

WHY RELIGION IS FUNNY

A sermon preached by the Reverend John Nichols to the Channing Memorial Church in Newport, R.I. on September 26, 2010

Once long ago, a rabbi wrote a book about the tragic death of his young son. Many read it and loved it and they told their friends, "You have to read, Why Bad Things Happen to Good People." But that was not the title of the book. "Why bad things happen" is what all of us ask. It is the question that motivates people to join churches. Some religions do offer answers, but most traditions believe that final answers are not given to anyone.

Rabbi Harold Kushner did not try to answer that question either. His first book was actually titled, When Bad Things Happen to Good People. But we remember the words, "Why" instead of "When" because the "Why" question is closest to our spiritual pulse.

Today we are, a nation politically divided, at war and in an economic crisis, asking all kinds of "why" questions. Where then is there a reason to find humor, and particularly humor in religion as I suggested by my sermon title? The serious purpose behind my whimsical topic is that humor enables us to live in a world that always has been as heart breaking as it is breathtakingly beautiful. Because we are caught and suspended between heartbreak, frustration and beauty, religion must offer us a way to laugh at ourselves and with each other or it will be little help to us whatsoever.

Religion is funny for the same reason we don't know why bad things happen to good people. Humor is our way of understanding a world that does not make sense the way we think it ought to make sense. And religion is also our way of understanding a world that does not make sense the way we think it ought to make sense.

Humor is how we continue to believe that we can build families and communities and something of lasting goodness out of this tough life. Religion gives us the same strength. Even though sometimes we are making our life up as we go along; even though a national tragedy makes our efforts seem pointless, religion strengthened by humor supports our ability to keep going.

Though much humor today is angry, the best humor is not a bitter making fun of things or people. The best humor understands that no matter how impacted we may be by our own silliness, our confusions, our contradictions or even despair we will survive. We will cherish our relationships, raise our children and grandchildren, support our religious communities and work for causes that matter to us.

If we were given an Olympian view over the follies and blindness of humankind – over all of our rituals, our pretensions, our politics, our resolutions and our theologies – that view would drive us either to amusement or despair. Since amusement saves us to fight another day and amusement is better for our digestion, we sustain ourselves and our faith with humor. When we laugh heartily we demonstrate our belief in the goodness of life's gifts and in the worth of the people around us, and that belief is stronger than the worst that can happen.

I first got into this topic because I wanted to track down the email lists I kept getting of what are called "Church Bulletin Bloopers." These are items from actual church newsletters, which because of a minor proof reading mistake now read differently from what the author intended. They are funny, because they help us recognize that it is human beings – not saints – that keep the home fires burning even in something as important as religion, even in something as sanctified as church. Knowing that perfection in those we care for is impossible, we can laugh with them. If we cannot laugh with them, then we cannot love them.

For example, in these bloopers, the juxtaposition of just two letters can produce mistakes like the following. "The Pastor would appreciate it if the ladies of the congregation would lend him their electric girdles for the pancake breakfast next Sunday."

People often write hastily for newsletters, and sometimes two thoughts, which seem directly related in the writer's mind have an entirely different relationship when seen in print. For example, "This being Easter Sunday we will ask Mrs. Lewis to come forward and lay an egg on the altar." For example, "The Low Self Esteem Support Group will meet Thursday from 7:00 to 8:30 p.m. Please use the back door." And, "Today's sermon will be titled, HOW MUCH CAN A MAN DRINK with hymns from a full choir."

But many religious jokes originate with the clergy, and it is a good thing they do. As professional ministers our task is to hold out for much more in the way of human progress or understanding than is either likely or possible. We do this so that we do not fall prey to the alternative of expecting too little of others and ourselves. But, those who hold high expectations had better be prepared to laugh at themselves or give in to disappointment, even bitterness.

For an example of this humor, two men arrive at the Pearly Gates at the same time. When St. Peter asked the first man his name, where he was from and what he did for a living he responded that he was John Smith and that he had been a taxi cab driver in New York City. St. Peter then looked through his book, went to his closet from which he took out a beautiful silk robe and a golden staff. He gave these to John Smith and wished him a happy hereafter.

The second man announced that he was Thomas O Malley, a Catholic priest from Chicago. St. Peter looks in his book, goes to the closet and gives Fr.

O Malley a cotton robe and a wooden staff, wishing him a happy hereafter as well. Fr. O Malley said, "Wait a minute. Why did that taxi driver get a silk robe and a golden staff while I, a man of God, got only a cotton robe and a wooden staff." St. Peter replied, "You see reward in heaven is based on the results you achieved on earth. According to our records when you preached, people slept. But when John Smith drove his taxi cab, people actually prayed."

Religious ritual sometimes expresses through sights, sounds and movements what is too tender or too difficult to put into words. For instance the ceremonies of communion for Christians or the Seder for Jews convey a lifetime of intimate experiences in ways that words can never capture. For each of us there is a special kind of music that will also capture the same experience better than words. But there are times when we misunderstand or overdue ritual. When the sacred and the pretentious travel together the pretentious can easily take over the sacred without our realizing it. Clergy call this "chancel prancing." Here is an example.

Once upon a time, St Albans Episcopal Church installed a new rector who was generally known as a liberal. His associate, a much more conservative man, had been with the parish for a number of years. In going over the ceremony of installation the associate explained that it had always been the custom of St Albans to have a young lad lead the clergy procession and carry the cross. The new senior pastor patiently responded that in his opinion this was a change he wanted to make and so there would be no young lad with a cross this time or ever again. He directed his associate minister to draw up the new order of service and send it to the printer without the young lad carrying the cross.

The associate was not pleased, but rank hath its privileges and besides there ... are ... ways to express disapproval. As the new rector's service of installation began, the rector took his place behind the choir, opened his order of service, and began to sing the words of the processional hymn, which had been printed in the order of service in his deep, mellow, stained glass voice. "Onward Christian soldiers. Marching as to War. With the cross of Jesus. Hid behind the door."

It has been said that we are born to humor. I have known some people whose sense of humor must have been stomped out of them early on, but for most of us our sense of humor goes through something like three stages. There is the Humor of Paradise: the sheer joy of finding a life of surprises and contradictions and puzzles and mysteries. "Peek – a – boo. Now I see you, now I don't. Where'd you go?" Sometimes what you think you see isn't all that's there, and isn't it wonderful.

This is sheer playfulness. Laughter for the fun of laughing; games for the fun of playing, because life is good and its goodness just does not seem to end.

Ever wonder why so many people stop and peer at infants in carriages. Because we know that babies are still in paradise as once we were.

The second stage in our use of humor is called the Laughter of Paradise Lost. At some point in our growing up, we discover that things are not always what they seem to be. This angers us. We feel we have been tricked or lied to. We discover that people we once worshipped are only human. We discover some painful ironies – distances between what should be and what actually is. We are only human. We will make mistakes. We will be unable to love as much as we should. We find that we can even deceive others and ourselves.

When many of us first encounter the reality of human deceptiveness, it seems massively unjust and hypocritical that life is so much more complicated than we once thought. We feel like we were kicked out of the Paradise we loved, and our humor carries a hard edge. It revels in irony and satire. It accentuates the ridiculous as more typical of humanity than the good. This is the humor of Saturday Night Live and of many sitcoms that portray all adults in authority as naïve, stupid or deceitful though probably harmless. Unfortunately some – perhaps many – stay in the ironic mode as long as they live. Sarcasm becomes their native tongue.

There is a third stage. It is the Humor of Paradise Regained. Now we finally accept the human condition for what it is. We can do great things, but even in trying to do great things we sometimes do very silly things. As much as we work on self-improvement we will never quite make it. The same kinds of mistakes will keep tripping us up. We will try to over achieve, over direct and over manage the simplest pleasures of life.

We will do and say things we shouldn't, and we will leave undone, unsaid things we should have done and said. Yet even as we take a sober look at our actions and those of others we can see warmth and a desire for loyalty. We see wisdom and courage in others and even in ourselves that kindles our hopefulness for each and every life.

The humorist and radio personality, Garrison Keillor, is one of the great apostles of Paradise Regained in that he helps us laugh with people we also love. Keillor is not Unitarian, as some have thought, but he clearly knows us. In one of his sketches he portrays himself as an advice to the lovelorn columnist who is trying to help a reader find someone with whom to fall in love.

“You have been hanging out in the wrong places. Try a new location like a Unitarian church. There's not a redneck in the bunch. Unitarian women are sexy but incredibly thoughtful and they are sensitive but also passionate about ethics. They won't try to jump you on the first date; they will want to know how you feel about economic justice first. They are not voluptuous, because they are often

fasting in protest of something or other, and when not fasting, they eat things made of tofu and exotic mushrooms.

“You’ll need to learn to folk dance and sit through lectures on American foreign policy given by speakers from third world countries, but this is a small price to pay for happiness. If you can’t find Unitarians, try Methodists. They’re Unitarians trying to pass for Christians.”

After September 11, 2001 it took about a week for our comedians to ask us was it all right if they tried to make us laugh again. And the truth is we needed that laughter to remember that our faith in our community, our world and ourselves was intact. Our laughter without faith would have been angry. Laughter without the faith that we are inherently stronger than what seeks to tear us down is just anger at the mixed hand we seem to have been dealt. And faith without laughter is brittle. If we cannot stand to know that we are very limited but that we can survive in a tough world, our faith in anything is brittle.

In a wonderful little book titled, Traveling Mercies, Annie Lamott tells this story about going to the beach and building a sand castle with her son on the occasion of his eighth birthday. They had spent the afternoon together building this giant altar of sand, and later in the day, Annie told her son, “We have to go. Our friend’s party is going to start in an hour.”

“No” he wailed. “We can’t. What about our creation? We can’t just leave it here. We have to stay and protect it. We’ve worked so hard on it. The waves will come and wash it away.”

“Honey”, she said, “It was never meant to be permanent. You must have known the tide would come back in.” He thought about this for a minute. “I’m going to kick it all over then,” he said. “And I hate you.” He added. “And I hate everything.” He walked off. Annie continues with her story.

“I didn’t say anything. He walked away from me and the altar, world weary, shuffling with dejection, head down. “Sam” I wanted to explain, “Making the altar was a way to celebrate, to honor you today. The fact that it is going to wash away heightens how wonderful our making it was. The altar did not hold as much animating spirit as our making it did, the gathering of our choices. It’s like we made it, we love it – oops, and it’s gone. But the best part is still here.”

Laughter without faith is angry. Faith without laughter is brittle. We live together. We work together. We love, we invest, and we build. And in the end the tide of life washes all things away, even our altars. In the end what we give to each other is something so deeply special that it transcends all of the limitations, which seem to mock our efforts. What we give out of love is so special that it even touches something greater than we all are.

The boy returned; his mood much restored. And he gave his mother a gift from the sea, something he wanted her to have because it delighted him. And then he ran off again toward the shore, free and happy and again loving his life. His mother remembers, "I can't help but say again what I said on the beach that day, in a whisper this time and without being exactly sure to whom I am saying it, "Thank you. Thank you. Thank you."