

Got Humor?

The Reverend Renee Marie Rico

Sunday, April 19, 2020

Bright Sunday

Genesis 15, Proverbs 17:22

Today is Easter in the Orthodox Church tradition, a time for telling jokes. Here's mine:

There were three students from San Francisco Theological Seminary waiting to enter heaven at the Pearly Gates. St. Peter asked each student individually, "Tell me, what is the meaning of Easter?"

The first one said, "Uh, isn't Easter the holiday when all your family gets together to eat turkey and then you all watch football afterwards?" St. Peter shook his head. "No, no, no. That's not what Easter is."

St. Peter walked over to the second one. "Tell me, what is the meaning of Easter?" "Easter is that holiday where you set up a tree and decorate it and that man in the funny red suit comes down the chimney and..." St. Peter cut her off. "No, no, no, that's not what Easter is either."

St. Peter was feeling very discouraged. Did anybody know what Easter was? He walked over to the third student and asked, "Tell me, what is the meaning of Easter?" "Easter is the holiday when Jesus was crucified and then they buried him in a tomb and he stayed there for three days, and on the third day..."

St. Peter interrupted the one, "Stop, don't go any further." St. Peter called the other two. "Okay, start over again and tell these students the meaning of Easter."

"Easter is the holiday when Jesus was crucified and then they buried him in a tomb and he stayed there for three days..."

"Go on," said St. Peter.

"And then on the third day, Jesus rose from the tomb..." "Yes. Yes." said St. Peter. "And if he saw his shadow, it was six more weeks of Lent."¹

Today is known as Bright Sunday. In some churches, this is called Holy Humor Sunday. No, you won't find this liturgy in the teachings of seminaries. Instead, it comes out of early church theologians like Augustine and Gregory of Nyssa, a tradition that says that God played a practical joke on the devil by raising Jesus from the dead. Easter, it can be said, was "God's supreme joke played on death."

¹ From Ralph Milton's RUMORS, a free Internet 'e-zine' for Christians with a sense of humor.

Wherever it is celebrated, by whatever name, it is characterized by joking around, singing, dancing, and merry-making.

The good news is that the Holy Spirit is always a part of laughter. You see, the word “spirit” also means “breath” and have you ever tried to laugh without breathing? Nope, not really, can you – laughter engages our diaphragm, and we have to push out the air.

So today, we are all about the laughter, and humor. We can use that right now, right?

I think laughter might be part of the foundational spirituality – because, unless we can laugh at ourselves, we are going to miss a lot of what God has to teach us about being the very fallible human beings that we are, and the opportunity to grow in the spirit.

Doris Donnelly, in her book *Spiritual Fitness*, writes that in faith communities, we can adopt a spiritual practice of laughter. Here a coupe that might speak to this time.

1. Spend time with people who have a sense of humor. I would add, especially folks who have the ability to laugh at themselves – it is truly a helpful and remarkable quality to hone.
2. Practice laughing.
3. Practice verbal disarmament. I’m pretty sure that Jesus had a good sense of humor, and that he managed to find humor in a lot of things. But one thing Jesus really excelled at was popping the balloons of pompous hypocrites, and doing it with a stiletto so that the marks could hardly be found.

Take the incident of the authorities challenging Jesus on whether they should pay taxes to Caesar, the Roman emperor who, from their point of view, is a pagan oppressor.

When Jesus is asked this question, he asks for a coin, and they give him one, even though by doing so they are showing themselves to have already broken two of the commandments: the first, because the coin shows Caesar to be King and God, therefore having “other Gods” before Yahweh, and second, because the image of Caesar is on the coin, breaking the commandment on graven images.

Just to top off the whole thing, the story ends before we know whether Jesus returned the coin to the Pharisees – maybe he pocketed it and has the last laugh!²

² Doris Donnelly, *Spiritual Fitness*, 115-6.

4. Look for the humor in scripture. Now the Jewish tradition has a slightly less elevated understanding of God. One of my favorite midrash stories (stories about stories in the Old Testament) is the one about modifying God's word. In Hebrew, only the consonants are spelled out in the ancient texts, because at first, everyone "knew" where the vowels went. The midrash story goes like this: as time went on, the community added in the vowels, but they didn't put them where God had first had them, so much so that the meaning was changed. When God complains to the community about this awful state of affairs, and how they must change things back to the way that God intended, the community members instead look up back at God and say, "Hey, you gave the word to us, now it's ours to play with."

Let me share with you a list of bumper stickers that Jesus might have had on his car, if he'd had one:³

What *would* I do?

So many lepers,
So little time.

My other car is a donkey.

If you can read this, give thanks for the twin blessings of eyesight and literacy. Also, you're too close.

Honk if you love everyone.

Gone fishing.

I'm not as infallible as you think I am.

Final Joke:

You know about Joseph of Arimathea, don't you? He was the guy who helped Jesus carry his cross and then offered a tomb for Jesus' burial. A neighbor asked Joseph why he gave his beautiful hand-hewn tomb to someone else. Joseph replied, "Well, he only needed it for the weekend."

³ "Jesus' Bumper Stickers" *Wittenburg Door*, July/August 2007, 25.