

The Humor of Joy

1 Thessalonians 1:2–6

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One question about humor always comes up from serious people: Why do we need humor in the first place? I have heard it put bluntly: “Let’s just get on with the job, no need to humor us or tell us jokes.” This question needs to be faced if we are to defend the humor of Jesus. Is Jesus “humoring” us needlessly when he tells parables, when he gives his disciples nicknames like “Rocky” for Simon son of John and “Sons of Thunder” for the youngest disciples, James and John, the sons of Zebedee? Someone could argue, “Aren’t the simple traditional names good enough?” Also it can be argued, “Doesn’t this humorous ‘new names’ practice of Jesus just call more attention to the disciples than is spiritually healthy for them?” Will it not become a possible cause for the dangerous sin of pride? At an even more theologically important level, we could ask if the true solemnity and costly grace of the sacrificial love of Jesus Christ are not compromised by humor.

Humor by its nature has the appearance of an “add on” that is not as vital as other ingredients in any total context of reality. Why should fighting men and women who are at war be assembled for a USO show with Bob Hope and Jerry Colonna in the first place? Such entertainment is certainly not as essential for

them as a long list of other ingredients, such as food, proper equipment, training, the latest and best weapons, and strategic planning. The same questions can be raised concerning such an event as the “water to wine” miracle in John 2. Where is the compassion in that sign, since no one is healed of leprosy or blindness? Some could ask if it is even wise to do a miracle that does not appear to be socially responsible from the perspective of a court counselor who has been required to work with the problems of alcoholism and drunk driving. Why is it necessary for Jesus to walk on water in the middle of the night? Does this event have long-term teaching significance?

The parables of Jesus pose their own special problem. Why a parable about a Samaritan and a wounded man? Why not simple, clear, direct teaching about the will of God concerning justice and public aid issues? The parable by its nature is subject to misunderstanding. Why, therefore, would Jesus take such risks in his teaching ministry?

We could argue that the use of humor has the same potential danger as parables. Both run the serious risk of leading us to misunderstand the seriousness of our discipleship mandate. Humor has a softening effect, after all. Is that softening caused by laughter a wise and logical strategy for disciples on a mission to oppose the works of darkness in this age and every age? How does humor fit with the sobriety and the watchfulness that a disciple needs to exhibit in order to live faithfully the apostolic mandate both in the church and in the world?

These questions go to the core of Jesus’ ministry, because humor is an inescapable part of that ministry. The humor of Jesus has its source in the joy of Jesus. Is that joy an add-on, a nonessential ingredient tacked onto the reality core, or is it in some remarkable way an essential part of the reality core itself?

This question about joy can be stated theologically as follows: Does joy, as a great word of biblical discipleship experience, have a ranking that can allow it to stand alongside the great evangelical virtues of faith, hope, and love known to us from 1 Corinthians 13 (“Now abide these three . . .”)? The apostle Paul gives counsel concerning this fourth word, joy. He sees joy as the

natural result of a faith, hope, and love that is centered on Jesus Christ. Notice how the apostle begins the letter to the Thesalonians:

We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of persons we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit. (1 Thess. 1:2-6, NRSV)

I believe that the Old Testament portrayal of *hallel*, praise, in the prophets and Psalms is in full agreement with the New Testament portrayal of the word *chara*, joy. In both instances the joy language is interpreted and portrayed as an essential part of love, because love is costly and joyous at the same time. That celebrative core of love is the direct result of the extravagant nature of God's love in Jesus Christ. So we see Jesus telling a parable about two sons to make that joyous core ingredient unforgettable for us (Luke 15). "It is right that we celebrate and have a party, for this your brother was lost and is found." These are not the words of the frivolous friend of a carefree youth who finally comes home from his wild trip to Europe; they certainly are not the words of the angry older brother who has kept track of his younger brother's immoral life. These are the words of a father, the one who suffered the humiliation, the worry, and grief because of a boy who walked out. It is the father who alone bears the cost of welcoming his son home. It is he who invites his other son to join in with the celebration. And what is vitally important for us to hear is that the father assures this elder son of his own belovedness and safety; the father loves both young men: "Son, all that is mine is yours, but this joy is right . . ." It is clear in this parable that our Lord has united joy with love so that the two cannot be separated from each other.

Faith is the portrayal of our trust in the faithfulness of God, and this understanding of faith stretches through the whole of the Bible. This means that faith is not the skill that certain mystics have mastered; nor is it a seven-step process for religious experts. Faith trusts because faith wagers on the trustworthiness of the character of God. The joy in faith comes at the electric moment when a man or woman dares to trust in God and finds that this trust is validated in spite of the contradictions that were there early on during the time of deciding.

The joy of our discovery of the faithfulness of God must not be eliminated from the core experience that the Bible calls faith in God. It is like the joy that floods two lovers when a young man speaks the promise and commitment of love and then asks the woman he loves how she feels about his proposal. If she hugs him tightly and says, "I love you too; yes, I want to marry you," then they experience together a joy that surpasses even the strong sexual and emotional desire of attraction. Such joy is an essential part of the goodness of faith. Faith in the one who deserves our trust is joyous just because it is so good and right. Jesus put it this way: "Take my yoke upon you. . . . For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matt. 11:29–30, NRSV).

Hope is the assurance here and now that comes toward believers in the present, but it comes from the future. It is our assurance that the God whom we meet in our present journey of faith is the same one who reigns in the future. This assurance has the identical joy that is a part of love and faith, because of the goodness of the one whom we will meet in that future.

Karl Barth explained the joy of this expectation clearly and simply: "There are no major surprises for a Christian believer when we die. We meet the same Jesus Christ at the end of history as we have come to know at the middle of history."¹ Since it is Jesus Christ whom we meet at the boundary of life and death, we have the best of all reasons to rejoice in our hope. Hope and joy therefore cannot be separated in the life of a Christian.

The humor of Jesus is an ally of joy, and therefore joy is not an extraneous add-on to greater realities. There are no greater realities. We are given permission to enjoy the rich humor of the

Bible, but it is not only the humor that graces the recipient of this good news about joy! We can now understand the energy of the Christian life. If you or I feel that odd fatigue that comes in upon us from fear or boredom or disobedience, or from the disappointments with ourselves or others, we now know where a cure is possible. The cure to fatigue is the joy that naturally follows faithfulness, love, and hope. This is why Jesus could say in truth that his “yoke is easy.” This is because our obedience to his will for human life produces not fatigue but energy, even a sense of humor.

Music benefits, too! The celebrative, joyous, and contemplative songs of faith are not luxuries for the rich; they have a secure home in Christian faith, just as humor does. I believe that music and the songs of faith have the same essential source of meaning in the Christian journey as humor. There may be those of a serious frame of mind who do not agree. Some think that pipe organs and guitars, poets, dancers, actors, and singing groups should not take up so much space or time in the church of Jesus Christ. But these worriers and non-singers “will need to take a crash course to really fit in when they get to heaven if we are to believe that Bible’s portrayals of heaven” (Walt Hearn, poet and scientist). Hell is the really serious future place to be, because there is absolutely nothing to laugh, dance, or sing about in that lonely place where, as C. S. Lewis described it, “each person is at an infinite distance from every other person.” But heaven will be the place of song and holy laughter (Revelation 5, Luke 15).

We owe the next generation not only a legacy of social and human concern for justice, for love, for faithfulness to truth, for hope. We also owe a legacy of joy, and that is where our collection of hymns and folk songs and poems fits in. It is where music of all kinds, drums, dance costumes, theaters and sports, peaceful times of human fellowship, games for fun, and the humorous stories we tell also have their place. It is one strong argument for the joy of beauty, and for the grand cathedrals that lift our eyes when we walk in and surround us with the stained glass of God’s faithful story. We humans instinctively begin to speak more softly when we enter a cathedral, and that quiet joy of wonder

should be a part of the experience, if possible, of every man and woman, every girl and boy. We owe it to them.

This is also why we owe it to the world and to the people of faith to keep real pipe organs in churches. This marvelous instrument of pipes, reeds, chimes, and wind was born in the church, and it is the grand instrument of joy. It can play more softly than any other musical invention; and when it is loud, it is able to shake a building. We owe this instrument, with its sense of wonder and sense of humor, to the future generation..

I remember attending a concert when I was a university student during which a large university choir and orchestra were presenting "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." During the final stanza I began to feel a profound underpinning, and then gradually more and more I became aware of a power and a depth of bass notes joining in with the chorus and orchestra. Then I saw it. In that concert hall the great pipe organ had entered the song; at first with such subtlety that it seemed as if flute and horn players far away were gradually coming near. By the time the final notes of that hymn were sung with full choir and orchestra and full, mighty pipe organ, my heart had melted, and tears were streaming down my face. It was the sheer joy of the good song of music to the glory of God. I want that joy for every girl and boy, young woman and young man, grandmother and grandfather. I want it to take them by surprise as it did me; I want them to be able to cry because it is so beautiful and well-pleasing, too.

We are told that there will be such a day, when the greatest chorale of all time will be sung with a vast choir, and you can be sure the organists and the drummers and the guitarists and the dancers and the poets and the ice skaters and the farmers and the scholars and the workers in the factories and their children will be there, doing what they do best to the glory of God. The song will be "Worthy is the Lamb" (Rev. 5:12).

We also owe future generations humor. Humor is the story that joy tells. G. K. Chesterton put it best of all: "I have often thought that the gigantic secret of God is his mirth." We humans need the mirth of Jesus, not to be humored, but to become more human—which is one thing that humor does to us and for us and

in us. The humor of joy draws us near to Jesus so that we want to trust him more. We owe this humor to our children because, however serious and heavy life is and can become, the greatest truth of all still is this, that Jesus Christ who gave his life for our salvation is alive, really alive. The tomb is empty because a real victory has been won over death, over sin, and over evil. Therefore the word that pleases us more than all the other words is joy. Paul said it well in one of his most humorous lines, "Where sin increased, grace increased more" (Rom. 5:20, NIV). How is this possible? It is because of Jesus, who began his ministry at the River Jordan alongside a very serious and earnest man called John the Baptist. But then by total surprise God spoke, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:17, RSV).

NOTE

1. Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, trans. G. T. Thomson (New York: Philosophical Library, 1945), 131, 133.