

An Undervalued Gift of God

Proverbs 15:13-15

(Communion – June 1, 2008)

There is a major capacity of ours that with only a handful of exceptions is there for all of us. For some reason, though, it gets almost no attention in the teachings and precepts of our Christian faith. Increasingly, though, it has nevertheless been demonstrated (albeit mostly in non-religious research) to be a vital component of spiritual health.

What I'm talking about is humor and laughter. True, there are a couple of places in the bible where, for example, it says things like, "A cheerful heart brings a smile to your face; a sad heart makes it hard to get through the day." (Proverbs 15:13) And later, "A miserable heart means a miserable life; a cheerful heart fills the day with song." But really, there is only a small handful of scriptural mentions of someone actually laughing. And half of those are derisive laughter – laughter that has overtones of either sarcasm or ridicule to it.

Apparently when it came to those ancient people writing about sacred matters – talking about events that were seen as the holy acts of God -- it felt to them as if including anything comic or ironic (such as most certainly was woven all through their world and experience just as it is ours) anything lighthearted or whimsical felt ungodly; felt like a gross trivialization of the holy.

In fairness to them though, they weren't the last to feel that way. Humorousness and laughter have, throughout recorded history been controversial. Plenty of writers, poets, philosophers and religious spokespersons were apparently so somber, so solemn, and/or so intensely earnest (in the worst sense of that term), that they considered laughter to be a sign of superficiality, frivolousness, and shallowness.

A quick look at quotations on the subject reveals quite a lot of that. Cicero, for example, said, "...laughter springs from some kind of deformity." Centuries later a philosopher named Joseph Addison said that "...laughter weakens the faculties and causes a dissolution of the soul." Lord Chesterfield said, "...there is nothing so illiberal and so ill-bred as laughter." Shelley said that "...there can be no complete regeneration of mankind until laughter is finally put down." Oliver Goldsmith declared that ..."humor indicates of a vacant mind." The Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes assures us that "Sorrow is better than laughter." And that's only a small and very random sample of ostensibly thoughtful people who nevertheless were appallingly wrong.

I am fully aware that I don't have to sell anyone in this congregation on the "okay-ness" of humor. The halls and meeting rooms of our buildings constantly ring with laughter. You've even laughed at some of my stories, even the cornball ones.

The reason for this sermon though, is that humor and laughter, while broadly enjoyed by people as being amusing and being a kind of interpersonal play, really are not well understood to be one of God's gifts to us human beings – a vital gift and an important grace. The laughter, that is, that goes on among us, not just “the mind sneezing or hiccupping” as was said by still another one of its many detractors.

It is only in the last half century or so that the important role that laughter can and does play in spirituality, has come to be understood and more fully appreciated. Those of you who are of my generation may remember the saga of Norman Cousins who, for many years was the nationally acclaimed editor of an outstanding magazine called “The Saturday Review.” In the early seventies he became seriously ill with a rare, incurable connective tissue disease. The way his struggle with it turned out captured national attention for what it seemed to reveal of the relationship of humor to healing.

It was an extraordinarily painful condition. Cousins was told that all that medicine had to offer to his situation was some measure of pain management during whatever time he had left. At that, the painkillers were only marginally effective.

Cousins, however, was a very resourceful and determined person. He decided that if his situation were that hopeless he had nothing to lose by taking charge of his own medical care. In researching his disease, among other things he learned that the painkillers he was taking to reduce the intensity of the pain, actually hastened the progress of the disease. He therefore quit taking them and, moreover, checked out of the health care facility.

He had also read somewhere that there was some evidence that laughter and humor actually worked upon the human brain in a way that produced the effect of an anesthetic. Cousins phoned around and obtained everything he could in the way of copies of films and TV programs such as Candid Camera, Charlie Chaplain, W.C. Fields and many others.

Those became a major part of his days. It actually worked. After hard laughing at, for example, an hour of vignettes from Candid Camera, not only was he pain-free during the laughing, but could then fall soundly asleep for a couple of pain-free hours.

To shorten a much longer story, Cousins not only got relief from pain but actually recovered from what was supposed to be the terminal disease. In his later writing about it, he had no doubt that laughter had been a crucial component of his healing.

Obviously, that didn't, couldn't and shouldn't become some kind of break-through cure-all. But it and other similar subsequent studies (by institutions like Harvard Medical School and the University of Maryland School of Medicine) of what humor does to and for us human beings have been startling.

In related studies, the constriction of blood-flow was measured as persons first watched stress-producing movies and then watched comedies that were hilarious enough to evoke major laughter. Blood vessels were constricted by 35% during and following stressful films, but became dilated by 22% as a result of hard laughter (a blood-flow improvement equivalent to a 15-to-30 minute workout).

No, that doesn't mean that your physician will soon be prescribing that you go to a comedy club rather than an exercise gym, but it does hint strongly that there is more going on in this matter of laughter and humor than we may have thought.

If taken seriously, this dynamic to yours and my spirits has major implications for what one seeks out and includes as a part of his or her living and interacting.

Being brusque, surly, morose, ill-humored are something a person "takes on"— are habitual ways of looking at what goes on. They are habits of being that can be broken.

Conversely, playfulness, whimsicalness, an appetite for what is comical or is bizarre also becomes a habitual way of relating to and perceiving life.

Suspect that if you reflect upon it a bit, you may recall examples in your own life where laughter turned out to be far more than a momentary reaction to something that was funny; that it had a healing impact.

I remember that our family, which gathered prior to the memorial services for both my Mom and Dad, notwithstanding all the shock, the tears, the feelings of desolation, found that we were laughing together – a lot. Laughter was something that had been very much a part of our family's way of relating to each other. Even so, this felt a little extraordinary. I remember wondering if there was something wrong about it. But no. Probably more than anything, the laughter carried healing, comforting overtones of their presence, notwithstanding it happening in the midst of the shock of their absence.

Abraham Lincoln at one of the darker moments during the Civil War was addressing his cabinet and other advisors. Grim as was the subject matter, he made several humorous quips. Whereupon a cabinet member took him to task for it, pointing out that it was very inappropriate to bring laughter into discussion of subject matter as grave as this was. Lincoln replied, "Oh no. Not true. You must still laugh. Laugh or all of this will drive you mad."

There are several other examples I relate to you. The best known may be W.C. Fields who awakened briefly, just before he breathed his last. He looked at his attorney standing on one side of the bed and a clergyman standing on the other. And he said, "Here I die like Jesus, between two thieves."

The Rev. Daniel Drew (founder of Drew Theological Seminary) managed to depart this life with the laughter of his beloved family ringing in his ears. They had all gathered at his bed. His breathing became imperceptible it was so weak. They thought, in fact, that he might be already dead. One daughter said, “Feel his feet. Nobody has ever died with warm feet.” At that point Dr. Drew opened one eye and said, “Joan of Arc did.” They broke with laughter and to the music of their laughter he died.

So while yes, there is such a thing as mean and derisive humor, overwhelmingly laughter and being playful are by no means to be seen as the automatic opposite of reverence, respect, or sincerity.

And that healing and heartening aspect is only one part of the gift. Having a well-nourished sense of humor about oneself is terribly important — crucial, in fact. For looked at carefully, laughing at oneself is actually a form of repentance. The person who cannot bear to think about, much less look and laugh at his or her own pretensions, quirks, moments of asininity, stubbornness, ridiculousness isn’t someone you want to get marooned with on a desert island. He’s a danger to himself and everyone around him. Turning loose yours and my own humor to feed upon what is comic in us and about us is a powerful antidote to the God-awful tediousness and ponderousness with which our egos sometimes distort and deform us.

As a bare minimum then, laughing at oneself is a superb way of nourishing humility and staying firmly in touch with reality – especially the reality of our own darker sides.

Better yet, it is frequently the shortest path to forgiving oneself. When you or I are able to say with good humor, “Wow! I really outdid myself at being a pompous ass at that gathering last night,” in its own way, that is confession and contrition, which, in turn, are the beginnings of self-forgiveness.

To mention just one more dimension of this, it is what has so often been humor’s ability to interrupt anger and diminish conflict. That’s because humor – laughter – has often turned out to be a kind of communicating that still works when, just now, nothing else does.

Think about it. You may have seen it or personally experienced it from time to time. When adversaries end up laughing together in spite of themselves over some incongruity or absurdity that just occurred amidst the heavy conflict laden somberness of their arguing, it changes the dynamic. It lowers the stress level between them by suddenly turning what, seconds ago, was a menacing adversary back into a human being. It is usually very difficult to laugh with someone and still keep one’s rage at him or her intact.

Obviously, there is much more that could be said. My hope for this sermon was merely that of strengthening awareness and appreciation of what is a most accessible, refreshing, healing, revealing and ALSO downright enjoyable of God's gifts to us human beings. As far as anyone knows, it is exclusively a human gift – one given us as a means of celebrating life, as an additional capacity for enjoying who and what we see and experience, and yes, also as a tool for getting perspective on our pain and frustrations, the dark valleys and the senseless or disorienting happenings.

It is not always so, but more often than we are usually aware, faced with one of life's shocking, unnerving, distressing, troubling junctures, you and I do get to choose whether we take hold of it by the handles of anxiety and self-pity or by the handles of humor.

It shouldn't be a difficult choice, should it?