



The Rev. Alan Sutherland, Rector

September 16, 2007

Pentecost 16

A little boy once asked me a question, “Does God ever laugh?” And that is a great question.

I know that in my life there have been situations that I have found my self in, and things that I have said, that I am sure God has begun to smile at me and then I believe it has developed into a belly laugh. All of us can relate but is there any evidence or truth that God has a sense of humor and does God ever laugh?

The Bible is not much help in answering our question. To my knowledge there are only 3 references to laughter in the whole Bible and they are in the Psalms. Yet each of them speaks of derisive laughter and I do not think that is the kind of laughter the little boy or us have in mind.

But even though the Bible does not specifically answer the question, I believe that there are many strong suggestions that God does indeed laugh for joy.

Today Jesus speaks about joy in heaven.

Now that is not surprising because we all think of heaven as a happy place and if there is happiness, there is usually joy, and there is usually laughter. So if there is joy and laughter in the presence of God then there must be joy and laughter in the heart of God, because a festive and happy occasion is hard to imagine under the gaze of a god who is grim and humorless. So if heaven is a happy place it must ring with the joy and laughter of God.

And it should follow that if God created the earth then we should find evidence on earth as it is in heaven of the joy and laughter of God.

If we take time and listen and look we find the sense of celebration in nature. The song of a bird, a flower, sunshine, trees and so on and so on.

Even Job; sorry, depressed, why me Job; talked of the morning stars singing in chorus.

The psalmist says the mountains skipped like rams, and the little hills like lambs of the flock.

All of this is wonderful imagery, inspired by what they saw and what they felt and in describing it there is a deep sense of celebration, and joy and laughter.

Has anybody here ever heard a child laugh? Is that not a basic happiness of creation? No one ever teaches a child to laugh because no one needs to. Children laugh for the same reason a bird flies or a fish swims.

They are made that way.

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WE are made that way.

There is a writer called Friedrich Nietzsche who once wrote- the human race suffers so excruciatingly that it was forced to invent laughter.

Well he was right about the suffering because sometimes the pain and the brokenness with people's lives is sometimes unbelievable and indescribable. But I think he is wrong about the laughter. We did not invent that. It is part of our equipment. Because we are told by Genesis that God created man and woman in his own image and if joy and laughter belong to the nature of God therefore it also belongs to our nature.

Our gospel reading seems to tell us that the laughter of God is closely connected to God's purpose of redemption.

When the shepherd finds his one lost sheep he places it around his shoulders, carries it home and invites his neighbors to rejoice.

And there is more joy in heaven over one sinner that repents than the 99 who have no need of repentance.

That is a very graphic picture and I want you to understand the context of the story.

Jesus is talking to the murmuring scribes and Pharisees. He tells them a story of great joy in heaven, a spontaneous celebration over the return of one sinner, yet the other 99 feel no need of repentance.

These were the scribes and Pharisees.

They must have been a somber crowd. Not much laughter, not much rejoicing. Their religion was serious business and Jesus has just now told a joke and unfortunately they did not get the joke because the joke was on them.

You know it would have been a saving experience if they had got the punch line, realized it was about them and then laughed at themselves.

All of us ought to be able to laugh at ourselves, because, to be honest, we all are a little funny.

We are small creatures in a vast universe, here today gone tomorrow, yet sometimes we pretend to be the center of the universe don't we?

Yes we all have sinned and we would be highly embarrassed if people could see the darker side of our souls. Yet we pretend to be so righteous.

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And sometimes we are so woefully ignorant, knowing almost nothing about anything, yet we pretend to be so wise.

You know it really is laughable. And the less we are able to laugh at our selves the more laughable we become.

Those Pharisees and scribes could have grown so much that day, if they had just caught the humor in the truth that Jesus was saying.

Righteous people who have no need to repent. That's a joke. If only one of them, only one of them, had understood it and enjoyed the moment he might have laughed himself right into the kingdom of God. And that would have caused another spontaneous celebration in heaven. There is a saving grace in laughter and it is a truth we do not appreciate often enough.

Now I am not saying that sin is funny or redemption is lighthearted stuff because the exact opposite is true. Sin is tragic and breaks the heart of God. Redemption came at a terrible price of Jesus being nailed to a cross.

But there is still great joy in heaven over one repentant sinner and there is laughter and celebration among the angels and archangels and the whole company of heaven.

And the person who knows forgiveness, really knows forgiveness, discovers that celebration, that joy, that laughter, that ability to find themselves amusing in their own heart.

You know one of all our favorite saints is Francis.

He danced in the village square. He sang to the moon and sun. He preached to the birds and animals.

Was he crazy? No he was happy. His soul was an outpost of heaven. The joy of God lived in him. And Francis knew the saving grace of laughter.

Does God ever laugh? Does God have sense of humor?

To my little friend who asked the question, and to my big friends who need to think about becoming little again, the answer is yes yes yes. Thank God, Yes.

Amen.

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