

## **Did You Hear the One About...**

[Text - Matthew 11:16-19; 28-30]

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One Sunday morning, a young teenager notices that her minister stops and bows his head for a moment before starting his sermon. After worship, when she asks him why he does that, he's encouraged that someone of the upcoming generation is showing some interest in his work. He tells her, "I always pause to ask God to help me preach a meaningful and inspiring sermon." To which the girl replies, "That makes sense...so how come God doesn't do it?"

In today's New Testament reading, Jesus says, 'To what shall I compare this generation? You're like a bunch of critical, cranky children who are dissatisfied with anyone or anything that is different. We play happy flute music, and you won't dance; we sing a solemn dirge, and you will not mourn. You condemn John the Baptist's serious and strict lifestyle as being demonic; yet when I come eating and drinking and enjoying Life, you call me a glutton and a drunkard. There's just no pleasing you!'

The problem isn't with John the Baptist, nor is it Jesus' problem. The real problem is that sometimes, some people aren't satisfied unless they're being negative. Yet as most of us know, being negative really isn't all that satisfying! How much better it is to be *positive*, to try to appreciate and affirm the qualities of those around us; even those who may be different from ourselves. That's how Jesus lives his life: with an upbeat sense of joy and acceptance - free from picky human judgments; yet fully human and fully aware of the differences, needs, and concerns of those around him.

I think it's probably Jesus' own healthy and Holy sense of humor, that allows him to remain gracious and reasonable in his interactions with others - especially the often unreasonable religious leaders of his day. Throughout the centuries, humor has been an indispensable tool for dealing with unreasonable people, and a powerful vehicle for getting people to lighten-up and to consider ideas or viewpoints that are different from their own. Even though some of the humor that Jesus uses gets lost in linguistic or cultural translation - particularly his puns and play on words - much of his witty repartee still retains its original punch.

For example, Jesus describes the nitpicking, religious purists - who easily find fault with *others*, yet allow themselves all kinds of leeway - as people who "Strain at the gnat, and swallow the camel!" Just picture such a person, carefully picking a tiny gnat from his cup, yet somehow missing - and *swallowing* - an entire camel! That's a pretty preposterous picture! Or take Jesus' premise, that before any judgmental individual points out the minuscule speck of dust in his neighbor's eye, he just might first want to remove the enormous log that is sticking out of his own eye! Or when Jesus warns people about practicing their piety in front of others, to show how deeply religious they are - imagine Jesus doing an imitation of a typical, sad-sack Sadducee, devoutly distorting his face and righteously raising his hands to heaven, looking *painfully* pious [or terribly constipated]!

Jesus displays a marvelously light spirit of forbearance and compassion toward people who have been pushed to the fringes of society; yet he's quick to use his sharp wit to confront the hypocrisy of those religious or political leaders who have pushed them there. Today's New Testament reading is a good example of this. It's also a good example of how you and I can find a balance between taking our Faith seriously, while at the same time not taking ourselves so darn seriously! The work of the Church *is* quite serious: helping people understand and respond to the Life-changing Love of God! However, it's not accomplished by critically picking people apart, but by compassionately picking people up and raising-up their spirits. And when we look at the life of Jesus, we see him doing exactly that. He

helps people move from discouragement to hope; from doubt to faith; from heavy oppression and fear, to genuine openness and freedom.

I believe that Jesus is so full of life, in large part, because of his ability to be fully present and responsive to all of the Life which surrounds him. I also think that he has this ability, because of his remarkable connection with his Loving Heavenly Parent. As a completely loved and secure individual, free from fear and self-doubt, Jesus can openly connect with others right where they are. By doing so, Jesus helps them lighten-up and open-up to the Holy Spirit of Joy, Peace and Grace. I know that when I feel safe and secure - not worrying about being judged by others - is when I am at my best. I relax; I take time to enjoy Life, and to listen and respond to the joys or concerns of those around me. I can be at peace with others, because I'm at peace with myself.

Jesus says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." Much of what burdens the people of Jesus' day, is a heavy-handed religious structure that pushes people down, and keeps God "up there" - as a distant, severe judge, just waiting for you to make a mistake. And as most of us know, it's extremely difficult to live fully or freely, if we're preoccupied with the fear of doing something wrong. So Jesus invites us to see and experience the Holy One in a wholly different way - as One who gives us this wonderful gift of Life and then asks only, that we lovingly share it with one another - fully and fairly, openly and joyfully.

That's one of the beautiful things about this congregation. This is a community where people's differences aren't disparaged, but are encouraged, welcomed, and celebrated! It's a place where all kinds of people can feel welcome to worship and pray together, work and play together, to share with and care for one another. It's a place where we know that we can hear and experience the *Good News* of Divine Love, embodied in genuine, down-to-earth people. People who definitely

know how to have a good time, as well as how to be there for one another in Life's most difficult or painful times.

This morning, as you and I come together and share together the Life-Affirming Bread and Cup of Holy Communion, we also remember and celebrate the Life of Jesus Christ:

One who isn't afraid to bring new life and joy to the stuffy religious traditions of his day;

One who openly accepts people where they are, and graciously encourages them to be the best that they can be;

One who willingly gives up his own life, for the tremendous joy of bringing other people together;

One who reminds us that the Holy One who creates and loves us all, really does smile upon us, whenever we joyfully share that love with one another.