

"BRING JESUS' HUMOR TO LIFE"

A
sermon
by

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Scripture: Mark 12: 13-17

Text: Psalm 2: 4

"He who sits in the heavens shall laugh."

When I was in college, I knew I wanted to go into the ministry. I knew that by the time I went through this church. The question was what kind of ministry. I was drawn to three different areas of ministry. One was history and research, the academic side of ministry. I was very drawn to become a historian. On another side, I was very taken with social concerns, everything from tutoring students to voter education and so on. The third side was a life of prayer.

On occasion, on some Sundays and weekends, I would go to a Benedictine Monastery, which was about fifteen miles away from Durham, North Carolina, where I would be able to spend time in prayer.

These three did not fit very well together. If any of you try to do all three, you know how they conflict with each other. If you're going to be a good historian, you should spend much time in the library. I should have been there every Saturday working on my history papers; but if I was going to be concerned with social concerns and out tutoring someone, that would take away from the history. If I was out doing meditation and prayer, that was taking away from these other activities. It was clear I couldn't do all three well. So, my prayer became; "which of these three things should I do, God, and which other two should I get rid of?"

I was at the beginning, I suppose, of what you would call 'getting it all together'. You have friends who are trying to get their lives all together. I was in an early phase of that. To 'get it all together' means usually you leave your family, you quit your job, you quit the church, and you 'get it all together'. You can see the problem in getting it all

together. I thought that what God promised was the peace that you could easily understand. I hadn't read that part of the scriptures where it says God gives you a peace that passes any understanding.

I went out to Berkeley to seminary, and that did not help matters. There were just more things pulling me apart out there. One night our prayer group met. It was a great time to be in seminary because if you were preaching a sermon in chapel, there were only about five other students there. After that, every church looks good by comparison. In any case, there were about five of us there that evening, and my prayer to God was, "which of these three things should I do?" "Should I become the academic, should I be a social concerns person, or should I develop the life of meditation and go to a Benedictine monastery? Which of the other two should I drop off?"

I went to sleep that night, and I woke up in the middle of the night with the only direct word from God I've ever received. To my question, "which of these three shall I do and which two shall I lop off, academic, social concerns, or the life of prayer?", the word from God was clearly, "Marry Margo." I knew there were other Doug Adams in the bay area, and I thought maybe God had misdirected his message. Another problem was "Margo who?" I had known several Margos in my life, but none in a Biblical sense. I had been acquainted with several Margos in my life. Fortunately, in two days, I had a letter from Margo. So, we got married right away. You know you do not put off such commands.

Of course, that didn't solve any of my problems, as you're well aware. Getting married does not help any of those problems. It makes them worse. Marriage doesn't help you be a better historian, unless you happen to marry one. As far as a life of prayer, it did settle the Benedictine question, but you only have more

to pray about actually. And, of course, marriage can kill social concerns. I realized I had been asking the wrong question. Marriage only increased tension in my life; but I began to realize that trying to reduce tension was not what God has in mind. I had been asking the wrong question. God gave me the answer to the question I should have been asking. So, now I try to do all of those things: academic, social concerns, prayer, and more.

I began to look at the Bible and notice that Jesus never gives a direct answer to a question because the questions are usually wrong. We receive the wrong message of what Jesus is saying if we miss the humor of the fact that Jesus gives an answer to a question we should have asked, but did not. Jesus' comment usually points out something wrong with our question.

Let me give some examples of that. For instance, in the story we call "the story of the good Samaritan", a man comes to Jesus and he says, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" There's something wrong with that question. God is not in it for one thing. "What can I do to earn eternal life? What can I do to get it?" There is a little banter back and forth which shows the man is concerned only with his own pride and asserting himself. Then Jesus tells the story we call "the good Samaritan". This man who asked a question about eternal life is a Jew; and with whom in Jesus' story can the man associate and see himself? Not the Samaritan. Remember, Samaritans are not only aliens to the Jews, but they are unethical from the Jewish viewpoint. Samaritans are people we do not like for good reason. In a previous period of exile, the Jews had stood firm for God's commandments. The Samaritans had cooperated with the invaders and gotten Jewish land, and the Jews had been exiled. Samaritans are people you and I do not like for good reason because from our viewpoint they are unethical. Who is that in your life? Who do you so dislike, for good reason? What group, what person, what political group, what nation, do you so dislike for good reason? Certainly, the listener would not want to

associate with a Samaritan. The listener could be the robber in the story, but not likely. Or, he could be the ones who passed by on the other side; but he probably wouldn't want to be those people. Where did that leave him? In the ditch. So, to the one who is saying, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" and thinks he is pretty close to it, Jesus says, "Brother, you're in a ditch. Now the good news is, help is on the way. The bad news is, it's from somebody you can't stand, whom you hate." That's the story, the graceful good news story. That's what makes it good news.

Now, I do not know who that person is for you. I can think of a variety of people who would be the last people on earth I'd want to see coming down that road if I was in a ditch. Can you think of those people? You clearly already have in mind those people, the last people you'd want to take help from. Think of people in your family whom you would least want to have help from, nations we'd least like to receive help from; the Ayatollah Khomeini probably is not our first choice of whom we'd like to have help us out of a ditch. Who are the other people you detest, you hate? Now, the good news is, that person is coming down the road to help you out of the ditch. When people like that come along and I'm in the ditch, and they say, "Can I help you out of the ditch?", I usually say, "What ditch?" or "No, I'm just down here doing a study of ditches, thank you. I can do very nicely." That's the humor of Jesus. It's mind boggling. It makes us have to change our minds and how we have been keeping good and evil separated and to recognize God helping us through what we consider to be evil.

The Old Testament, of course, had it too. Cyrus is the right hand of God. Cyrus, a Persian, is the right hand of God bringing judgment upon Israel. I won't try to do exegesis on that in our day with Ayatollah Khomeini as Cyrus because I don't want to be run out of town. But you see God moving in the world which is far better than those

who say, "Where can God be?" when we face the Iranian crisis.

In any case, Jesus puts his humor in a very pithy way. He says, "The kingdom of God is putting the leaven in the dough. The kingdom of God is putting the leaven in the dough." That doesn't sound strange to us. How do you make bread? But that expression, that short parable, is mind boggling to a first century Jewish audience because those people would spend a whole month before the Passover Seder service getting all the leaven out of the house. Leaven, in the popular mind, was the pollutant. You want to have unleavened bread for the Passover. Leaven is seen as a pollutant, an evil thing, which you've got to get rid of. Jesus is saying, "The kingdom of God is putting the leaven, the evil thing, in the holy thing, the dough." Mind boggling!

How would we put that in our own day? In a political mode, to your most liberal friends, the way of putting the matter would be to say, in a parallel way, "The kingdom of God is putting Ronald Reagan in the White House." Mind boggling for liberals. They can't even entertain the notion. Or, to your most conservative friends, "The kingdom of God is putting Ted Kennedy in the White House." Unthinkable for a conservative mind. Or, to people in the middle of the road, it would be to say, "The kingdom of God is putting both Ronald Reagan and Ted Kennedy in the White House."

Now you'll notice at the end, every time Jesus says any thing in the way of parables, everybody goes away amazed. They don't understand what he's saying. How could He say that?

Let me give some examples of that. I need to have a helper here. Will you be Simon Peter for us here? Simon Peter would like everybody to be kosher. He's a good Jewish mind. He finally has to have all kinds of mind boggling dreams about unclean food and eating those unclean things in order to bring him around to be cooperative with Paul and the Gentiles.

Simon Peter would really like everybody to be circumcised, at least all the men. Simon Peter and the disciples are with Jesus; and Jesus was telling these parables that put these things together in ways that we normally don't. Peter finally comes up to him and the other disciples, and they say, "Jesus, why do you talk in parables? We don't understand what you're talking about. We just don't understand what you're talking about." Jesus answered, "The reason I talk in parables is so all those outside people whom you don't like won't understand what I'm saying." You get the point.

There's a point in scripture where Jesus is in the house, Peter is outside, and someone comes to Peter and says, "Peter, you disciples haven't been paying a temple tax. You must pay the temple tax." Peter, being a good Jew, said, "Oh, I know we've got to pay the temple tax. I didn't know we hadn't paid the temple tax. We've got to pay it." He comes rushing down to Jesus and said, "Jesus, we've got to pay the temple tax." Jesus says, "Does the father tax the son?" Missing the point, Peter said, "Why no, but we've got to pay the temple tax." Then Jesus starts what is really a shaggy dog story. He said, "Peter, here's what you're going to do. You're going to go fishing." Peter loves to fish and may have exclaimed, "Oh, we're going to go fishing. I love to go fishing. We'll sell all those fish, and we'll pay the temple tax. Right?" Jesus says, "Not quite. Now here's what you're going to do. You're going to go fishing and get the fish." Peter was probably thinking, "Shall I use a ten-pound test or a twenty-pound test, or shall I use the big net? I'll get the fish, bring it in, and I'll take it to market." But Jesus tells him that he was to open the mouth of the fish and take out the coin (out of the mouth of the fish). Peter then realized he'd been had. You notice he doesn't go fishing. The point is, if you miss the humor in that, then very likely you are down by the sea or at the market. Christians who miss the point in this story are down there opening up the mouth of every fish, looking for a coin.

There are other examples of that kind of humor, and I need you back now to be a good help on this. Jesus encounters the Syro-Phoenecian woman who wants her child healed. She wants her child healed, but she is not of the house of Israel. The disciples don't want Jesus mixing in with any of these people who aren't of the house of Israel. They want Jesus all to themselves as you want Jesus all to yourself. They try to send the woman away. They want to have Jesus be theirs, to talk to them. But the woman persists. She comes up, and what Jesus does in this dialogue, if you miss the humor, makes Jesus sound monstrous. She captured the humor. We don't know whether Peter ever does. She comes up to Jesus and she says, "Heal my child." Jesus' response is a little like spitting in the soup. I don't know if you have anybody in your family who does this for you. I try to be very diplomatic; I learned it from my mother, who's very diplomatic. I'm so diplomatic, sometimes I forget my own point. I try to be so diplomatic, I try to put the matter in such a way that people may be receptive to it. My wife, though, is very direct. She'll often put things bluntly that I'm trying to put rather diplomatically. I serve at a seminary, and one of our biggest groups are congregational students, UCC students; but we have a big group of Methodist students who, of course, have bishops. I don't like bishops very much. I actually dislike bishops on the whole. I like to encourage people in the congregation to speak for themselves and be active and let no one person dominate a church, whether it's a lay person or they're called a bishop or a minister or anybody else. Never let one person or a few people dominate a congregational church. Everyone of you should have equal voice, equal power. I don't like bishops very much, however they're called or however they're styled. On one occasion, we had many Methodist students at the house. I was saying to them that I thought it would be important for them to cultivate in their congregations all the people speaking out. I was being so diplomatic about it. My wife finally blurted out, "Now, Doug, if you had your own way, wouldn't you just burn all those bishops at the stake?" You see, that's the kind of thing Jesus is doing here. What he's saying is articulating the mind.

of the disciples and putting it in such an extreme way that even they have a hard time tolerating their prejudice. Let me just act this out for you. A woman has come asking for healing for her child. Jesus then says, "I'm sorry lady, I can't help you heal your child. I've only been sent to the chosen of Israel. Right, Peter?" "Right." You'll notice that in the story it doesn't mention Peter, but where do you think Peter went with the disciples, who just minutes before wanted to be with Jesus all the time. Did they go off to the hills alone? No, they're always there, wanting to hear everything Jesus said. Then the woman persists, and she says, "But my child is ill. My child needs your healing and your help." Then Jesus said, "I can't give the bread of the children to the dogs. Right, Peter?" "Right." At that point, Peter agrees with that, but he does feel a little uncomfortable with Jesus' way of putting it in a blunt Archie Bunker way. He might take one slight step to the left, wanting to temporarily disassociate himself from this rather bald way of putting it to her. But the woman catches on to the humor, and she responds in kind, saying, "Ah, yes, but even the dogs get the crumbs of the bread that fall under the table." Then Jesus said, "Ah, then, let it be done for you as you wish." Right, Peter?" Peter was probably baffled.

One other case of Jesus' humor. Some of what Jesus said has been styled anti-Beatitudes. They really run against the expectations of the people in their own time. Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of God." Now, of course, in Judaism of that day, the common Beatitude was "Blessed are the rich for they are obviously with God." Notice Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor for theirs is the kingdom of God." It doesn't say, "Blessed are the poor for some day theirs will be the kingdom of God." I don't think any of us would want that blessing. We'll move right along. You can see that he's undermining, reversing, what people expect; and then in two other examples that are of a kind,

Jesus undermines the piety of people in his own day, undermines things where they believed that if they only do this, they're going to be saved. He undermines that certainty. The trouble about living with rules is that if you believe that if you follow the rules, you're going to be saved, you don't need God any more. Jesus undermines every certainty people have about their own salvation, so that they'll need God again, so that they'll need to rely on God and not just on rules. So, people who want to be certain about things, he makes them a little nervous. The Rabbis and Pharisees believed that as long as you didn't commit adultery, the act of adultery, you were an upright person. To those people, he says, what becomes a problem for our President Carter apparently, "Even if you lust in your heart (in your mind, in your dreams), after a person, you have committed adultery." There's a problem, because how can we control our dreams? We dream what we dream. What Jesus is doing is saying to all the pious Rabbis in his day, "You, too, have committed adultery." Every person in this room, by that judgment, has committed adultery. Every one of you, and I, too, have committed adultery by that standard. It doesn't leave us much room for self-righteousness, does it?

What Jesus is saying there is not to condemn us. It doesn't mean we should run off and see a psychoanalyst to help us learn how not, in our dreams, to lust after someone. Oh, that would be what some people would try to do. Or, he says another thing. People are trying to be charitable and they give their ten per cent in Old Testament times and ~~think~~ they are righteous for doing it. Jesus says, "You want to be righteous? You really want to be righteous?" he says to people who think they are. "If someone asks for your coat," we translate it in English, "give him your cloak as well." Do you know what a cloak is? What's that saying in the Greek? It sounds easy to give him your cloak as well; but in the literal translation, it says, "If someone asks for your coat, give him your underwear as well." That's what a cloak is. At that point, some of us might think, "I don't think I care to be that righteous, thank you all the same. I

think I'll just be a sinner instead, and rely on God's grace."

Well, for the closing, I want to give you one gift first before I go away. This is a stole my wife made, and we made it for you, Pat. It's a stewardship stole. You can see it's a proper stewardship stole in scotch plaid. And a good steward knows not only how to raise money, but also how to spend it. As one bishop noted, "The early church sold all to give to the poor; but the modern church buys more to avoid giving to the poor."

The closing gives you an opportunity to join in. We're in the Advent season. This is the Advent season and one of the parts of scripture you probably never heard read in worship before is the genealogy of Jesus, where so-and-so begat so-and-so; it goes on about seventeen verses. I've only heard it in worship done once, and that was by mistake. The person was supposed to be reading the eleventh chapter of Matthew, and it was misprinted in the program, so he did the whole first chapter. But it is a wonderful chapter. It ought to be read, but again it needs to be done as reformers urged in the 16th and 17th centuries.

I have done an annotated genealogy of Jesus. I also have some cue cards here, so you'll know how to respond to these characters. The point in this genealogy is, one great king, a faithful, humane person, gives birth to a real rotter. Then out of that rotten person comes a great leader. That goes on and on and on, and very unpredictably. You never know how God's going to act. We don't control God. God acts as God will act. So, in this genealogy, we see the record of it. In Jesus' family tree is Rahab, the prostitute. That's mind boggling, isn't it? So we go down through this whole genealogy. We never know when the good person's going to come out, sometimes out of the very bad. In other words, it puts the skids to any form of determinism. It not only

undermines astrology, it undermines heredity and environment as well. Finally, let me give you cue cards, so you'll know, in case you may not hear all the annotations, I've tried to put in what we know about these different characters, but some we know nothing about at all. But some we know deserved this...please give applause, cheers. Or some of them deserved that...hisses. You seem to do hisses better than applause. Some deserved that..."moans". About a third of them, we know nothing about at all; complete nonentities, they never made it into 'Who's Who', but they gave birth to some of the great leaders. They just get this..."huh?". Remember, as we do this, what this genealogy is saying is that out of the worst of people can be born the best of people. That gives hope for your children.

The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ..."yea". The son of David..."applause". The son of Abraham..."applause". Abraham was the father of Isaac..."applause". Isaac was the father of Jacob, who stole his brother's birthright..."boos". Jacob was the father of Judah and his brothers, who sold their brother into slavery..."hisses". Judah was the father of Perez and Zerah..."huh?". Perez was the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Ram..."huh?". Ram was the father of Amminadab, Amminadab the father of Nahshon, the father of Solomon who was the father of Boaz, by Rahab...the prostitute..."hiss". Then Boaz, though, was the father of Obed by Ruth, you remember Ruth..."cheers". Obed, then, was the father of Jesse, the father of David the king..."cheers". David was the father of Solomon, you remember Solomon..."cheers" by the wife of Uriah, whom he had had murdered..."boos". Solomon, then was the father of Rehoboam, who was a very good king..."cheers", but abandoned God for several years..."boos". Rehoboam was the father of Abijah, who had fourteen wives..."cheers" and "boos". Then, Abijah was the father of Asa, who was a very good king, but at the end of his life he didn't walk with God, and so he died of gangrene in the feet..."moans". Asa was the father of Jeoshaphat, who was a very good king, a fine king in every way..."cheers".