

JOIN THE CELEBRATION: LAUGHTER
Philippians 4:4-7

Join The Celebration Message Series
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One of the challenges as a pastor in talking about laughter and humor in a sermon is that worship is often a difficult place to get people to laugh. A humorous story and joke often need a little time to sink in; then people often wonder if it is okay to politely chuckle—more or less laugh a belly laugh out loud.

Something in our church upbringing and experience has seemed to condition us to the pattern of thinking that worship is not to be too fun and enjoyable; that pastors are pretty dull and have a difficult time being funny; that worship liturgy and repetition easily lulls a person to snooze.

Then there is also how slow some of us with Scandinavian backgrounds are in figuring a joke out. Someone said onetime that you should never tell a Scandinavian a joke on a Saturday because that person may actually end up blurting out in laughter in worship on Sunday morning—meaning they just got the joke a day later.

So how about you—would you find it funny if I told you this morning about how Ole often brings up the subject of how poor he was as a child? In fact, he often recalls the bygone days of past Christmases when, as Ole described it, *“We wouldn’t have had any decorations on the Christmas tree if grandpa hadn’t sneezed.”*

What about the time when Sven saw Ole’s cute baby and asked, *“Ole, is your baby spoiled?”* To which Ole responded, *“No, he always smells that way.”* Or Lena who said, *“You know, middle age is when women stop worrying about getting pregnant, and men start looking like they are.”*

Then there are those church bulletin bloopers: *“Don’t let worry kill you off—let the church help;” “Remember in prayer the many who are sick of our church and community;” “The low self-esteem support group will meet Thursday at 7—Please use the back door.”*

Yes I am one who loves to laugh and I know that many of you do too. Studies have found that laughter releases endorphins and other chemicals in our bodies that actually relieve stress and make us healthier.

Now it should not be surprising that joy, laughter, and celebration are all part of the Bible and many of the Biblical stories. In fact, I believe it is of utmost importance to remember that Jesus in our Gospel reading for today started his ministry and performed his first miracle at a wedding celebration.

He changed the water into the best and most wonderful wine; he blessed the parents, the bride & groom with a very practical way to celebrate with their family and friends; he made it known that it is good to have fun; to dance and be joyful; to laugh, smile and love.

The Apostle Paul also echoed this truth and sentiment in his letter to the Philippian church: *“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all.”*

The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4:4-7)

One of the problems today of course is that life is often filled with things that kill and drown out laughter and joy. Work is often a hassle with unrealistic expectations; too much focus on profits and the bottom line. Relationships are difficult as people are overly tired; as issues and hurts often go unresolved.

Then add to this stuff financial and health challenges we are going through and it is easy to feel sad; to feel all alone with a cloud of dark all around. It is easy to wonder if there is any hope or any good news. Joy, laughter and happiness you might question?—I’m pretty much in a funk a lot of the time.

It is important to note here that it is often times like these when people are more susceptible and in danger of getting involved in risky behaviors. Some people are more likely to drink heavily; to attempt to be the life of the party (life of sport's game; campout; class reunion) when they are trying to mask some deep pain inside them with surface and superficial happiness.

People who are down and depressed are also more vulnerable to getting into an affair with someone other than their spouse; to surfing the internet for pornography or an affair (look at the millions exposed through Ashleigh Madison); to cooking the books and dishonesty in taking money in business/community organizations. We live in a very dangerous time when increasing numbers of people are seeking superficial relationships, shallow fun, empty laughter.

It is true that the joy that Jesus our Savior brings is always deeper than simply a funny joke; deeper than a wild party that seems like fun; deeper than even a fakey laugh trying to hide the pain and hurt inside. The joy of Jesus is found in his amazing grace which accepts and loves you just as you are.

The joy of Jesus is found in his forgiveness and new life, where all your sins and burdens are set free by his love. The joy of Jesus is found in his promise that he walks with you everyday and that his help is always as close as a prayer. The joy of Jesus is found in his hope that tomorrow is a new day; that Jesus brings new possibilities out of whatever seems hopeless.

Jesus brings a deep and lasting joy to people and to this world no matter what they are going through or facing. Jesus brings joy and peace to our lives even when we are grieving and sad; even in times of death and loss in Jesus there is the joy of resurrection and new life. Now that is good news and assurance where we can laugh, smile, rejoice and celebrate.

Something important however to note in this discussion is that for way too many Christians today rather than a joy-filled life of faith; rather than a joy and laughter filled church they have made Christianity a burden filled with lots of rules and regulations.

Some take themselves and thinking their doctrines are right way too seriously; some focus all their passions on what they are against and how wrong our world is; some seem to not want to trust God completely that he is in control; it is somehow giving into the world if they laugh and affirm good things in life, in the church, in people they even may disagree with.

The reason for this craziness in the church today is that Christianity has often become centered in being a religion rather than a relationship. It has often centered in people judging others souls; in theological and Biblical debates that have often deeply divided the body of Christ; in pastors and people who often take themselves way too seriously.

Madelyn L'Engle has written, *"If we are sure of our God we are free to laugh at ourselves...we can best take ourselves seriously if we are free to laugh at ourselves, and to enjoy the laughter of God and his angels. As William Temple once remarked, 'It is a great mistake to think that God is chiefly interested in religion.'"*

German Lutheran theologian, Helmut Thielicke, wrote many years ago, *"The glum, sour faces of many Christians...They rather give the impression that, instead of coming from the Father's joyful banquet, they have just come from the sheriff who has auctioned off their sins and now are sorry they can't get them back again."*

As someone once told me, *"If you don't think that God has a sense of humor just look at yourself in the mirror."* It is true that not one of us is in anyway perfect; we are all sinful and unclean. Therefore the Gospel truth that Jesus loves us as crazy as we are should fill us with joy.

Yet how can we find that joy and happiness Jesus came to give each of us? In his book, *"The Wisdom of Tenderness,"* Brennan Manning tells the following story:

"Several years ago, Edward Farrell of Detroit took his two week vacation to Ireland to celebrate his favorite uncle's 80th birthday. On the morning of that great day, Ed and his uncle got up before dawn, dressed in silence, and went for a walk along the shores of Lake Killarney."

"Just as the sun rose, his uncle turned and stared straight at the rising orb. Ed stood still beside him for 20-minutes with not a single word exchanged. Then the elderly uncle began to skip along the shoreline, a radiant smile on his face."

"After catching up with him, Ed commented, 'Uncle Seamus, you look very happy. Do you want to tell me why?' 'Yes, lad,' the old man said, tears washing down his face. 'You see, (God) the Father is fond of me. Ah, me Father is so very fond of me.'"

My friends, as we hear today the promises of Jesus may we also affirm, *"Wow, God our Father is so very fond of me."* May this truth put a skip in our step, a smile on our face, some laughter in our souls—it is an amazing joy.

Yet the question is are you reflecting that joy to others? So many are down and hurting these days—God wants to use you to shine Jesus' joy and laughter into the life of others. Don't be like the man who said, *"I love my wife so much I almost told her."* Jesus wants you to shine your love and joy in everything you do.

Writer Henriette Mears once said, *"Are you proving that the Christian life is a joyful, happy thing? Do you look glad that you are a Christian? Does your life radiate joy and enthusiasm? Check yourself carefully on this before you teach it. Make the Christian life contagious."*

The Apostle Paul said, *"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!"*