

Old South Church in Boston

July 7, 2019 - Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

A Fish Story, a sermon by Nancy S. Taylor, senior minister

2 Corinthians 9: 6-7 (God loves a cheerful giver) and Luke 5: 1-11 (The Great Catch)

“God loves a cheerful giver.” So writes the Apostle Paul to the Christians in Corinth. The Greek word that is translated as “cheerful” is “hilaros.” Some have translated St. Paul’s sentence to read:

God loves a hilarious giver. Or, God loves the one who gives with hilarity. Greek scholars suggest the meaning of the sentence is closer to this: God loves the one who gives with a laughing heart.

Or, God loves the one who gives with dancing eyes. Or, this: God loves those who pour themselves out cheerfully, joyously, readily, gamely, with spontaneity and abandon.

If it is true that God loves those who give cheerfully, with dancing eyes and laughing hearts, it might be just the thing to experience little hilarity, a little joy and cheer this July morning; to indulge in mirth, to laugh a little, indeed, perhaps even partake of a joke or two. Which reminds me:

Why did the fish poke its head out of the water when Jesus taught by the lakeshore? Because it was hooked!

How do you communicate with a fish? Drop it a line!

Why did the vegan go deep-sea fishing? Just for the halibut!

What do sea monsters eat? Fish and ships.

Jokes are not unheard of in sermons. Indeed, there is a school of homiletics that recommends every sermon begin with a joke: something to warm people up, break the ice, create community. On the other hand, there are those who believe this whole church-thing should be dignified, serious, sober, restrained, solemn, i.e., joke-less.

John Chrysostom, a monk, early Church Father, and 4th century Bishop of Constantinople warned Christians not to laugh. Why? Because, as he explained, Jesus never laughed. At least, there is no hard evidence he did.

Benedict, founder of the Benedictines, and Augustine, one of the great theologians of the early church, were both of a similar opinion. They thought laughter indecent. Christians, they reasoned, are far too full of sin to engage in the frivolity of laughter. Christians, they believed, must focus on the serious, no-laughing-matter of saving their sorry souls and there was no time for anything else.

Maybe you know Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*. Among the bestselling books ever published it is an intricate murder mystery situated in a medieval Italian monastery. The novel is about the suppression of humor in the church in the 14th century and revolves around a monk who has discovered a long lost book by Aristotle on comedy. The idea is nothing short of scandalous. Imagine Aristotle, that great philosopher of antiquity, writing on comedy... and promoting the virtues of laughter! The monk feels that if the book is revealed to the world, the impact would be ruinous, calamitous for Christianity. He, therefore, poisons the pages of the lost book so that anyone who discovers and reads it will die.

Speaking of humor ...

Did you hear about the crab who went to a seafood disco? He pulled a mussel.

How does an octopus go to war? Well-armed

Why don't oysters share their pearls? Because they're shellfish!

What kind of music should you listen to while fishing? Something catchy.

In the ancient Christian dispute over laughter, I side with the Apostle Paul, in believing that a little hilarity never hurt anybody. Not only does it not hurt, we have the benefit of a kind of science unknown to John Chrysostom, Benedict and Augustine: A science that studies the physiological effects of laughter on our bodies. Laughter, it seems, is good for us, therapeutic.

So, What did the fish say when he posted bail? "I'm off the hook!"

Why don't fish like basketball? They're afraid of the net

Which fish can perform operations? The Sturgeon!

What do you call a fish with a tie? soFISHticated

It is true that the New Testament nowhere explicitly says, "Jesus laughed". The New Testament does report that Jesus wept, and John Chrysostom does want us to weep in imitation of Jesus. But we do. God knows we do a lot of weeping. There is much to weep over. Amen?

Yet, despite the hardships Jesus and his followers experienced, despite the poverty all round them, and the tyranny of an occupying Empire, and the cruelty of class and caste in the first century, and the prevalence of disease... despite all this, nay because of this, Jesus and his followers lived, and loved, and poured themselves out with laughing hearts and dancing eyes; they were cheerful, eager, and game.

Perhaps no story better illustrates this than that of the Great Catch. The fishermen have been out all night, working their nets, positioning their boats, struggling against wind and tide, and against their own weariness and hopelessness. This is no weekend pleasure trip. This is business. This is their livelihood. It is how they feed their families, how they make their way in the world.

The fish that they toil to haul in are what stands between them and poverty. It is what fills their bellies, nourishes their families. It is what gives them dignity and purpose, and identity in the village.

Yet, this particular night the fishermen labor in vain. They catch nothing. With the dawn of the new day, they return to shore. They are weary and defeated. They are cleaning their nets when Jesus comes by. He climbs into a boat and instructs one of the fishermen, Simon Peter, to put out into deep water and let down the nets for a catch. But, they had been out all night. They'd just finished cleaning the nets! They were ready to pack it in, go home, sleep.

Despite this, when Jesus instructs them to start over, do it again, try once more, put out into deep water, they do. With a kind of reckless abandon, with a shrug of the shoulders and a what-the-heck, what-can-we-lose, what-can-it-hurt kind of attitude, with cheerfulness and hilarity, Simon Peter and the others, ready the nets, climb back into the boats, and head back out to fish.

Which reminds me:

There are two fish in a tank. One turns to the other and asks: "Do you know how to drive this thing?"

What did one shark say to another shark after he ate a clown fish This tastes funny.

What did the magician say to the fisherman? Pick a cod, any cod!

Did you hear about the fight in the kitchen? A fish got battered.

This story of the Great Catch and of the Call of the Disciples, is a central, inaugurating story in Christianity. Indeed the whole Christian enterprise depends on these fisherman agreeing to follow Jesus. Depends, moreover, on their cheerful, joyous, game, we'll-give-it-a-try attitude. Because they respond to Jesus with such an attitude, they find themselves embarked upon an adventure of discipleship that changes the course of human history.

Christian discipleship is an adventure in generous living, way of life marked by spontaneity and abandon; a way of facing the world – mean and hard as it can be – with dancing eyes and a laughing heart.

As you contemplate your own discipleship – how to follow Jesus in this world-weary time, in this dark season of partisan divides, caged children, saber-rattling, and climate calamity – allow yourselves to laugh, savor satire, relish irony... study the cartoons in the New Yorker; linger over late night skits. Indulge in gallows humor.

Laughter can be a pressure release valve. Humor offers distance, allowing us to gain altitude and perspective on what is sometimes too close and too awful to see clearly. A good, long, hard laugh releases endorphins. Christian, if you need to get high, let this be the way you do it.

Speaking of which:

Why do fish always know how much they weigh? They have their own scales.

What do you call a lazy crayfish? A slobster

How do shellfish get to the hospital? In a clambulance.

Why did the fish blush? Because it saw the oceans' bottom.

I hope God and you will forgive me these jokes in church. I can only trust that God relishes our laughter, our joy ... and, indeed, our cheerful and sometimes hilarious attempts to follow the call of Christ.

I believe that God understands what it is to laugh through our tears and cry through our laughter. This I believe: that laughter is both human and divine.

For your sake – and for the sake of the church – may you experience dancing eyes and a laughing heart as you respond to Christ's call upon your life. May laughter refresh and renew you today and every day. May it cause you to clamber back into the struggle, make you put out into the deep water, and, with abandon, dive afresh into the work of discipleship.

Finally, I leave you with this thought:

Keep your friends close and your anemones closer.