



## Sermon of July 11, 1999



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### "LAUGH IT OFF"

I Corinthians 1:18-20. 26-31

Psalm 8

John 16:20-24, 33

I have heard people talk about the power of laughter to heal. I came across it first in a book written by Norman Cousins some years ago called, *Anatomy of an Illness*. It was a story of his own debilitating illness, and how he conquered it with laughter.

It seems that he was overseas at a meeting, and felt a fever coming on. In no time at all he found himself in the hospital, his situation diagnosed as a degenerative arthritic condition. The prognosis was not good. At best, he would have life-long paralysis, and at worst, he was facing death.

His condition didn't improve in the hospital. The longer he was there, and the more medication

he took, the worse he got. Finally he asked his doctor, who was also a good friend, if he could experiment with some unorthodox therapy. His doctor reluctantly agreed.

He had three requests. The first was that he be allowed to leave the hospital and check into a hotel across the street. Second, that he be allowed to stop all drugs, and instead take massive doses of Vitamin C. And third, that he be allowed to "take" massive doses of comedy films. It seems that Alan Funt, the founder and producer of *Candid Camera*, was a good friend of his. Funt provided him with hundreds of hours of taped Candid Camera programs. The results were immediate, and they were dramatic and impressive. Cousins health was restored. He went home, apparently cured.

Now there is still controversy over the medical explanation for all of this. Some say that he would have gotten well anyway, it was just a placebo. That may be. But at least one medical school at UCLA was impressed with what happened and the implications from it. They invited Cousins to be an adjunct professor on the medical school at UCLA.

Cousins himself was modest in making claims. He said that laughter may not have cured the disease, but he knew that it had a salutary effect on his recovery. For instance, he said, laughter relaxed him. As a result he was able, for the first time since the onset of the illness, to sleep through a whole night. Secondly, he said, laughter changes attitude. He became more hopeful about the future. As a result, he said his body's recuperative powers were strengthened because of his being able to rest, and because of his attitude about the future.

So at the least, laughter can change your attitude, and laughter can generate hope. I want us to look at that this morning, not from a medical point of view, but from a biblical point of view. According to the Bible, laughter is especially appropriate at two points in our lives. One is when we understand what it means to be a human being, the human condition. The second is when we finally understand the meaning of the Christian Gospel.

First, look at the human condition. The Bible says, in the story of creation in Genesis, that we are creatures. We are made from the dust of the earth, from mud, according to Genesis, just like all the other creatures. That has a critical implication. We are not gods. We are not even super-human. We are fallible, we are frail, we are imperfect, we are sinners, every one of us.

But the problem is that that is not all there is about us. At the same time, Genesis says, we are created in the image of God. Which means that there is something in us, or about us, that is more than just a creature, that transcends our creatureliness. Therefore we are not content with being the way we are.

That is called the paradox of human nature. We are made out of the dust of the earth, and at the same time made in the image of God. That is expressed beautifully in the 8th psalm, which we read this morning.

O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is thy name in all the earth!

Thou whose glory above the heavens is chanted by the mouth of babes and infants, thou hast founded a bulwark because of thy foes, to still the enemy and the avenger.

When I look at thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars which thou hast established; what is man that thou art mindful of him, and the son of man that thou dost care for him?

Yet thou hast made him little less than God, and dost crown him with glory and honor. Thou hast given him dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the sea.

O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is thy name in all the earth!

Human beings, according to the Bible, are a paradox. They are first of all creatures. "What is man that thou art mindful of him?" We are just animals, insignificant. "Yet thou hast made him little less than God." Which is the source of our predicament. It would be better if we were just one of the two. If we were just cows, for instance. Our whole life would be a whole lot simpler. We could just sit around, chew our cuds, not worry about anything.

Or, it would be simpler for us if we were, on the other hand, gods. We could take charge then. We could get things done around here. We could finally make things right. Be in control of our lives, and be in control of all those things around us that cause us so much trouble.

Our problem is that we are both animals, so we are limited and imperfect, and made in the image of God, so we think we ought to be perfect. So we worry about it, agonize over it, and try to cover up our imperfections, try to pretend that we are perfect.

That is where the comedy comes in. The richest source of comedy is the behavior of people pretending to be greater, or better, than they are. That is a universal source of comedy. It is why we love to hear how the proud have fallen. That is why we love to read in the newspaper that the Dodgers are languishing in last place. That is why we enjoy Charlie Chaplin comedies.

Charlie Chaplin always portrays a tramp. As a tramp he is an outcast. He is a nobody. He is on the bottom rung of society. Yet he dresses in tails and a bowler hat, swinging a cane. He is a parody of the upper class, to remind us that there is a stumbling clown in each one of us, especially in those people who try to cover it up with manners, dress, and status.

I read about a man who was running down the pier to catch a ferry boat. This is a true story, but it sounds like Charlie Chaplin. It seems that he was dressed in an expensive suit, at least an \$800 suit. He had Italian shoes, an expensive briefcase in one hand, and a black umbrella in the other. He was waving

the umbrella at the ferry, yelling for it to stop so that he could get on.

He ran all the way to the end of the pier, jumped ten feet across the water, and landed on the deck safely. He regained his dignity, straightened his tie, obviously very proud of himself for doing this. It was then that he discovered that the boat was not pulling out, it was coming in.

I love that. Especially when it happens to other people. It shows that we are human, especially when we think we are in charge, and we know everything. It happens to me, more and more, it

seems. It's not funny then. If you try to pretend that you are a little less than God, it is embarrassing to be reminded that you are related to the baboons, and sometimes act like one.

If we can see that, if we can see who we really are, see this paradox of who we are, the way God has made us and loves us the way we are, then we can see that it is all right if we act like a baboon once in a while, as long as we don't get in the habit. God forgives you. And God will give you grace to become better than you are. That is why it is possible for us to observe that the same person who acts like a baboon can turn his or her life around, be turned around by grace, and begin to act as if they were a little less than God.

If you know that, when you can accept yourself the way you are, made from the dust, yet a little less than God, then you can laugh at yourself. Laughter will bring healing. Healing means wholeness. And wholeness means to integrate these two parts of your nature into one whole.

One of my favorite stories is about a preacher named Willsie Martin, who was the preacher many years ago at the Wilshire Methodist Church in Los Angeles. He was a great preacher there. He had just been appointed to that church on that Sunday. He had arrived early to check out the place, make sure everything was all right.

He went around to the front of the church, to the steps going up into the sanctuary. He saw a little old woman walking up the steps. Being a gentleman, he said, "Ma'am, may I help you?" He took her arm, and helped her up the steps. When they got up to the top she thanked him, and asked, "Can you tell me who is preaching here this morning?" He said, "Willsie Martin." She said, "Will you please help me back down the steps?"

The old Shaker hymn put it correctly from the biblical perspective.

'Tis a gift to be simple  
'Tis a gift to be free  
'Tis a gift to come down  
To where we ought to be.

Where we ought to be, according to the Bible, is to realize that we are just creatures, human beings. We are created like all the other animals in God's creation, and yet we are a little less than God, made in the image of God.

That is both the source of our grandeur and our misery, to use the famous phrase by Pascal. "The grandeur and misery of man." But if we can understand that, if we can understand that we are made that way, then we will find ourselves free to laugh at ourselves. And with the laughter will come wholeness.

The other time that laughter is appropriate, according to the Bible, is when you finally understand the Christian Gospel. Theologians have made the point that, according to the Bible, life is not a tragedy, life is a comedy. You remember Dante's *Divine Comedy* was the title that he gave to his description of the human life, the human pilgrimage. It's a comedy. In tragedy life is inevitably worked out into something disappointing, and in the end, meaningless. In comedy life is free, unpredictable, and there are always surprises. In tragedy the appropriate response is

to weep, to resign yourself, or be defiant against the fate that has caused you such suffering and pain in your life. In comedy the appropriate response is to laugh, and to have hope, and expect surprises.

You can understand the impact the Christian Gospel had on that first century world. The apostles went into a Greek world, a civilization dominated by Greek philosophy and the culture that invented the idea of tragedy. The hero in Greek tragedy is the person who defies his fate courageously. He knows that he is inevitably going to lose, but he defies it.

Then here come the Christian apostles into that first century world to tell them about a hero who was caught up in fate, the powers that were against him, but instead of a tragic ending, the story has a surprise ending. Which means that fate isn't in control after all. There is a power stronger than fate, and who is for us, and who is in control. That is why Paul sings to the Romans, "If God be for us, then who can be against us."

That is the text we are going to use next week, so I don't want to quote it in full, but simply go to the last line, which is the most important. It says, "We are more than conquerors through him who loved us." If life is a tragedy, then we are victims. But if life is a comedy, then we can be more than conquerors.

Then in our epistle lesson for this morning, I Corinthians, the first chapter, you heard read to you, Paul speaks to the reaction of the Greek world to this Christian preaching. They said it was "foolishness." He writes this: "Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom. It pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe."

I can just imagine the preachers in the first century, the kind of reaction they got. They begin their sermon by saying, "You're probably not going to believe this, but God came into the world as a baby, of poor folk." You can see the smiles come across the faces of the congregation as they hear this, the look of incredulity as if somebody is going to say, "This is a joke, right?"

"But it is true. The boy grew up. He became a man, just like us, fully human. Only God dwelt in him fully." Now more smiles. You can hear chuckles among the audience. The preacher continues. "This man Jesus taught us that with him, in him, the kingdom has come. So you can have the life that God intends for you. You are not trapped by fate anymore, because God's kingdom is here. You can be who God wants you to be. And after he preached that they arrested him, and crucified him. On the third day he rose from the dead." With that, heads are thrown back and the room filled with laughter. Before they can regain their composure, the preacher says, "And you share in his resurrection. Because he lives, you also will live."

"Foolishness." That is what the Greeks said. "But to those who are called, both Jew and Greek, Christ the power of God, for the foolishness of God is wiser than men and the weakness of God is stronger than men."

If life is a tragedy, then you are a hero if you fight your fate knowing that ultimately you are going to lose. But if life is a comedy, then you fight knowing that there are going to be surprises, so you don't give up hope. You know that at the end there will be a wonderful surprise.

In the Book of Proverbs there is a wonderful tribute to a woman. I often read it at funerals. It says, "She laughs at the time to come." That reminded me of the story of Natalie Sleeth. Some of you know that name because she was a church musician. Two of her hymns are in our hymnal. She died of cancer a few years ago, but a short time before she died she wrote a parable for her grandchildren to explain to them what was about to happen.

She began with, "Once upon a time," and then told the story of creation as it is found in Genesis, paraphrased it, and then said that God said, "That's good. That's good." Then she talked about how God gave everybody a special gift, and that God would help everybody to use this special gift to make the world a very special place. And God said, "That's good. That's good." Then she wrote this.

Now one of the people on God's earth was named Natalie. And God gave her the gift of music. As she grew, she learned to use this gift in many ways, and she gave thanks that she could share it with others.

And Natalie had a family. She had a husband, children, and grandchildren. Each one was special, and she loved them all. God looked down, and smiled, and said, "That's good. That's good."

But one day Natalie began to realize that she was growing older and that her body was beginning to wear out. She talked to God about it and asked him to help her.

And God heard her, and said, "My child, when I made the world and filled it with people, I had a plan. I wanted my people to live life for as long as they could, but not forever, because my world would be too full, too crowded for everybody. So I planned it so that when it was time to leave the earth, my people would come and live with me in heaven, where there is no pain, or sickness, or sadness, or anything bad."

And Natalie said softly to God, "Is my time to come and live with you getting near?" And God said, "Yes. But be not afraid, for I will always be with you and take care of you." And Natalie said to God, "But I will miss my family and my friends, and they will miss me." And God said, "I will comfort them and turn their tears to joy, and they will remember you with happiness, and be glad for your life among them."

So slowly Natalie began to make her journey to heaven, and day by day she grew nearer to God. In the distance she could see light and hear music and feel happiness that she had never known before.

And as she moved toward the gates and into the household of God, she heard her say to herself, with joy in her heart, "That's good. That's good."

In the Gospel of John, Jesus says,

So you have sorrow now, but I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy away from you...so be of good cheer [laugh] for I have overcome the world.

*Help us to be masters of ourselves,  
that we might be servants of others,  
through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

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