

Holy Hilarity
Preacher: Rev. Karen E. Gale
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19:30

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Exodus 24: 12-18
Matthew 17: 1-9

The pastor stood before the congregation and announced that she had three sermons that she could give this morning. "I have a \$1000 sermon that will last about five minutes, next I have a \$500 sermon that will take about 15 minutes and finally I have a \$100 sermon that will take over an hour to give. Lets take the offering to see which sermon I will be giving this morning."

Today we celebrate Holy Hilarity Sunday, also called Bright Sunday or Holy Humor Sunday. This is an old, old tradition going back to medieval European times.

"On Easter Sunday afternoon most people in the villages and towns of central Europe come back to church for the solemn services of Vespers and Benediction. At the sermon that preceded this afternoon service, the priests would tell their congregations with funny stories and poems with moral conclusions from these jolly tales. Called Ostermarlein or Easter fables, these stories were to reward the faithful with something joyful after the many sad and serious Lenten preaching. (newcelebrations.com)

"The laughter and this part of the service were called risus paschalis: Easter laughter. This tradition is found as early as the thirteenth century. From the fourteenth to the eighteenth centuries the custom was widespread, and a number of collections of Easter fables appeared in print. The Protestant reformers (our forebears) violently attacked the practice as an abuse, however, and it was gradually suppressed by the Church during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries." (FREDERICK G. HOLWECK, Catholic Encyclopedia).

Ah well, no one said reformers had a good sense of humor.

In more recent years this custom is being revived in churches with help from a group called the Fellowship of Merry Christians located in Portage Michigan. And although Holy Hilarity Sunday is most often held the Sunday after Easter to celebrate the holy foolishness of Christ's death and resurrection, some churches also celebrate at other times of the year, like right before Lent, a sort of Mardi Gras. And, so, let us laugh together for great joy is held in the heart of God....

A couple had two little boys, ages 8 and 10, who were excessively mischievous. They were always getting into trouble and their parents knew that, if any mischief occurred in their town, their sons were probably involved.

They boys' mother heard that a clergyman in town had been successful in disciplining children, so she asked if he would speak with her boys. The clergyman agreed, but asked to see them individually. So the mother sent her 8-year-old first, in the morning, with the older boy to see the clergyman in the afternoon.

The clergyman, a huge man with a booming voice, sat the younger boy down and asked him sternly, "Where is God?"

They boy's mouth dropped open, but he made no response, sitting there with his mouth hanging open, wide-eyed. So the clergyman repeated the question in an even sterner tone,

"Where is God!!?" Again the boy made no attempt to answer. So the clergyman raised his voice even more and shook his finger in the boy's face and bellowed, "WHERE IS GOD!?"

The boy screamed and bolted from the room, ran directly home and dove into his closet, slamming the door behind him. When his older brother found him in the closet, he asked, "What happened?"

The younger brother, gasping for breath, replied, "We are in BIG trouble this time, dude. God is missing - and they think WE did it!"

Where is God? Somehow it is so much easier when we think of God contained in one place. Easy to box up God, define God, making sure that God is busy doing something else while we skirt the edges of good behavior.

When Moses led the people out of Egypt into the wilderness, Moses promised that God went with them. Where was God? At times God was in the smoke and pillar of fire that led the people. And then there were times when God spoke to Moses. In today's scripture Moses went up the mountain to talk to God. What do you think the people of Israel said in those times?

I have some guesses.

"There he goes again. What will he come back with this time?"

Or, "hey quick get out the margaritas and the disco, God's going to be busy for awhile."

And that is, in fact what happens. While Moses is up talking to God (and as turns out, getting the 10 commandments), the people get busy and create a god of their own. They build a golden calf to worship and adore. And then they have a great party. And then Moses comes down from the mountain.

Moses comes down from Mount Sinai after a long day of negotiating with God. He looks very tired, but the Israelites are very anxious to hear what he has to say. He says, "I have some good news and some bad news... The good news is that I got him down to only Ten Commandments. The bad news is that he wouldn't budge on the "have no other Gods before me."

Whoops! Better hide that golden calf.

Sam Levensen said, "Different people look for different things in the 10 commandments. Some are looking for divine guidance. Some for a code of living, but most people are looking for loopholes."

You see it is much easier to have a God at hand. Tangible. Understandable. A golden calf is a lot easier than a God who calls us to love and to care for our neighbor. Give us the cow made of gold. We'll bow down, have a big party celebration and go on with things. Ah, but no. It's much more difficult than that. God calls us to love and ethics. Love and ethics...

After a long illness, a woman died and arrived at the Gates of Heaven. While she was waiting for Saint Peter to greet her, she peeked through the Gates. She saw a beautiful banquet table. Sitting all around were her parents and all the other people she had loved and who had died before her. They saw her and began calling greetings to her - "Hello" "How are you! We've been waiting for you!" "Good to see you".

When Saint Peter came by, the woman said to him "This is such a Wonderful place! How do I get in?" "You have to spell a word", Saint Peter told her.

"Which word?" the woman asked.

"Love."

The woman correctly spelled "Love" and Saint Peter welcomed her into Heaven.

About six months later, Saint Peter came to the woman and asked her to watch the Gates of Heaven for him that day. While the woman was guarding the Gates of Heaven, her husband arrived.

"I'm surprised to see you", the woman said. "How have you been?"

"Oh, I've been doing pretty well since you died," her husband told her.

"I married the beautiful young nurse who took care of you while you were ill. And then I won the lottery. I sold the little house you and I lived in and bought a big mansion. And my wife and I traveled all around the world. We were on vacation and I went water skiing today. I fell, the ski hit my head, and here I am. How do I get in?"

"You have to spell a word", the woman told him.

"Which word?" her husband asked.

"Czechoslovakia."

Not so easy is it? Not so easy.... If only God were clearer. These 10 commandments aren't always as helpful as we'd like them to be. Why can't God communicate directly with us, answer a few questions and then head back out again, give us a little breathing space. Then we'd know what to do. Maybe God could send an email....

One day God was looking down at Earth and saw all of the evil that was going on. God decided to send an angel down to Earth to check it out. So God called one of the best angels and sent the angel to Earth for a while. When she returned she told God, yes it is bad on Earth, 95% is bad and 5% is good.

Well, God thought for a moment and thought maybe a second angel better be sent to get another point of view. So God called another angel and sent him to Earth for a time too.

When the angel returned he went to God and said "Yes, the Earth is in decline. 95% is bad and 5% is good."

God said this was not good. So God decided to send e-mail to the 5% that were good. God wanted to encourage them, give them a little something to help them keep going.

Do you know what that e-mail said?.....

Oh, you didn't get one either, huh? Bummer.

God does try to communicate with us in many. Maybe not always in ways we expect.

In the fullness of time, Jesus arrived. Jesus was like us. Human. Vulnerable. He could talk to us. And yet Jesus was more than human, too. And the divinity within him shone through.

Through him we could learn what it meant to live in the spirit of the Lord. He spoke of love and inclusion. He healed and spoke with power. Ah, now we get it....

Then Jesus took his disciples up the mountain and, gathering them around him, he taught them, saying:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the meek, blessed are they that mourn, blessed are the merciful, blessed are they that thirst for justice, blessed are you when persecuted, blessed are you when you suffer. Be glad and rejoice, for your reward is great in heaven.

Then Simon Peter said, "Are we supposed to know this?" And Andrew said, "Do we have to write this down?" And Philip said, "I don't have any paper." And Bartholomew said, "Do we have to turn this in?" And James said, "Will we have a test on this?" And John said, "The other disciples didn't have to learn this." And Matthew said, "May I go to the bathroom?" And Judas said, "What does this have to do with real life?"

Then one of the Pharisees, who was present, asked to see Jesus' lesson plan and inquired of Jesus, "Where is your anticipatory set and your objectives in the cognitive domain?"

And Jesus wept.

Jesus' words and wisdom are not always what we really want. It is easier to go on living the way we are living. To keep how we understand our world intact. To try to fit everything into a box. The disciples struggled with this a lot. They experienced Jesus' divinity in special ways and yet they too were caught in their own preconceived notions. The disciples were always bugging Jesus about God. Show us God, they asked. Where is God?

In today's gospel reading Jesus took Peter and two other disciples up the mountain. Just like Moses going up the mountain. And while there he was transfigured, a dazzling white light came off him. Show us God... Ok, here is God! Here is the power and presence of God. Here is the glory the disciples have been asking for. Here is the Almighty! And what happens? Peter starts babbling,

"Well this is just great. Oh my gosh. Jesus we can build some booths right here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah. It will be just fabulous and we can decorate and God can be here. It will be a party. We'll all hang out"....on and on he goes. Peter has been watching too many episodes of Extreme Makeover.

How wonderful we've got God back in a box. Or in a booth, at least if Peter has his way.

Until God speaks and everyone hits the deck terrified. We're really not so keen on God speaking. The golden calf didn't talk back. God safely contained in a booth, not a problem. A voice that speaks from the heavens, "this is my son in whom I am well pleased, listen to him!" Yikes.

God is big. Too big for us sometimes. God's ideas are too much for us sometimes. The very idea of God is too much for our rational minds. Too complicated. We wish for something simpler, easier, more made by the rules, more in line with science, simpler, more related to our experience..

A man was walking in the mountains just enjoying the scenery when he stepped too close to the edge of the mountain and started to fall. In desperation he reached out and grabbed a limb of a gnarly old tree hanging onto the side of the cliff.

Full of fear he assessed his situation. He was about 100 feet down a shear cliff and about 900 feet from the floor of the canyon below. If he should slip again he'd plummet to his death. Full of fear, he cries out, "Help me!" But there was no answer. Again and again he cried out but to no avail. Finally he yelled, "Is anybody up there? "

A deep voice replied, "Yes, I'm up here."

"Who is it?"

"It's the Lord"

"Can you help me?"

"Yes, I can help."

"Help me!"

"Let go."

Looking around the man became full of panic. "What?!?!"

"Let go. I will catch you."

"Uh... Is there anybody else up there?"

This is the human experience. To want a God just big enough. Not too big. Not too unpredictable. Just enough. And so, given the human condition, God grants us one more essential gift. Laughter is a gift from God. A big gift. A gift that is large enough to encompass the absurdity of our human situation. Laughter can help us embrace the impossible. To live with a God who is both knowable and unfathomable and to laugh at our all too human attempts to pin God down, box God up or somehow reduce God to manageable size.

There was the man whose bread fell and landed buttered side up. He ran straight away to his rabbi to report this deviance from one of the basic rules of the universe. At first the rabbi would not believe him but finally became convinced that it had happened. However, he did not feel qualified to deal with the question and passed it along to one of the world's leading Talmudic scholars. After months of waiting, the scholar finally came up with an answer: "The bread must have been buttered on the wrong side."

We will keep searching for God: on top of mountains, in voices that we hear in those around us, in healing we experience. In laughter and joy that comes to us like cool rain on a hot day. We will keep searching for God. And being UCC people we will search in our own particular way:

A bride went to her dressmaker and asked her to make a negligee for her honeymoon. She brought yards and yards and yards of fabric. The dressmaker asked, "What's with all this material?" Her answer: "My husband is a UCC pastor and he prefers searching to finding"

Oh, and why can't UCC congregations sing very well? Because they're always reading ahead to see if they agree with the next verse.

Oh yes, we will search. Sometimes it is our own ideas that place limits on God,. God is big, large, powerful, joyful, glorious. And we will laugh at the frustration and in some ways futility of seeking to truly know God. And we will tell good religious jokes for jokes too sometimes point to the truth of our absurd situation. For we shall search and never find the end. We shall seek God and only find pieces and glimpses. We will never find the whole. It is absurd. And it we are lucky, if we find moments of transcendence, moments of God, we will not blither on and on like Peter trying to capture this moment in a booth, a box, but we will stand in that experience and say, "yes, I see you God." Or laugh and "Yes, I feel you God!"

And perhaps if we are very lucky, if we seek and hunt and pray, we too shall get to the gates of heaven knowing the name of God.

The notorious ne'er-do-well went to his reward, and he was terrified about what awaited him. He had spent years carrying on in saloons and chasing women. Now he was worried about paying the price. But when he got to the Pearly Gates, he was welcomed with open arms. "Are you sure you didn't make a mistake?" he asked Saint Peter.

"No, sir," replied the Saint. "There were never any records kept, and you are just as welcome as anyone."

The man then noticed a large group standing together in a corner. Every few minutes they would start to cry and then kick the ground screaming. "What's wrong with those guys who are crying and kicking?" the new arrival asked. "Oh, them," replied Saint Peter. "They also thought we kept records."

Amen!

These jokes (good and bad) came from several websites: randomjoke.com, pretty good jokes from a Prairie Home Companion, poddy's.com and from friends who send me the best religious jokes they can find.