

Holy Laughter
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Rev. Mary Koon and Sue Greimel
April 11, 2021

[Mary Koon]

Psalm 100

¹⁻² On your feet now—applaud GOD! Bring a gift of laughter, sing yourselves into his presence. ³ Know this: GOD is God, and God, GOD. He made us; we didn't make him. We're his people, his well-tended sheep. ⁴ Enter with the password: "Thank you!" Make yourselves at home, talking praise. Thank him. Worship him. ⁵ For GOD is sheer beauty, all-generous in love, loyal always and ever.

Philippians 4:4-8

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Knock, knock. (who's there?) Lettuce. (Lettuce who?) Lettuce pray...

I first heard about Holy Humor Sunday in seminary. The tradition started in the early church, when the days after Easter were marked as days of joy and laughter. The Sunday after Easter featured picnics and dancing.

The custom was rooted in the ideas of early church theologians that God played an ultimate practical joke on the devil by raising Jesus from the dead. Early theologians called it “the Easter Laugh.”

Today, apparently, lots of churches celebrate this Sunday. Members and pastors play practical jokes on each other, and some people wear costumes or funny outfits to church. I’ve heard of the practice of doing everything backwards as in, pastors start with the benediction and end with the call to worship, pastors play the piano (heaven help us) and the music director gives the sermon! All because God turned the world upside down when God raised Jesus from the dead!

The Bible is filled with passages about rejoicing, which simply means to show joy and delight. The psalms envision the faithful dancing and playing instruments! Sarah laughed! Jesus laughed. Joy is the mark of a faith-filled life; Paul lists it as one of the fruits of the spirit.

Psalm 100 was the only scripture that I was asked to memorize as a child in Sunday School. Yes, it’s short and kind of catchy... but it lays a foundation of faith that can sustain us in hard times. First, praise God, there’s always something for which to say thank you. Deep in our hearts, we can rest and take a weight off our shoulders because we aren’t in control of this world...God is. God made us, we didn’t make God and God is faithful. That is a source of great joy.

We all want to be happy. But happiness is different than joy. Happiness is what you feel when everything is going well in your life...like the word suggests, it is dependent upon happen-ings. Joy is different.

Biblical times were hard, and we still face hardships today. Paul did much of his writing in prison, remember he speaks of joy, and praise, and hope. God's people were oppressed, poor, and downtrodden. Early Christians were persecuted for their beliefs. Paul, who went through a lot, reminds us that we can give thanks in all circumstances...not for all circumstances. In struggle, by the grace of God, we can focus on that which is life-giving and true. And what is true is that God is with us, God has overcome death, God is faithful. Faith in Jesus, the risen Lord, is not a ticket to easy street, but it also isn't an all-somber-all-the-time proposition. Joy feeds our souls.

For those who work for social justice in our world, and particularly for Black, Indigenous, Asian Americans and other people of color, joy is a form of resistance. The great Sojourner Truth, former enslaved person and civil rights advocate said, "I will not allow the light of my life to be determined by the darkness around me."

<https://www.glide.org/deciding-to-have-joy-is-an-act-of-resistance-womens-history-month-at-glide-part-2/>

Joy is not dependent upon what is happening all around us, it walks alongside our pain and suffering. I hope and pray that you have all had experiences of unexpected joy even in the midst of serious struggle. I see this often in memorial services when a family member shares a funny story and people laugh through their tears.

Author and Presbyterian theologian Anne Lamott calls laughter, "carbonated holiness." We are born with the innate capacity to laugh... Surely, God gave us laughter and it is good for us. Babies mirror our smiles naturally, but we do not need to teach a baby to laugh!

Take a look at these videos of babies laughing.

[Sue Greimel]

Well, I hope those videos made you smile! With over 7,000 languages in the world, isn't it nice that we all understand laughter! The sounds are the same, no matter where you're born! The first video was Mary's youngest grandson Cass laughing while playing peek-a-boo with his Mom, and at 9-months old, he seems to know what he's doing! The second was my granddaughter Ada laughing at her sister swinging. Ada was just over 3-months old and this was her first experience, which is probably why she wouldn't stop! Al recorded her for over a minute and a half! What a great feeling!

Mary asked me to talk a little bit about laughter and the brain, so what is laughter and what's happening when we laugh? According to Webster, laughter is defined as showing emotion (such as mirth, joy, or scorn) with a chuckle or explosive vocal sound, sometimes even a snort (I added that). It can arise from such activities as being tickled, humorous stories or thoughts, and other stimuli including nitrous oxide.

A little background: Gelotology is the study of laughter, of which there are five different kinds. One of these is stimulated, the tickle, which kids experience frequently, adults not so much. Tickling laughter is reflexive and involuntary, totally independent of higher cortical circuits, it doesn't require any thinking! Chimpanzees, gorillas, and orangutans are said to laugh when tickled or chased while playing. Scientists have found that tickling laughter activates the hypothalamus, the part of the brain that triggers our fight or flight system, which makes sense when you're the younger sibling trapped beneath an older brother or sister! Laughing when tickled in vulnerable spots (under the arms, near the throat and under our feet) could be a defensive mechanism. Research suggests that we've evolved to send this signal to indicate our submission to an aggressor, to dispel a tense situation, and prevent us from getting hurt!

Another type of laughter is spontaneous, a tickling of the mind or humor. There are several theories as to why we laugh, two of which result in achieving balance, either from a physical state of arousal, stress, and tension or from a mental state of internal conflict or discrepancy - something doesn't add up. Laughter reduces stress in the first case by easing arousal and tension, making the physical or emotional situation less negative. In the second case, we experience the "aha" moment when the discrepancy or conflict is resolved, sometimes with a laugh, sometimes with a groan! In both cases, there is relief, the threat has passed and it wasn't dangerous!

I'll give you a few examples:

A woman dies and meets St. Peter at the pearly gates. She asks, "Did I make it to heaven?" St. Peter says, "You have to spell a word first." She replies, "Ok, what word?" St. Peter says, "It's easy, Love." So the woman spells out L-O-V-E and St. Peter says, "You're in."

A few months later St. Peter asks her to watch the gate for him. Low and behold, the woman's ex-husband shows up. He asks her if he made it into heaven? She says, "You have to spell a word first." Her ex-husband replies, "Ok, what word?" The woman says, "It's easy, Czechoslovakia."

I hope many of you found that funny, but if you were from Czechoslovakia, you might be saying "I don't get it!" Here's another:

A burglar broke into a house one night. He was searching around with his flashlight, looking for valuables, and picked up a CD player to put in his sack when a voice in the dark said, "Jesus knows you're here." He nearly jumped out of his skin, clicked off his flashlight and froze. When he heard nothing more, he shook his head, promised himself a vacation after the next big score, then clicked on the flashlight and continued. Just as he pulled the stereo out so he could disconnect the wires, clear as a

bell he heard, “Jesus is watching you.” Freaked out, he frantically searched for the source of the voice with his flashlight. Finally, in the corner of the room, his flashlight beam came to rest on a parrot. “Did you say that?,” he hissed at the parrot. “Yep,” the parrot confessed, then squawked, “I’m just trying to warn you.” The burglar relaxed. “Warn me, huh? Who in the world are you?” “Moses,” replied the bird. “Moses?” the burglar laughed. “What kind of person names a bird Moses?” “The same kind of person that names a Rottweiler Jesus.”

Then there's the story about two hunters lost in the woods, no cell phone service, and it's getting dark. One is frantic, thinking they'll never be found, and the other is calm as can be, relaxing by a tree. His reasoning? It's Pledge Week at church, someone will find us! Hopefully that is not Oak Grove!

And finally, I was an electrical engineer for most of my career, so one of my favorite jokes goes like this. There are 10 kinds of people in the world. Those that understand binary and those that don't. This joke is more likely to get only a handful of laughs. But once those of you who don't get it, get it, there will be lots of groans!

So what's actually happening when we laugh? Number one, our bodies release endorphins (which is a shortened form of “endogenous morphine”). Endorphins are technically endogenous opioid neuropeptides which act to decrease something called substance P (which is a pain neurotransmitter) and increase dopamine (which is a pleasure neurotransmitter)! Two-for-one, less pain, more pleasure and they’re not addictive! In addition, endorphins trigger the release of nitrous oxide, our own internal laughing gas, which increases blood flow and reduces inflammation and clotting! Laughter not only has cardiovascular benefits, it improves respiration, and exercises and relaxes our muscles (laughing for 10–15 minutes burns 10–40 calories

and since researchers have found benefits to just six seconds of vigorous exercise a day, this could be your ticket)). Laughter also boosts the number of antibody-producing cells and enhances the effectiveness of T-cells, leading to a stronger immune system. The effects are similar to exercise (particularly in a group), eating dark chocolate and creating music or art. And it's so much easier, except for the chocolate. Wow!

Laughter also reduces cortisol and epinephrine (or adrenaline), stress hormones which the body has been building up all day while we're working and not laughing. A number of years ago, Bill did a sermon on laughter. He cited the book "*Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers*" by Robert Sapolsky, which describes how humans have taken the fight vs. flight system (which evolved as a survival mechanism enabling us to react to life-threatening situations) to a whole new level (now we react similarly to traffic jams, work pressures, sporting events, family difficulties, and politics, which are rarely life threatening).

The sympathetic nervous system works by conserving resources to focus on the situation, relying on memory/instinct (how did I get out of this before?) rather than novel thinking (what if I tried to talk my way out of this?). Too late. Non-stressful times are those for growth, exploration, and neurogenesis (new neuronal growth). Stressful times are not, they're about survival. The problem humans have is that with our ability to plan, see beyond the here and now, envision the future, we can also imagine all the what-ifs. This can lead to nearly constant stress, or at least a higher baseline level! As a result, we're more susceptible to chronic stress-related disorders such as ulcers, hypertension, decreased neurogenesis, and increased hippocampal neuronal atrophy. What's easier than laughter to reverse this trend!

When you get a chance to experience the true belly laugh, it feels like a full body workout. Your face muscles hurt, belly muscles hurt, you're

sweating, or crying. How can that not be good for us? Norman Cousins, who wrote "*Anatomy of an Illness*" said, "Hearty laughter is a good way to jog internally without having to go outdoors," good advice for Minnesotans! Cousins was diagnosed with a disease from which only one out of 500 fully recovered, and decided to take control. By watching 10 minutes of Marx Brothers films, Candid Camera, and EB White's Sub-treasury of American Humor, to experience real belly laughter, Cousins would get two-hours of pain-free sleep! While it took him several years to recover, he lived for another 26 years! I should mention that he also took large doses of Vitamin C, but that didn't help his mood!

Which leads me beyond the physical benefits of humor and laughter to the mental health benefits. These include the reduction of stress, depression, anxiety and fear. Laughter elevates mood, increases serotonin, boosts our energy levels, improves memory and alertness, and adds joy to our lives. Laughter promotes relaxation and restful sleep, improves cognition and encourages creativity. There are studies that show that even the potential of humor/laughter has a positive effect on the body! How many times have you thought of something funny on Zoom and couldn't help but smile, or snort?

And laughter isn't just good for us as individuals, there are social benefits as well. These include strengthening relationships, improving teamwork, reducing conflicts, and making ourselves more approachable (some say more attractive, in the sense that people are drawn to you). People who have a high-arousal positive affect, which is characterized by joy and excitement, and lots of energy, are more likely to approach others, and share that positive energy with them! Kind of like love, the more we have, the more we give!

I read somewhere that laughter, like a smile, is the shortest distance between two people. It makes people feel closer to each other, safe,

more talkative and demonstrative, and likely to make eye contact (though not in Minnesota!).

An Apache myth tells that the creator endowed human beings, the two-leggeds, with the ability to do everything: talk, run, see and hear. But he was not satisfied until the two-leggeds could do just one more thing, laugh. And so men and women laughed, and laughed, and laughed! Then the creator said, “Now you are fit to live!”

Church newsletters

Ladies, don't forget the rummage sale. It's a chance to get rid of those things not worth keeping around the house. **Don't forget to bring your husbands.**

The morning sermon this week is ‘Jesus Walks on Water.’ The evening sermon is ‘Searching for Jesus.’

Did you hear the one about Hazel on her deathbed?

She calls Roger her beloved husband of 50 years to her side. “Roger?” “Yes Hazel... what is it?” “Roger... do you remember when my momma died and you were by my side?” “Yes... Hazel.” “Roger... do you remember when my daddy died and you were by my side?” “Yes... Hazel.” “Roger... do you remember when I got cancer the first time and you were by my side?” “Yes... Hazel.” “Roger... do you remember when the cancer came back and I had the mastectomy and you were by my side?” “YES... Hazel.” “Roger... do you remember when the cancer came back again and got in my lungs and you were right by my side?” “OH YES, Hazel!” “Roger... there's something I've been wanting to tell you Honey” “Yes Hazel... What is it?” “Roger, I think you must be a jinx!”

And they fell into each other's arms. And they laughed... and they laughed... and they laughed... until they cried.

Amen!

<https://bhcwausau.com/2017/01/the-benefits-of-laughter/>

<https://academic.oup.com/cercor/article/23/6/1280/426218>

https://www.jstage.jst.go.jp/article/tjem/239/3/239_243/html/-char/en

<https://www.worldlaughtertour.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Lee-Berk-Alt-Ther-Vol-7-2.pdf>

[Mary Koon]

Where you do find joy? What makes you laugh? Write it in the Facebook comments or send us a note.

I love to dance and feel joy every time I do. Some find joy in the game of golf... John Crampton sent in this story:

One day Jesus was out golfing with Moses. They came upon a par 3 which was a tee, a small green and a big lake in between. Jesus stepped up with a 9 iron and addressed the ball.

"Use a 7 iron instead of the 9 iron" Moses said. "You need more club."

Jesus said, "No I'm going to use a 9 iron because that's what Tiger Woods would use."

Jesus hit the ball. It sailed up high and went down ploop in the water short of the green.

"You need more club..." Moses said.

"No I'm going to stick with the 9 iron because that's what Tiger Woods would use."

This went on and on. Jesus stuck with the 9 iron and hit 3 balls in the lake.

"Moses, I'm out of golf balls. Do you have any I can borrow?"

"No Jesus, I only have the ball I'm playing."

So Jesus went down and was walking on the lake looking down in the water for his golf balls. Another foursome came up and saw this man with white robes, long flowing hair, walking on the water.

They said, "Hey, who does that guy think he is? Jesus Christ?"

Moses replied, "No, he thinks he's Tiger Woods."

Thanks be to God for the gift of new life, for Easter, for joy and the ability to laugh. Thanks be to God. AMEN.