

Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa
April 16, 2023 – Elizabeth Bryce

Readings: 1 Corinthians 4:9-16
Matthew 28:16-20

Sermon: Laughter IS Gospel

There once was a proud and confident genius who was cousin to a man who was not known for his brains. The genius said to his cousin « Hey you, I'm going to ask you a question, and if you don't know the answer, you have to give me 5\$. Then you can ask me a question and if I can't answer your question, I will give you 5000\$. » The cousin agreed.

So the genius asked him this question : « How many continents are there in the world? » Well, the cousin didn't know much about geography, so he sheepishly handed over \$5. Then he asked his brainy cousin this question : « Now you answer me, what animal stands on two legs, but sleeps with three? » The genius racked his brain to solve the riddle. Finally he had to give up and handed a cheque for \$5000. to his cousin.

The genius said « I can't believe I lost. What was the answer to your question? »

So his cousin handed him a 5\$ bill.

Never pick on the underdog, because it seems like God has a great sense of humour.

Today is Holy Humour Sunday. This is a tradition as old as the Easter story. It's because many who observe Holy Humour Sunday consider the story of Jesus' resurrection God's joke on death and despair. The expectations of the rich and powerful were overturned, and the preacher from the fringes becomes the centre attraction.

From ancient times many churches decided that a lighter approach was needed so that the followers of Jesus could recover from 6 long weeks of Lent, a profound observation of Holy Week, then all the pomp and grandeur of a fine Easter Sunday worship service.

On Easter Monday, orthodox churches gathered to tell funny stories and play jokes on one another. In other places there was folk dancing and feasting. This they say is time to celebrate God pulling the rug out from under our feet. In Latin it is sometimes called Risus Paschalis, or the Easter Laugh. So, in the spirit of the season, Heather Ingrams has a joke to offer...

Of course there's a fine line. Holy Humour can be controversial. What one person thinks is hilarious could be someone else's sacred cow. Since many of us didn't grow up with the tradition of Holy Humour, you might find it a little irreverent. I think Rideau Park has been celebrating it only since 2014.

One of my favourite depictions of Jesus for example, is this one (slide with cartoon): it fits with my sense of humour. And, as usual, Jesus turns the questions back on the one in his audience who doesn't quite get how expansively God's kingdom is going to change the world. Because we even love the ones who ask stupid questions... which I am happy to hear because I feel like I ask a lot of those.

This Lent in our lenten retreat series, I covered the story of Rachel and how, leaving the home of her father Laban, she broke all the rules that the patriarchs and matriarchs are supposed to represent. We talked about tricksters in various cultures, and how these sometimes anti-social characters end up being the heroes in our scriptures because they transcend the social conventions of their time and bring a fresh perspective to the story of our faith.

The Bible is full of these contradictory stories, and sometimes it is because we are thousands of years removed from the authors and the original audience, we don't see the humour which would have been obvious to the first listeners. The bible is full of buffoons who do great things, class clowns who defeat the enemy, and underdogs who end up champions.

In Paul's letter to the church at Corinth, he called on the faithful not to be proud or arrogant in their faith, but to be fools for Christ. Eugene Peterson in the Message translated it this way : *It seems to me that God has put us who bear his Message on stage in a theater in which no one wants to buy a ticket. We're something everyone stands around and stares at, like an accident in the street. We're the Messiah's misfits.*

There are lots of people who use the rationale of their Christian faith to persecute the "Messiah's misfits" of our own world, the people whom we have marginalized because we aren't comfortable with how they have broken down our fixed categories and preconceived assumptions.

When you think about the protest and persecution of drag performances which has been going on at libraries and children's events, you have to wonder if those sparkly adults (the drag performers) are much like those biblical tricksters – they are challenging our social conventions and they also reveal our inability to move with the Spirit.

When I was training for ministry, one of the most challenging forms of worship leadership I learned about was clown ministry. Without saying a word, except for the occasional sign, these ministry clowns led us in some very powerful worship services. They embodied the gospel message, by playing the fool or the interloper who made even the most austere church patriarchs chuckle.

Sometimes they would dress up like a street person, and challenged whether we really meant it when we said we are a welcoming congregation. Then out of their shopping

cart they would pull all the elements of communion, to share with the congregation, and even though we really didn't know quite what to think of them, we all broke bread together.

I am not the dramatic type, I can't say I ever felt that I had the vocation or the gifts and skills that are essential for a good clown ministry. But King Jules, who preached for us in drag last year, and will do so again this year, they feel they express themselves best as a drag clown – by taking the best of both traditions – the sparkly over the top drag performer, and the funny profound clown minister.

They do this to preach the gospel in a way that surprises and unsettles us and thus deepens our understanding of what it means to receive a Living Word. Not a word that is two or three thousand years old. Not a commandment that was engraved on stone tablets and then stayed that way. Not a museum exhibit pointing to the way things used to be. But instead a living word that is accessible to modern forms of culture and communication, and that speaks to the hearts and minds of 21st century people.

Jesus was not afraid to be criticized for colouring outside the lines. Neither was he afraid to fail. A necessary element of his ministry was his ability to step through the walls that enclosed or limited God's Spirit at work. He called his disciples to do the same, to *"Go out and train everyone you meet, far and near, in this way of life,"*

This way of life that Jesus talked about is the way of the gospel. It is not the conventional way, though it would be nice if always living the gospel became conventional for faith communities. And we might disagree on what "living the gospel" means, just like one person may find a joke inappropriate while another finds the same joke hilarious.

In our scripture readings today, both Jesus and Paul invite us to step beyond our comfort zones and to discover that the gospel already at work in places we never imagined it.

Today, as we share the bread and the cup at this table, an open table which represents God's banquet, may we be nourished to invite and to welcome and to play with God's Word, in order to explore its most profound challenge and its deepest joy.

Then there's the story of a woman and a man who had been friends for many years, but then both died and went to heaven. So they told St Peter that they would like to be married.

"Take your time and think about it," said Peter. "You just got here, you're settling in, and you have all eternity to be together. Get back to me in 50 years."

Fifty years later, the couple returned and once again they told Peter that they wanted to be married. "Well," he said "Why don't you take another 50 years to think about it..."

*But this time the couple was insistent "We know we want to be married now." they said.
"Why are you putting us off?"*

*Then St Peter replied "Tell you what, take another 50 years and if we don't have a
preacher up here by then, I'll marry you myself."*

The best jokes are the ones you play on yourself.

May the love of God inspire and awaken us to new possibilities and Easter joy in this season, and always. Amen