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# Laughter on the Journey

HOWARD R. MACY

In telling friends that I'm preparing an article on humor and spirituality for a seminary journal read by pastors, I've heard them say too often, "Good luck!" or "I hope it does some good." Their remarks remind me that in many Christian traditions people think that ministers and other leaders don't show much humor. Too often, they have found ministers overly serious, somber, even grumpy. That may be true, but I think it's unfair to paint with such a broad brush. I've known a couple of ministers who have a sense of humor, even among Lutherans.

One of these is friend Bill Vaswig, who, when he speaks in a church, begins with a blessing and then, with a broad grin and a twinkle in his eye, introduces himself as a "Lutheran evangelist." He laughs heartily and often. Then there's Martin Luther, whose comments and stories in *Table Talk* often amuse us, sometimes with both surprise and shock, and may even be far enough over the edge that they no longer qualify as what my preacher dad used to call a "pulpit joke." Actually, examples of Christian leaders who enjoy and use humor abound, since humor is often a mark of a lively relationship with God. For examples you can choose from a great roster of saints and heroes, including Francis of Assisi, Mother Teresa, Desmond Tutu, Martin Marty, Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton, Pope John XXIII, St. Paul (yes), and even the Gospel writer Luke. I include Jesus, of course, but exploring that goes well beyond the scope of this article.

To be fair, using and enjoying humor genuinely challenges people of faith;

*Humor can be used to demean and degrade, but it can also be used to promote understanding and Christian community. One key to using humor might well be to paraphrase Jesus: "Laugh with others as you would have them laugh with you."*

humor surrounds us and is used in many ways for both good and ill. People create humor to get our attention, to sell products and ideas, to sneakily win a point, to avoid, to mislead, to attack, and to demean. Humor is often mean-spirited. It can trivialize and leave us feeling dirty. Yet, we also use humor to build relationships, to show love, to relieve stress, to help heal, to stir up creativity, to interpret our experience, and to tell the truth. Though we rightly reject its misuse, humor is too grand a gift to fear or to neglect.

Susan Sparks, both a stand-up comedian and a Baptist pastor, writes: “As a veteran of the punch line and the pulpit, I believe that humor can empower us to live with elegance and beauty and a generosity of spirit. It is the one tool that can enable us to live our daily lives, our *spiritual* lives, with grace.”<sup>1</sup> In this spirit, the purpose of this article is to explore how humor thrives in a healthy spirituality and how humor can nurture a joyful life with God and the people of God.

### MISLEADING IDEAS

Sincere people sometimes are reluctant to use humor because they have misleading ideas about humor or about the true character of God and humans. For example, some folks think that having a healthy sense of humor means being a good joke teller, showing dazzling wit, or being the life of the party. It doesn’t. Having a great sense of humor means lightening up, being “in fun,” and walking through our lives alert to the surprising, the absurd, the mismatches, the mistakes, the unexpected, the quirky, the silly exaggerations, the klutzy, and all manner of things we run into every day. We live purposefully, of course, but living daily life in fun usually gives us plenty of reason to laugh (or at least to smile loudly, if we fear erupting in snorts or guffaws). As James Martin notes, “A sense of humor depends upon having an eye for the humorous in the ordinary.”<sup>2</sup> We can learn to see and enjoy the great fund of funny.

Many folks resist humor because they misunderstand God. Sadly, many see God as dour and damning, as a scary God who would yell, “Wipe that smile off your face!” rather than laugh at a joke, let alone tell one. They can hardly imagine that God would ever do things to make people laugh. They don’t see the humor in God cracking up Abraham and Sarah by telling them they would have a baby in the geriatric ward. They don’t see the comic touch in God doing surprising things in unexpected ways with unexpected people, whether with Gideon or David or the fishermen who followed Jesus. Jesus himself, who told entertaining stories and was a welcome guest at too many parties (so his detractors said), showed us a God who is not only loving and joyful, but who wants us to share in that joy.

Misunderstanding what people are like also hinders humor. The Bible tells us that humans live in a paradox: made in the image of God and given great powers, on the one hand; dependent creatures, limited by design, on the other. Rather than

<sup>1</sup>Susan Sparks, *Laugh Your Way to Grace* (Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths, 2011) xvii.

<sup>2</sup>James Martin, *Between Heaven and Mirth* (New York: HarperOne, 2011) 187.

living gladly in that tension, we have tended to grab for the power and to ignore the limitations. We're easily taken in by the temptation: "You shall be like God." It's odd, isn't it, that dependent creatures, limited by design, should push to be independent and to run the world. And to do it perfectly!

This is a recipe for disaster. All kinds of folks promote themselves to be the center of the universe and take themselves very seriously in this self-appointed role. The resulting multicentric world is a mess. Others fall into a perpetual, self-defeating perfectionism, steadily frustrated that they can't quite reach their unrealistically high goals. And then, of course, there are those who fancy themselves as perfect.

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There is hope and humor in living in the paradox of the Creator's design. Receiving God's provision and sustaining power can release us from the anxiety and responsibility of being self-sufficient. Knowing that we are limited frees us to understand and even laugh when we make mistakes. It helps me to think about human limits as the Klutz Factor. We all (except for the perfect ones) lose our keys, wear mismatched socks or shoes, say the wrong thing at just the right time, forget an appointment (again), or...look in the mirror, and fill in the blanks. Laughing at our absurd attempts to run the world, to keep every hair in place, and to never lose our keys frees us to truly be ourselves and to enjoy the world in which we live.

#### HUMOR IN THE PERSONAL SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Properly understanding a sense of humor, God, and the paradox of being human opens the way to develop humor in our personal spiritual journey. As we have suggested, we extend grace to ourselves as we learn to accept and live within our human limitations. It's good to remember that many of our shortcomings and mistakes are not moral failures. Laughing rather than fuming, as hard as it is sometimes, is usually a better course. Certainly in our frailty we do have moral failures. We should not just laugh them off, of course, but, in my experience, sometimes humor has helped me overcome defensiveness and pride so that I can move toward confession.

A healthy use of humor can also deepen our integrity. Laughter can help us avoid pretending to be someone we're not or letting others cast us in roles that don't fit. We can take off masks and become more transparent. Sometimes being honest with ourselves can be difficult, but a loving sense of humor can keep it from being brutal.

Humility and integrity are very close to each other. As Thomas Merton wisely



noted, “Humility consists in being precisely the person you actually are before God, and since no two people are alike, if you have the humility to be yourself you will not be like anyone else in the whole universe.”<sup>3</sup> Humor can deepen our humility, too. Self-deprecating humor can serve to remind us who we are when we get tempted to puff up or show off, whether inwardly or publicly. This is one of the most endearing forms of humor, often disarming others or putting them at ease. At its best, self-deprecating humor is both truthful and gentle, reflecting self-respect and compassion. Of course it can take a negative turn. It damages those who use it to demean themselves with anger and self-loathing. It is distorted also when people use it as a ploy to get attention, pity, or the affirmation of others. Then, it no longer serves either truth or humility.<sup>4</sup>

Humility and integrity are particularly challenging issues for all kinds of folks who serve in ministry: pastors, chaplains, music leaders, religious educators, and many more. For all kinds of reasons, we are drawn to take ourselves with deadly seriousness. James Martin, a priest well experienced with this, warns that when ministers “act as if they have the weight of the world on their shoulders, that no job is as difficult as theirs, and that they alone are responsible for doing God’s work, then we’re in trouble.”<sup>5</sup> Humor can help ground us again when we’re tempted to be morose and grandiose. To adapt Anne Lamott’s observation to the newest population figures, “only one [seven]-billionth of this is about you.”<sup>6</sup>

Another way humor strengthens our personal spiritual journey is by helping us reframe our experiences to create a more healthy perspective. Comic sketch writers and others point out that comedy is tragedy plus time. Crises, tragedy, and disappointments, when they first happen, can be very hard to walk through and can seem so dark that there is not even a hint of laughter. But given time, we can often look back and see the absurd, the unexpected, and the surprise of grace. We find we can laugh. We can even actively choose to look back, seeing whether, in retrospect, humor might bring healing. Sometimes it can help, when we know we’ll probably laugh later, to wonder, “Why wait?” That’s not always appropriate, but often the sooner humor can heal, the better.

## HUMOR AND THE JOURNEY AMONG OTHERS

Humor can open the way to developing relationships. When we walk through the world in fun and our humor rises out of our integrity and humility, it draws people. I recently heard Maya Angelou say, “I don’t trust anyone who doesn’t laugh.” But people often gravitate to those whose humor is deeply grounded in a joyful life in God. Again, this does not mean being a grand entertainer (though

<sup>3</sup>Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, rev. ed. (New York: New Directions, 1974) 99.

<sup>4</sup>If you find that you’re complimenting yourself at this point regarding how well you use self-deprecation, you may have some work to do.

<sup>5</sup>Martin, *Between Heaven and Mirth*, 144.

<sup>6</sup>Quoted in Sparks, *Laugh Your Way*, 54.

some have wonderful gifts for that); it is simply a way of being fully present in life and seeing humor in the ordinary.

Humor can be a way of extending grace to others. We can use humor that embraces others rather than undercuts or attacks them. Some comedy writers assume that all humor has its root in anger, and they use humor to assault others as enemies. In contrast, laughter that grows out of knowing our common humanity and the love of God can be very compelling. We can smile and jest that we're all in the same boat, that we all have klutzy days. Recently, at midday, my next-door office colleague (a smart guy) called me out into the hall to show me that he had just discovered he was wearing mismatched shoes, one black and one brown Birkenstock. We laughed together, of course, but the fun of sharing stupid mistakes helped me months later when I ran the battery dead on a rental car and mused that human klutziness is a good reason to belong to the auto club. I especially like humorists like Bill Cosby and Erma Bombeck who, rather than demeaning us for our mistakes, help us know that we belong to each other and share stupid moments. It helps me be gracious to myself and to those around me, even when they and I really mess up.

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Humor can bring blessing to others. Christians have the task and treat of letting God's love and delight show in the world. We get to pour out and surround people with the love of God, which is what it means to live life as blessing. As we discover ways to be with people joyfully and playfully, humor can be a wonderful way to share God's love. Because so many are worn, weary, and feel under attack, humor that blesses may come as a surprise. For example, many who serve others as store clerks, restaurant servers, or office workers routinely experience grumps who offer criticism, disrespect, and demeaning humor. What a welcome change it is when someone interacts with them cheerfully, with respect, and perhaps joining with them in empathy and gentle humor. It can be simple, even silly, and it need not get in the way of their work. A favorite local coffee shop sells day-old bakery goods. When I ask for a "used brownie," it's usually good for a smile. Or when I use high exaggeration (a common humor device) to praise them for the latté they just made, it serves as both laughter and affirmation. Actually, though it's not specifically humor, even a warm smile can make a difference. When we are genuinely present to people with respect and joy, we bless them with the love of God.

Humor can help build unity and a sense of community among the people we know and serve. Humor can be an all-purpose tool, like WD-40 and duct tape. It

can loosen things up where they're stuck, and bind things together.<sup>7</sup> Humor, well used, can break through tension and it can gather people together. We can model and teach how to use humor in playful, loving ways, so that people can share their lives openly. Communities can have fun together with games (especially collaborative games), in social gatherings, and even working groups—yes, even committees. It can increase the group's creativity and build the sense of common purpose. Leaders who are well grounded and free in their own humor can help lead the way.

Humor can also help us tell the truth. Many folks mistakenly think that using humor trivializes what is serious, and that “funny” equals “not important.” Of course, this makes them vulnerable to all sorts of serious persuasion carried in jokes, comic sketches, and advertising. Using humor is, in fact, a very effective way to persuade or to make a point, partly because hearers don't get the point until it's already sneaked up on them while they're laughing. In his stories, funny word pictures, and high exaggeration, Jesus used humor splendidly, often perplexing the Pharisees while he pleased the crowd. Politicians and other public figures don't fear humor for nothing.

#### USING HUMOR EFFECTIVELY

The scope of this article will not permit teaching how to do stand-up comedy, write comic sketches, or craft and tell killer jokes. Others can do that, and it is not my forte. But it is important here to consider how to use humor well, especially when connecting humor and the spiritual journey. I am convinced that two key guides for using humor are trustworthiness and love.

“Laugh with others as you would have them laugh with you.” Since I adapted Jesus' words in this way (from Luke 6:31), they have become a persistent, usually welcome, guide to my use of humor. They seem to me to capture what love means when I'm being funny. They tell me not to attack others with humor or use it to get revenge. They warn against putting others down, slinging zingers, puffing myself up, and trying to win something through humor that I can't otherwise have a civil conversation about. They remind me not to go after easy targets, the folks that are laughed at easily and often. Surely we all know painfully well the difference between being laughed with and being laughed at. What surprised me when I first shared this saying publicly, and many times since, is how much it caught my listeners off guard. Their responses suggested that many of them didn't regard humor as part of the whole package of Christian living. For them, somehow, humor lived in its own rules-free territory. Of course, they knew that becoming Jesus' apprentices and friends includes all of life, so thinking that loving God and neighbor should guide our humor challenges them as it does me.

Based on this basic principle, I developed some questions to help me think about the humor I use and join in. They include: Is this a hit or a hug? Does this

<sup>7</sup>Thanks to Susan Sparks for this image. Sparks, *Laugh Your Way*, 65.

tear down or build up? Is this one-way or two-way? Is this laughing with or laughing at? Does this divide or unite? Is this costly or free, and who's paying for this laugh?<sup>8</sup> Humor happens quickly, and often we laugh before we think (as that's how humor works) but when we think back or think ahead, questions like these can help us reflect on whether we have acted in love.

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The other guide in using humor is trustworthiness, which has its roots in integrity and love. Trustworthiness means being truthful and fair. It rejects humor that scrambles for advantage or tries to get revenge. It is careful not to let things slip in jest that someone told you in trust. Trustworthiness also requires transparency and consistency, both of which grow out of integrity. Sometimes it's tempting to make fun of someone when they're not around, but it's still unkind and it reveals the joker to be a person who can't be trusted. Certainly it makes those who are present wonder what we might say when they're not around. The pain of that kind of betrayal often shows up in the lament psalms when the singer complains to God about people who smile to your face and stab you in the back (for example, Ps 41:9). Modern social media like Facebook and Twitter add another level of caution here, since hasty, careless remarks can both sting and raise questions about the writer's trustworthiness.

Most of us can grow in our sense of humor and, in the process, learn to use it better. That can be challenging when life storms by, full of wind and fury. Still, we can learn to laugh, even in humor-parched environments. One way is simply to hang out with people who enjoy being in fun and are glad to have company. A lot of humor is best shared. Another tool is to read amusing writing, enjoy cartoons, and watch funny movies and video. They often open the world to us in ways we haven't thought of. Mark Twain, Patrick McManus, Anne Lamott, Walt Kelly's *Pogo*, John McPherson's *Close to Home*, Rita Rudner, Monty Python, and almost anything by Mel Brooks are on my long list. You probably have a list, too, one that would make mine better.

Searching books and the Internet for humor produces abundant, surprising, and mixed results. In preparing this article, I have learned new things about Martin Luther and the mischievous Martin Marty. I've discovered the Old Lutheran Gift Shoppe that carries a variety of humorous gifts including a Martin Luther bobblehead doll, "You Might Be A Lutheran If..." shirts, and Old Lutheran

<sup>8</sup>Howard R. Macy, *Laughing Pilgrims: Humor and the Spiritual Journey* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2006) 57–65.

Confirmints. I was drawn in by an article that began, “You might be a Lutheran if you only serve Jell-O in the proper liturgical color for the season.”<sup>9</sup>

We can take other active steps to grow in humor. One is to steadily look for reasons to be grateful. That goes a long way in curing terminal grumpiness. Look, too, for what seems silly or amusing in your own experience. Don’t beat yourself up over whatever klutziness you find. Laugh gently, instead. Some folks find it helpful to collect stories, cartoons, experiences, or whatever makes them laugh almost every time they interact with it and to keep that collection handy when times get tough. Pulling out a few sure-to-laugh treasures in hard times can feel like rescue. Finally, it was from a Lutheran that I first learned that you can laugh in prayer. Sometimes that laughter is simply joyful and is prompted by wonder of God’s presence and the outrageousness of grace; at other times it’s because we know that God often finds things as sad and preposterous as we do.

Laughter in our life with God isn’t just acceptable—it’s winsome and necessary. It responds to the wonder and dazzle of God’s grace and invites others to share in it. Humor goes to the heart of God’s goodness. As Martin Marty challenges, “How can you talk about Christian joy, if you never have an impulse to dance or play or do funny things? If you are inundated with God’s grace, you should be liberated and free to dance, to laugh, and to smile!”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Erin Hemme Froslic, “‘Old Lutheran’ Brand—With Martin Luther Bobblehead—Adds Touch of Humor,” *Brainerd Dispatch*, March 22, 2002; at [http://brainerddispatch.com/stories/032202/chu\\_0322020044.shtml](http://brainerddispatch.com/stories/032202/chu_0322020044.shtml) (accessed February 3, 2012).

<sup>10</sup>Quoted in Martin, *Between Heaven and Mirth*, 211.