

“The Mirth of God”

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Acts 3:11-22

Luke 24:36<sup>b</sup>-53

*And while they still disbelieved for joy, and wondered, [Jesus] said to them,  
“Have you anything here to eat?”*

Let us pray... O God,

Help us to believe even at the risk of being disappointed.

Help us to feel your mirth and know that whatever we face, we are in your care.

Amen

At my first church in Mystic Connecticut,  
where I served as the Youth & Family Minister,  
we had a liturgical drama group that met every Monday afternoon.

Seven little girls, ages 7 to 12, were the members of our  
Not Ready For Prime Time Play Readers Theatre  
which I led with help of a senior couple  
who were active in local community theatre.

They were supposed to be ‘play readers’,

but these kids took it upon themselves to memorize their parts.

The very first play they presented was called, “The Prodigal Daughter”;

They did many more after that – and some of them we have performed here.

After play practice – for 10 minutes or so before their parents would arrive,  
we would let these children play hide-and-seek, together in the sanctuary.

I believe that was almost as important for their spiritual development  
as bringing a Bible story to life in drama.

They would remember “church” as a safe place that was fun, too.

They were learning that holiness can be as much about joy as reverential awe  
and that God has a sense of humor.

One of the first times I realized God has a sense of humor  
was when my family gathered at my sister’s house in southern New Jersey  
for Thanksgiving.

My Dad, brother-in-law, and I had got up early to take my folks’ dog out for a walk  
and it was one of those brisk autumn mornings  
of blue sky, leafless trees, and brown lawns.

At the bottom of a hill in the midst of a copse of trees,  
we were surprised to see four or five deer moving soundlessly through it,  
almost invisibly with their tan fur hides.

Then I looked down at our dog – a miniature white poodle  
as she blissfully poked along unaware.

Willard, p.2

I suppose if she had seen the deer, she would've been arf-arfing all over the place –  
but the sharp contrast of the whiteness of her fur  
compared with the deer's camouflage, struck me how much she was  
an exception to Darwin's rule of the 'survival of the fittest'.  
This goofy little dog served no practical purpose to us, anybody else, or even herself  
other than to delight us with her extravagant beauty...

Not everyone sees God's sense of humor in the same way.

A family I have known all my life suffered a tragedy when their youngest son  
was afflicted by a condition that left him wheel chair bound  
and mentally disabled, until he died at age 30.

His father said to me with bitterness, that what happened to their son  
was God's joke on them...

After he said this, I asked him, "What did this teach you?"

and he said, "That's a *good* question..." meaning it was a good question to ask.

He and I went to church that Sunday and seeing the inscription on the altar table,  
"In Remembrance of Me", we wept together as we remembered his son.

Of course that inscription was meant for Jesus the Son of God,  
which can serve to remind us of what he went through and to teach us  
we have a companion on those painful stretches of our life journeys –  
and that the 'joke' was on him, too.

Certainly, there is no humor in the cause of such situations,  
but humor can play a role in healing from them – if we choose to recognize it.

The Resurrection narratives are filled with humor -  
humor that healed and transformed the disciples then,  
and have inspired healing for generations of believers ever since.

The first example is from the Gospel of Luke  
when two male disciples were walking to Emmaus,  
forlorn with grief at the death of Jesus,  
and the resurrected Christ showed up to walk with them –  
though they didn't recognize who he was.

When he asks what they are talking about,  
they are dumbfounded that anyone coming from Jerusalem  
wouldn't know about all the things that had been going on.

Perhaps Christ was massaging his wounded wrists when he said,  
"What things?" knowing exactly what had happened to him.

They tell him about Jesus of Nazareth, 'a prophet mighty in word and deed'  
and how he was betrayed and put to death.

They tell him about how the women of their group went to his tomb  
but found his grave empty –  
except for two angels who said that he was alive.

Willard, p.3

At this point “he” says to them,

“O the foolishness of men who are slow of heart to believe  
all that the *prophets* have told you” – meaning their women.

They still don’t get it until they sit down at table with this stranger

when they finally recognize him *by the way* he prayed and broke the bread.

Paintings of this story by Rembrandt, l’Hermitte, and other artists

portray an almost comical event as the stupefied disciples realize  
who is there with them.

These two fellows race back to Jerusalem – seven miles in an hour,

which means they were running 9-minute miles to get back to the upper room  
to tell their fellow disciples.

Before they can even say a word of what they’ve raced all that way back to say,

as they burst through the door, somebody already there blurts out to them  
that Christ had appeared to Peter!

The Gospels of Luke and John seem to have a special relationship –

one picks up where the other leaves off with the stories about Peter –  
and Mary Magdalene.

Mary Magdalene is mentioned in Luke

as being present with the other women who went to the tomb;

However in John, she is given her own revelation – not only with the angels,

but Christ himself, whom she thinks at first is the gardener.

She is feisty as she demands to know where Jesus’ body has been taken,

until she realizes who she is talking to.

In the traditional King James Version, Jesus says,

*“Touch me not, for I have not yet ascended to my Father...”*

when what he probably said was,

“Don’t hang onto me. Let me go! I still must go up to Heaven!”

In the Gospel of John, we find out in detail about Jesus’ encounter with Peter

who with other disciples, had gone back to his old life in Galilee as a fisherman.

Out in a boat, fishing all night long, they catch nothing,

but in the morning, Christ is standing on the beach –

and he tells them where the fish are biting.

They drop their nets over the side –

and they are immediately filled with fish!

In the Gospel of Luke, this happens when Jesus first met Peter,

so, if we presume it happens a second time in the Gospel of John,

when a disciple says, ‘It’s the Lord!’, Peter is like, “Duh!”

He put on his clothes and leapt into the sea – as if to escape Christ,

but he has nowhere to go except towards shore

where Jesus is waiting for him.

Willard, p.4

Once again, Peter is sitting by a fire and confronted three times  
as to whether he loved Jesus or not –

like when he denied even knowing Jesus just three days before.

Jesus was tough on Peter,

but he had to bring him to it to bring him through it.

What *we* learn is that Jesus was so far beyond what had happened to him,  
that he doesn't seem to need to forgive for his own sake.

He said to Peter,

“Take care of my sheep” – as if to say,

“You are loved and forgiven. I trust you. Get to work!”

This brings us back to today's Gospel lesson from Luke

where Christ enters the locked and barred upper room

surprising the disciples gathered there.

At first they think he is a ghost, but when he insists that he is of flesh and bone,

the text says that they ‘still disbelieved for joy’ –

meaning they didn't want to be disappointed.

Then, Jesus does something totally unexpected...

He asks for something to eat.

They give him a piece of broiled fish and he eats it right in front of them!

This seems like such a normal, simple thing, but under the circumstances,

it was shocking and even comical – which appears to have been Jesus' intent.

He wanted to defuse the charged atmosphere of grief and fear –

and may even have gotten them to laugh!

There is a fine line between what some consider to be sacred or profane,

and we often hear about those with no sense of humor

assuming the grim task of defending the faith.

I believe those were the people with whom Jesus most often had problems.

I also believe that a sense of humor is one of the distinguishing features

of our relationship as Christians with God.

Our God – through Christ, is not aloof as an all-knowing and dispassionate Judge,

but is more like a Beloved Friend – the kind of friend, though,

who doesn't let you get away with anything.

Our God – through Christ, is also like that friend who calls forth the best in you –

who believes the best about you.

Our God – through Christ, has demonstrated a sense of humor

and even still seeks opportunities to play despite outward circumstances...

Willard, p.5

An Episcopal priest friend of mine visited Ethiopia  
during the terrible famine there of the mid-1980s.

He only had two weeks, but for a week and half,  
was stuck in the capital, Addis Ababa.

Just days before he was to leave, he was allowed to visit an orphanage  
in the countryside.

He had brought with him a kickball – the kind used in elementary schools here.

It was deflated to carry easily in his travels –  
but he had to use a Bic pen refill to blow it up.

When he got to the orphanage,  
he gave the ball to the children and they began to play,  
kicking it all over the compound.

He had been there six hours and those children were still  
kicking that ball around.

As he was preparing to leave, the orphanage director told my friend,  
“Our children were fed only yesterday. Had you come even a day earlier,  
they would not have had the strength to play with the ball.”

It's funny – in a way of speaking, how it all worked out...

Amen

*Our lesson today from Acts 3:11-22, describes how the Apostle Peter responded to the reactions of those who saw him heal a person crippled since birth...*

<sup>11</sup> While the healed man clung to Peter and John,  
all the people rushed toward them at Solomon's Porch,  
completely amazed.

<sup>12</sup> Seeing this, Peter addressed the people:

“You Israelites, why are you amazed at this?

Why are you staring at us as if we made him walk  
by our own power or piety?

<sup>13</sup> The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—the God of our ancestors—  
has glorified his servant Jesus.

This is the one you handed over and denied in Pilate's presence,  
even though he had already decided to release him.

<sup>14</sup> You rejected the holy and righteous one,  
and asked that a murderer be released to you instead.

<sup>15</sup> You killed the author of life,  
the very one whom God raised from the dead.

We are witnesses of this.

<sup>16</sup> His name itself has made this man strong.

That is, because of faith in Jesus' name,

God has strengthened this man whom you see and know.

The faith that comes through Jesus

gave him complete health right before your eyes.

<sup>17</sup> “Brothers and sisters, I know you acted in ignorance.

So did your rulers.

<sup>18</sup> But this is how God fulfilled what he foretold through all the prophets:  
that his Christ would suffer.

<sup>19</sup> Change your hearts and lives!

Turn back to God so that your sins may be wiped away.

<sup>20</sup> Then the Lord will provide a season of relief from the distress of this age  
and he will send Jesus, whom he handpicked to be your Christ.

<sup>21</sup> Jesus must remain in heaven until the restoration of all things,  
about which God spoke long ago through his holy prophets.

<sup>22</sup> Moses said,

“The Lord your God will raise up from your own people  
a prophet like me.

Listen to whatever he tells you.’

*Let us be guided and challenged by these words.*

Inspired by Luke 24:33-53

AND THEY RACED BACK FROM THERE TO JERUSALEM IN AN HOUR...

THEY CAME TO THE ELEVEN DISCIPLES

WHO WERE GATHERED IN AN UPPER ROOM

WITH OTHERS WHO SAID,

“THE LORD HAS RISEN INDEED AND APPEARED TO PETER THE ROCK!”

THEN, THEY...TOLD...WHAT HAD HAPPENED TO THEM ON THE ROAD

AND HOW HE HAD BEEN MADE KNOWN TO THEM

BY THE BREAKING OF BREAD.

AND AS THEY WERE SAYING THESE WORDS, LOOK HERE!

JESUS STOOD IN THEIR MIDST AND SAID,

“SHALOM, SHALOM! PEACE BE WITH YOU!”

BUT THEY WERE TERRIFIED AND SUPPOSED

THAT THEY WERE LOOKING AT A GHOST!

AND HE SAID TO THEM,

“WHY ARE YOU AFRAID?

AND WHY DO QUESTIONS ENTER YOUR MINDS?

HANDLE ME AND SEE!

FOR A GHOST DOES NOT HAVE FLESH & BONE

AS YOU SEE THAT I HAVE!”

STILL, THEY DISBELIEVED –

BECAUSE THEY DID NOT WANT TO BE DISAPPOINTED.

AND HE SAID TO THEM,

“DO YOU HAVE ANYTHING HERE TO EAT?”

THEY GAVE HIM A PIECE OF BROILED FISH;

AND HE TOOK IT AND ATE BEFORE THEM.

AND HE SAID,

“THESE ARE MY WORDS WHICH I SPOKE TO YOU

WHILE I WAS STILL WITH YOU:

THAT THE WORDS OF THE LAW, THE PROPHETS, AND THE PSALMS

SHOULD COME TO TAKE PLACE;

AND THAT REPENTANCE AND FORGIVENESS

SHOULD BE PREACHED IN MY NAME,

BEGINNING WITH JERUSALEM.

AND YOU ARE WITNESSES OF THESE THINGS,

BUT REMAIN IN THE CITY

UNTIL YOU ARE CLOTHED FROM ON HIGH.”

THEN, HE LED THEM OUT AS FAR AS BETHANY, AND LIFTING UP HIS ARMS,

HE BLESSED THEM; AND AS HE BLESSED THEM,

HE WAS TAKEN AWAY FROM THEM INTO HEAVEN;

AND THEY WORSHIPPED HIM.

SO, THEY RETURNED TO JERUSALEM WITH GREAT JOY;

AND FROM THEN ON, THEY WERE ALWAYS IN THE TEMPLE

PRAISING GOD.

Luke 24:36<sup>b</sup>-53

[36] As they were saying this, Jesus himself stood among them.

[37] But they were startled and frightened, and supposed that they saw a spirit.

[38] And he said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do questionings rise in your hearts?"

[39] See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself; handle me, and see; for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see that I have."

[41] And while they still disbelieved for joy, and wondered, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?"

[42] They gave him a piece of broiled fish,

[43] and he took it and ate before them.

[44] Then he said to them, "These are my words which I spoke to you, while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled."

[45] Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures,

[46] and said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead,

[47] and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

[48] You are witnesses of these things.

[49] And behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you; but stay in the city, until you are clothed with power from on high."

[50] Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them.

[51] While he blessed them, he parted from them, and was carried up into heaven.

[52] And they returned to Jerusalem with great joy,

[53] and were continually in the temple blessing God.