

## Laughing on our Way to Inclusion (11/02/2018)

First of all, thank you for trusting me with the position of board chair. With God's help and your prayers, I will try to be worthy of your call. I'm grateful for the other members of the board and the many others who give generously of their time, energy, and talents make this community our home. When I agreed to do this, I reminded myself of the responsibilities of the Board. According to our core documents, the constitution and bylaws, the responsibility of the board is to work with the pastor or pastors to care for the wellbeing of the congregation. I had expected something more detailed and specific - but that's what we'll try to do.

As I understand well-being, it has two parts: the first is to keep the lights on. I suspect that much of the discussion at board meetings will involve keeping the lights on, the building dry and warm in winter and cool in summer, and so on, but that's not what any of us want to hear about on Sunday morning, and that's not what motivates any of the board and committee members to serve.

The second component of well-being is for the board and pastors to take the lead in implementing what we collectively have identified as our mission and vision. In the vision we adopted in 2008, we wanted to focus on four things: first, we wanted to become more intentional about our welcome and inclusion; second, we wanted to focus more deliberately on faith formation for all ages; third, we wanted to make better use of our space in this building and the house next door at 6 Lark St; and finally, we wanted to be involved in a local mission. We've made a lot of progress already to

implement the four elements of that vision. Some time this year or next we'll revisit that progress but it's a good vision that we can pursue for a while yet.

I personally am especially motivated by our desire to become more welcoming and inclusive. I've found it stimulating to learn more about barriers and how we can remove them. The Soup and Sophia discussion we had a few weeks ago, for example. Over the years we've started to remove some of the barriers in our community to newcomers as well as to the full participation of members who have been here for a long time. Some of these barriers are physical and we've made good progress over the years to remove those barriers: power doors, an elevator, better signs, an accessible washroom, a functional nursery, hearing assistance devices, a level entrance into the building, and so on. We've become more deliberate about lowering the less visible barriers that make it harder for newcomers to feel at home in our community: we've adopted name tags for regular attenders, we're trying to avoid acronyms, we take less for granted, and so on.

I would like us to continue reflecting on some of the less obvious barriers, and focus today on the way we communicate as a possible barrier to newcomers. I'm not going to use the two lectionary texts that are our scripture this morning, but I suggested we read both because both are about communication: in the book of Kings Elisha encounters two companies of prophets, one company at Bethel and the second at Jericho. Both come out to meet Elisha and ask, "Do you know that today the Lord will take your master away from you?" Both times Elisha responds, "Yes, I know; be silent." I wonder how good actors would dramatize those encounters: are the prophets sympathetic to Elisha? Can they see Elijah, or

is Elijah already not visible to others. Are they warning Elisha? Are they gossiping? What are their motives. What might their body language reveal. Are they mocking him? Were they laughing? (title of my sermon!) What is the meaning of Elisha's response? Does he think that they are talking too much? I have no idea so I won't try to say any more, although I do wonder sometimes whether any newcomers find the Biblical texts so weird that they don't come back. The passage from Mark 9 is about the event often referred to as the transfiguration. Jesus and his disciples go up a mountain, Jesus becomes radiantly white, Elijah and Moses appear, and Peter decides that it would be a good idea to start a building project. But then the gospel writer goes on to tell us that Peter did not know what to say, because the disciples were terrified. We all know people like that, I suspect; people who don't know what to say, but talk and talk anyway.

But these are not examples of the kind of communication I would like to explore this morning. Perhaps one of you would like to explore this topic in a future sermon! As promised in the title of my sermon, I would like to reflect on laughter, and whether our laughter here at TUMC might be a barrier to inclusion. My goal is not to get you – us – to stop laughing. My hope is that by reflecting on something as joyful and healthy as laughter we might become more aware that even things that are good in themselves can be barriers. In her sermon two weeks ago, Lori Unger reflected insightfully on Paul's advice to the Christians in Corinth. There's nothing wrong with meat from animals that have been butchered in the context of sacrifice. It's perfectly good meat, you can eat it with a clean conscience. But if eating that meat bothers some of your fellow church members, please avoid eating it. As Lori reminded us, that advice has often been used to oppress people

who don't conform in some way. I hope laughter is a good example of the kind of thing Paul might have had in mind. None of us – I'm guessing – thinks laughter is sinful so I hope that by using laughter as an example of a possible barrier none of us needs to feel defensive. I want us to ask a simple question: would we be willing to laugh less if someone from a culture with a different view of laughter came to our church?

I've been thinking about laughter for a while but didn't explore seriously until I was scheduled to speak today. The topic turned out to be much more complicated than I had expected. So please forgive me if my thoughts are disjointed and hard to follow.

Let's start by listing some of the contexts in which we laugh. Some are familiar and obvious so I only mention them briefly. We laugh for joy, for example. People also laugh when they're tickled. This is an instance of laughter as a purely physiological reaction. Few of us enjoy being tickled, I suspect. Which is a bit odd if laughter is good medicine.

We laugh at jokes. Jokes can be innocent. But jokes (and here I mean good clean jokes) can assume a lot of cultural knowledge. [use example of earlier joke about building project if possible] Also, it takes a sophisticated grasp of language to get a joke. It's very hard to learn to tell a joke in a language one doesn't know well. So if we want to be more inclusive of those whose first language is not English, we might want to be more careful about a sophisticated joke. One influential theory of humor is that humor is a form of displaying superiority. That's not an impression we want to leave with newcomers.

It can take a long time to learn culturally appropriate humour and laughter. Children need time to learn to appreciate different types of jokes, for example. According to some of the literature I found, an infant's first experience of laughter is joy. But somewhere along the way that ability to laugh purely for joy is lost or diminishes. Toddlers tend to laugh when they're surprised or disconcerted – if you sneak up behind a child, for example, and catch it unawares. Those of you who are parents can tell if me that's true.

Laughter can be a defensive or protective mechanism: I have a collection of favourite quotations. One is from the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who wrote that “a joke is the epitaph on the death of a feeling.” [*Menschliches, alzumenschliches*, vol 2, pt 1, section 202 “Der Witz ist das Epigramm auf dem Tod eines Gefühls”) In other words, a joke can be a way to bury a feeling. A serious conversation has to be, well, serious. What might it mean that many of the most successful comedians are affected by depression. (Charlie Chaplin, Robin Williams)

If joy and good clean jokes are the main reasons we laugh, we're very fortunate. There are or have been cultures where it's okay to laugh at pain, or misfortune. To mock at and jeer persons with disabilities, for example, or as part of the punishment meted out to those who commit crimes. Laughter can be ugly. The cultures in and through which God revealed the Bible were very familiar with that kind of humour and laughter. We often hear that God has a sense of humor and that may be true. But if it is, God does not express that sense of humour through laughter – I'm speaking of the way God is imagined in the Bible, specifically in the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament.

And that leads me to my next section: I'd like us to examine episodes of laughter in the Bible. While I describe them, I invite you to think of how these examples compare with your experiences of laughter.

God very rarely laughs, and when God does, the laughter is always scornful, mocking. A few quotations to show you what I mean. Psalm 2: "Why do the nations conspire, and the peoples plot in vain? ... He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord has them in derision." Ps 37: "the wicked plot against the righteous, and gnash their teeth at them; but the Lord laughs at the wicked, for he sees that their day is coming." Ps 59:8: "but you laugh at them, O Lord, you hold all the nations in derision." That's it, the three occasions in the Bible when God laughs. Lady Wisdom, in the biblical book of Proverbs, is like God – she too laughs rarely, and when she does her laughter is mocking: "because I have called and you refused, have stretched out my hand and no one heeded, and because you have ignored all my counsel and would have none of my reproof, I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when panic strikes you." One poignant instance of mocking laughter is in the lament of Job, when he is sitting in the dust, covered in sores: "Now," he says, "they laugh at me, those who are younger than I, whose fathers I would have disdained to include among my pack of dogs" (Job 30:1). It's worth noting, I think, that Job is not condemning the young men; it's normal in his cultural context that the young men would now mock him, jeer at him. Job is upset that God has put him in a position where young men can legitimately laugh at him. From time to time we hear stories about homeless people in Toronto being abused and mocked by passers-by or even deliberately targeted, and we're horrified. In Job's world that kind of laughter was likely more common and more widely tolerated.

These are all instances of biblical laughter in a context that we would now consider bullying, or abuse. I haven't yet mentioned the laughter in the stories in Genesis of Abraham and Sarah, and how they become pregnant in their old age. Their son is named Isaac, which means, in Hebrew, "he laughs." These are fascinating examples of laughter in the Bible but I'll leave it to you to reread the stories in Genesis 18 and 21 and figure out what kind of laughter Sarah's is.

The Bible has still more occasions for laughter. People who have had a bit too much to drink often laugh more than usual; I was surprised to find only one instance in the Bible where laughter is clearly associated with drinking, and it isn't negative: Ecclesiastes 10:19, "Feasts are made for laughter; wine gladdens life, and money meets every need." I won't argue with that! And laughter can be a joyful gift. Psalm 126, for example, "When the Lord restores the fortunes of Zion – we see it as in a dream – our mouths will be filled with laughter, our tongues, with songs of joy." Or in Job 8:20-21, "See, God will not reject a blameless person, nor take the hand of evildoers. God will yet fill your mouth with laughter, and your lips with shouts of joy." The parallelism of laughter and joy suggests that here laughter is seen very positively. But it is striking how much of the laughter in the Old Testament is bitter or mocking laughter.

In the New Testament, laughter is rare: 'to laugh' occurs twice in Luke's version of the beatitudes: "Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh," in Luke 6:21, and "woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep," Luke 6:25. These pairs are not in the Matthew's gospel. Three gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, tell the story of Jesus raising from the dead the daughter of the synagogue leader, Jairus. Jairus sends

messengers to Jesus while his daughter is very sick but still alive. When Jesus arrives, he is told that it's too late, the daughter is dead. Jesus responds that she is not dead, she is only sleeping. "And the people laughed at him." The form of the word implies that they jeered, or mocked Jesus. In James 4:9 laughter is something we need to get over in order to draw nearer to God. That's it, the four clear instances of laughter in the NT.

There are other instances in the NT where laughter is likely part of an action and condemned by implication. The gospel of John (9:28) has a story about a blind man healed by Jesus who is abused by the Pharisees; the language used implies that mocking laughter was part of that abuse. The most important and obvious instance in the NT of abusive laughter is the trial and crucifixion of Jesus. Jesus is reviled and mocked, and virtually every ancient reader and commentator who condemns laughter does so in part because of the way Jesus was treated. Jesus' response is widely used in ethical teaching. Paul urges the Christians in Corinth (1 Cor 4:12): "when reviled, we bless;" and Peter says about Jesus (1 Peter 2:23): "when he was abused, he did not return abuse."

In the early church, laughter was widely condemned. An early theologian, Basil, bishop of Caesarea, an important early Christian center near Haifa, Israel, wrote the following around 350: "Since our master condemns those who laugh in this life, it is clear that for the believer there is never a right time to laugh." John Chrysostom, another important Christian bishop and theologian, wrote around 400: "Christ himself wept ... we often observe him doing so, but never laughing – nor even smiling gently; none of the evangelists states that he did so." When ancient writers comment on Luke 6, they insist that we will laugh in heaven, not here and now. Some even claim

that we will laugh because we will see our tormenters suffering in hell. Not very funny, in my opinion.

Why is there so little laughter in the Bible, and even less joyful laughter? And why did the early church condemn laughter so strongly? I suspect that there is so little laughter in the Bible, especially in the New Testament because the biblical writers came from a culture that was much more attuned than ours is to the dangerous side of laughter. They did not distinguish as clearly and easily as we do the difference between laughter that is healthy and joyful and laughter that mocking or demeaning.

We should not assume, I think, that people from other cultures are like us. I would like to hear from those of us who are familiar with other cultures whether laughter is seen as dangerous or risky. I think learning more about cultural differences would be stimulating and very rewarding. I suspect, for example, that indigenous cultures have norms of communication very different from ours. It may be that indigenous people respond differently to humour and laughter. I would like to learn more. Closer to home, we might learn from the Old Order Mennonites or Amish – I'm curious to know whether they too use and respond differently to humour and laughter.

I don't mean to say that we should stop telling jokes or laughing at church; I simply want to suggest that jokes and laughter are profoundly influenced by our cultural formation. We're fortunate that we live in a culture that strongly discourages mocking laughter, especially of those who are weak. That restraint may be breaking down a bit in our neighbour to the south but it remains strong in Canada. But there is much less restraint about mocking the strong. Much late-night humour is devoted to making fun of politicians

and other people in positions of power. I enjoy that humour. But I suggest that for children, or people from other cultures, it can be difficult to learn what is culturally appropriate or accepted. If you've ever lived in another country or culture, you may remember how hard it is to learn another language, and how much harder it can be to learn how to get a joke in another language and culture. Our culture frowns on those who mock the weak. That's good, but it may prevent us from seeing what other cultures see more clearly, that all laughter is a bit ambiguous. It is very easy to see how mocking the strong can slide over into mocking the vulnerable, for the restraints to weaken. If you look at the online comments section of most media outlets, it's shocking how much mockery and contempt there is. It's easy to be carried along by the crowd. From time to time our worship leaders ask us not to laugh during the children's time, when the children say something we find amusing. Children may not yet have learned the distinction between laughing with and laughing at; there is a risk that children could perceive our laughter as mocking. Jesus tells the disciples that they must become like children in order to enter the kingdom. I wonder if one reason is that children have not yet learned to use mocking laughter. We have learned to distinguish and separate mocking laughter from joyful laughter so that for most of us, only joyful laughter is real laughter. But this sharp distinction or separation may not be true of all cultures.

Let me stress again that my intention this morning is not to discourage laughter. In fact, I doubt very much that our laughter is the barrier that newcomers first notice, or that anyone has stopped coming to TUMC because of the humour in our sermons. And I hope we haven't hurt children because we laugh during the children's story. But if we are able and willing

to acknowledge cultural differences and become more aware of them, I think it is more likely that we will be perceived as hospitable and inclusive. And it would be a good thing in general to learn about other cultures and how they differ from our own. The Bible too is a foreign country so becoming more sensitive to cultural difference would help us better understand the Bible.

In her sermon, Lori gave us a great definition of love – to love is to freely accept limits. My hope is that we who are most fully at home here, will want to learn where limits on our freedom will make our community more welcoming, so that others are freer to join us. And may we find joy and enrichment in learning how and where to accept those limits.