in life around us is a hallmark of a posture in life we call the *comic spirit*. It is also an integral part of the character of God.

It all begins with creation: “God saw everything that [God] had made, and indeed, it was very good” (Gen. 1:31). “Everything” includes humor!

And it doesn’t end with creation. God’s subsequent interactions with humankind depict one who specializes in the dynamics of reversal and incongruity on which a sense of humor and a comic vision thrive. We meet God, who makes a fine art of overturning human expectations, showing again and again that divine foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, that divine weakness is stronger than human strength. As Paul reminds us, “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose

what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are . . .” (1 Cor. 1:27–28). Paul draws again on this sense of reversal in the Christ hymn in Philippians (2:4–11). But this view of God’s sense of humor as revealed in reversal is not limited to Paul. Luke presents Mary as ecstatically giving prophetic witness to the reversal of status of the weak and the strong in the Magnificat (Luke 1:46–54).

Central to many biblical stories and teachings and to the theological understandings that have grown out of them is the deflation of human pomposity, exaltation through humility, and demotion through arrogance. These are consistent themes that a comic spirit notices and that have characterized comic literature, including parts of the Bible, for centuries. We believe they are at the core of God’s character and the divine relationship with humankind.

For example, in the book of Proverbs and in parts of the biblical wisdom literature more broadly,³⁴ Wisdom, understood as an aspect of the character of God, is personified as a woman, standing at the crossroads, calling young fools and those who are no longer young and ought to know better onto her path of wisdom (Prov. 1:20–33; 8:1–21). As a personification of divine Wisdom she delights playfully in the entire created world and is instrumental in its creation:

When he marked out the foundations of the earth,
 then I was beside him, like a master worker;
 and I was daily his delight,
 rejoicing before him always,
 rejoicing in his inhabited world
 and delighting in the human race.
 —Proverbs 8:29b–31

The thirty chapters of the book of Proverbs, with its pithy advice on human relationships, personal conduct, and community responsibility, are presented as issuing from Wisdom’s lips. And when the Wisdom of God speaks, we learn something from her about God’s humor. Wisdom is capable of laughing at our calamity when we do not follow her divine invitation³⁵ and exposing the folly of human beings who tend to be meddling, lazy, lustful, and arrogant.³⁶

Early Christians saw similarities between Woman Wisdom at the crossroads calling disciples onto the path of wisdom and Jesus inviting followers to embark on the Way (Matt. 11:28–30; John 14:6). John’s Prologue attributes the qualities of Proverbs’ Woman Wisdom to the masculine Logos (Word). Matthew equates Jesus with Heavenly

Wisdom (23:34). Paul, describing the cosmological role of Christ in 1 Corinthians 8:6, draws on the vivid picture of Wisdom as contributor to creation in Proverbs 8:22–31ff.³⁷ Woman Wisdom comes to be associated with the divine in Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, and, by some later theologians, with the Holy Spirit.³⁸

These connections between Woman Wisdom and Christology mean that when Jesus as “Wisdom-in-Person”³⁹ speaks, we learn something of the humor of the God he represents on earth. Jesus clearly included humor in his homiletical repertoire. Though the scriptural record does not present Jesus as a teller of gut-buster jokes, the parables present him as having a keen sense of the ridiculous. He used a wicked wit to expose the folly of trusting in wealth, superficial religiosity, and lukewarm discipleship. He painted absurd scenes of a camel trying to squeeze through the eye of a needle, putting a lamp under a bushel, putting new wine into old wineskins, and cleansing the outside of a cup while leaving it filthy inside. He compared the reign of God to a mustard tree when no such plant existed. Such parables would have clearly evoked a wry smile among those attracted to Jesus and anger among his privileged, powerful adversaries.

Alyce heard of a preaching professor who posed this question on the first day of class: “Who is the greatest preacher of all time?” After a silence long enough to become awkward, one brave student raised her hand and hazarded a guess: “Jesus?” “Correct!” said the professor. “Next question: Why don’t we preach like Jesus?” If we did, in addition to learning how to preach prophetically and pastorally in new ways, we would know how to wield humor’s power to deflate human pretension on the way to introducing hearers to the God of humor and joy.

A follow-up question that draws even closer to our subject matter than “Why don’t we preach like Jesus?” is this: Why don’t we preach the God of Jesus? If we did, we would be proclaiming a God who has a sense of humor! Why don’t we preach a God who has a sense of humor?

Psalm 104:26 is a psalm of praise that describes a God who created all things, all nature and creatures, the skies and the sea, and “Leviathan that [God] formed to sport in it!” A God who formed a giant sea serpent to sport in the sea has to have a sense of humor—the mental image alone is worth a smile if not a laugh.

Likewise, it seems God created humans to sport on the land. A God who created human beings, placing them in a garden and giving them both free will and the temptation to misuse it, has to have a sense of mischief and humor. What did God think would happen when those

humans met up with that snake? The scene in Genesis 3 is usually read in terms of the tragic results that come upon the human race. However, the snake redefining disobedience as the legitimate exercise of free will has a comic element. Incongruity, the discrepancy between how we expect or wish things to be and how they are, was born in the garden of Eden! Incongruity, as we shall see, is a key dynamic in humor.

After creation, in one scenario after another, we begin to see God's sense of humor at work. A God who initiated God's covenant with a geriatric couple who conceive and birth a son whose name, Isaac, means laughter has to have a sense of humor.

A God who chooses an obscure group from a backwater region to be God's chosen people has to have a sense of humor. We are reminded of Tevye's sly comment to God from the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*: "I know, I know. We are your chosen people. But, once in a while, can't you choose someone else?"

This God, as casting director for the Bible's odd dramedy, shows what we would call questionable judgment in God's choices of protagonists. People who are too old (Abraham and Sarah), too young (Jeremiah), con artists (Jacob), good-looking but shallow (Saul), dynamic leaders but who don't always think with their brains (David), vulnerable women who survive by any means they can and are disrespected by society (Rahab), a peasant couple from a backwater village (Mary and Joseph), fishermen with no particular education or training, women unlikely to be believed as the first preachers of the Resurrection, arch-enemies of the gospel (Paul), and on and on.

Over and over again in Scripture, God displays the divine habit of reversing our expectations and upending the status quo. Such a God embodies a keen sense of the incongruity and reversal that are keys to much humor: becoming incarnate in a poor family, unable to provide for God's son in conventional kingly fashion; choosing everyday people as his emissaries; teaching about finders weepers, losers keepers; being executed as a criminal; and, in the resurrection, replacing the expectation of the finality of death with that of life. The Song of Solomon, in describing human love, asserts that "Love is strong as death" (8:6). The resurrection's message at the core of God's comic vision is that divine love is stronger than death. And so is divine humor.

Alyce has personal experience of God's sense of humor: calling a painfully shy adolescent girl (no, this is *not* a lead-in to Mary; this is about Alyce) to the very public vocation she has lived out for the past forty years. She would resent it and call it a cruel use of divine humor

if it hadn't turned out to be such a spiritually rewarding, though sometimes harrowing ride. Over the years, Alyce has come to realize she had nothing better to do with her time.

Owen had the opposite experience. It was not that he experienced God's sense of humor in his vocation so much as his own sense of humor helped him experience and find a deeper place for God in his life. He finds humor in most things. He relies on humor in his research, his teaching, and especially in his ethnographic and social impact work to reduce social distance and to learn local meanings. His life focus changed in part due to his (re)reading C. S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity* a decade ago. It was not Lewis's argumentation or theology that grabbed Owen's attention. It was Lewis's style; the trustworthy persona he established through his wit and observations that resonated with Owen. Lewis's style got past Owen's usual analytical and skeptical approach and helped him consider important questions as if posed by a friend. One of the reasons Owen is enthusiastic about this book, *Humor Us!*, is that he believes that people who have the proper combination of a profoundly reflective personal narrative, a hopeful comic vision, and charitably wielded humor are uniquely qualified to take on today's flippant, cynical mindset—which thrives on division and is often expressed through the extremes of egotistical superiority humor. As Lewis describes it, this is “a humor that puts people down as we stand on their heads in triumph.”⁴⁰

Earlier we mentioned Psalm 104:26, where we are told that God created the sea and Leviathan to sport in it. The Talmud (*Avodah Zarah* 3b) teaches that God's schedule comprises daily activities assigned to four quarters of the day, including one devoted to “playing with Leviathan”! What a divine example of work-life balance! For the rabbis, playfulness is a fundamental attribute of God. Moreover, Jewish teachings advise human beings committed to realizing a more godly personality to recognize that humor is a vital part of our perception of the world. We do not have to take everything so seriously. The Talmud teaches that God, in divine omniscience, maintains the ultimate “sense of humor.”⁴¹

To Ponder

When the women came to the tomb with spices and ointments in Luke's Gospel, they found the stone rolled away from the tomb and no body inside. Two men in dazzling clothes appeared and asked them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead?” (Luke 24:5). This

account epitomizes the reversal at the heart of the gospel, the comic vision of the victory of life over death, faith over fate, hope over despair. Can you think of a way in which you have experienced this comic vision, this dynamic of divine reversal in your life? Or discussed it in a recent sermon?

NOTES

1. Quoted in James Martin SJ's *Between Heaven and Mirth: Why Joy, Humor, and Laughter Are at the Heart of the Spiritual Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 15.

2. R. Escarpit, *L'humour* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1963), quoted in *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Yehuda T. Radday and Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1990), 23.

3. Athalya Brenner, "On the Semantic Field of Humour, Laughter and the Comic in the Old Testament," in *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Yehuda T. Radday and Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1990), 39. This definition is especially appropriate for this book as its author is a biblical scholar but also, and perhaps more importantly, it largely agrees with field humor studies.

4. Melissa Wanzer, Melanie Booth Butterfield, and Steven Booth Butterfield, "The Funny People: A Source Orientation to the Communication of Humor," *Communication Quarterly* 43, no. 2 (1995): 142–54.

5. William Shakespeare, *Love's Labour's Lost*, act V, scene ii, lines 934–36.

6. Owen Hanley Lynch, "Humorous Communication: Finding a Place for Humor in Communication Research," *Communication Theory* 12, no. 4 (2002): 423–45, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2002.tb00277.x>.

7. John Morreall, "Philosophy of Humor," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2012 edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://blogs.baruch.cuny.edu/literatureandthebrain/files/2017/01/humor-1.pdf>.

8. Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1999).

9. Alyce McKenzie, *Novel Preaching: Tips from Top Writers on Crafting Creative Sermons* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), chaps. 1–3.

10. Owen Hanley Lynch, "Kitchen Antics: The Importance of Humor and Maintaining Professionalism at Work," *Journal of Applied Communication Research* 37, no. 4 (2009): 444–64, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00909880903233143>; Lynch, "Kitchen Talk: Cooking with Humor: In-Group Humor as Social Organization," *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research* 23 (2010): 127–60, <https://doi.org/10.1515/humr.2010.007>.

11. Owen Hanley Lynch, *Humorous Organizing: Revealing the Organization as a Social Process* (Saarbrücken: VDM Publishing, 2007); Zachary A. Schaefer and Owen H. Lynch, "Negotiating Organizational Future: Symbolic Struggles in a

Fiscal Crisis,” *Journal of Organizational Ethnography* 4, no. 3 (October 12, 2015): 281–305, <https://doi.org/10.1108/joe-07-2014-0017>.

12. David G. Buttrick, *Homiletic: Moves and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 17.

13. Tryon Edwards, *A Dictionary of Thoughts* (United States: F. B. Dickerson Company, 1908), 238. Thomas Wentworth Higginson (1823–1911) was an American Unitarian minister, author, abolitionist, and soldier. He was active in the American abolitionism movement during the 1840s and 1850s, identifying himself with disunion and militant abolitionism. He was a member of the Secret Six who supported John Brown.

14. Conrad Hyers, *And God Created Laughter: The Bible as Divine Comedy* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1987), 5.

15. Brian Edgar, *Laughter and the Grace of God: Restoring Laughter to Its Central Role in Christian Spirituality and Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2019), 19–20.

16. Terry Eagleton, *Humour* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), 42.

17. Reinhold Niebuhr, “Humour and Faith,” in *Holy Laughter: Essays on Religion in the Comic Perspective*, comp. Conrad Hyers (New York: Seabury Press, 1969), 140.

18. High-hope individuals are those who remained committed to goals and believe that their circumstances could improve despite the uncertainties and setbacks of life.

19. Alexander P. Vilaythong et al., “Humor and Hope: Can Humor Increase Hope?” *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research* 16, no. 1 (January 4, 2003), <https://doi.org/10.1515/humr.2003.006>.

20. Charles R. Snyder, “Hope Theory: Rainbows in the Mind,” *Psychological Inquiry* 13, no. 4 (October 2002): 240–75, https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327965plii1304_01.

21. Barbara Fraley and Arthur Aron, “The Effect of a Shared Humorous Experience on Closeness in Initial Encounters,” *Personal Relationships* 11, no. 1 (March 2004): 61–78, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6811.2004.00071.x>.

22. Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1908), 16.

23. Bethany Butzer and Nicholas A. Kuiper, “Humor Use in Romantic Relationships: The Effects of Relationship Satisfaction and Pleasant versus Conflict Situations,” *Journal of Psychology* 142, no. 3 (May 2008): 245–60, <https://doi.org/10.3200/jrlp.142.3.245-260>.

24. Avner Ziv and Orit Gadish, “Humor and Marital Satisfaction,” *Journal of Social Psychology* 129, no. 6 (December 1989): 759–68, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224545.1989.9712084>.

25. Howard Thurman, *Deep Is the Hunger: Meditations for Apostles of Sensitiveness*, 1st ed. (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1951), 160–61.

26. C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (London: HarperCollins, 2001), 54.

27. Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy, Paradiso* 27:4–5, quoted in Hyers, *And God Created Laughter*, 6.

28. Martin, *Between Heaven and Mirth*, 72.

29. Humor prods us to step away from our ridiculousness at times and laugh at ourselves. It invites us to laugh together in ways that can help communities build identity and survive hardship.

30. Humor provides a break from the rigidity or monotony of everyday life; our laughter even sometimes temporarily immobilizes us. See Wallace L. Chafe, *The Importance of Not Being Earnest: The Feeling behind Laughter and Humor* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing, 2007), 1–181. Laughter, especially shared laughter, is a signal that the situation, even a tension-filled moment, is not actually dangerous and we are safe to enjoy it with each other. See Peter McGraw and Joel Warner, *The Humor Code: A Global Search for What Makes Things Funny* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014).

31. A sense of humor in the context of faith can help us look beyond our foibles and failures to reliance on a forgiving, gracious God.

32. A sense of humor, with its companions playfulness and laughter, can produce a stubborn joy even in desperate conditions.

33. Brian Edgar, *Laughter and the Grace of God: Restoring Laughter to Its Central Role in Christian Spirituality and Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2019), 4.

34. Two apocryphal books in which wisdom looms large are the Wisdom of Sirach (or Ecclesiasticus) (200–175 BCE) and the Wisdom of Solomon (50 BCE).

35. Woman Wisdom is not all sugar and spice. She promises those who do not heed her call to “laugh at your calamity; / and mock when panic strikes you” (Prov. 1:26).

36. H. J. Flowers, “The Humour of the Book of Proverbs,” *Baptist Quarterly* 6, no. 7 (January 1933): 312–17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0005576x.1933.11750289>.

37. Alyce M. McKenzie, *Preaching Biblical Wisdom in a Self-Help Society* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 170.

38. Leo D. Lefebure, “Sophia: Wisdom and Christian Theology,” *Christian Century*, October 19, 1994, 953. See also Ben Witherington III, *Jesus the Sage: The Pilgrimage of Wisdom* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), chaps. 1 and 2.

39. Witherington, *Jesus the Sage*, chap. 4.

40. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 43.

41. Daniel Feldman, “Does God Have a Sense of Humor?,” *Jewish Action*, May 23, 2013, <https://jewishaction.com/religion/jewish-law/does-god-have-a-sense-of-humor/>.

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