

“LIGHTEN UP!”

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Proverbs 15:13, 15; 17:22

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 9-12

A seminary professor of mine used to say that when you read the Bible, one of the cardinal rules is to read it with a sense of humor. Many of us have a solemn notion about the Bible, and for that matter about religion as a whole. We get very serious when we read Scripture. We use our holy voices to talk about God. We wear our religious faces to worship. We get cautious around clergy.

I was getting a hair cut one day when a guy walked in and started to tell a joke to my barber. *“Did you hear the story about the minister, the priest, and the rabbi who were sitting at the bar . . .”* My barber quickly interrupted the guy and said, *“Mike, before you go any farther, have you ever met Rev. Ollinger?”* The guy telling the joke said, *“I’ll finish it later!”* I’VE MISSED MORE GOOD JOKES THROUGH THE YEARS!

I happen to believe that God has a sense of humor. No somber God could have created the long-necked giraffe, or the long-legged ostrich, or the purple-bottomed baboon. Only a God with a sense of joy and humor could create hairless, toothless infants who giggle, gurgle and coo. God cannot possibly be as solemn as we believe he or she is because we would not otherwise be blessed with the wonderful gifts of joy and laughter.

On this winter Sunday morning, I want to make us smile. I want to encourage us to lighten up a bit. I want to make us feel good about being here in worship and about being children of God and disciples of Jesus Christ. I want to echo the words Nehemiah spoke to the tearful Israelites as they gathered for worship upon their return from exile to face the rebuilding of Jerusalem: *“This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep....Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”*

Of all the hours of the week, this should be the one hour when our spirits soar with joy and enthusiasm. This should be an hour when we let go of our fears and rejoice in the good news that God has the whole world and each of our lives in his loving hands. Here in worship, we affirm that God’s love is greater than our sin. We affirm that God’s goodness is greater than the world’s suffering and pain. Here we affirm that the darkness of death is overcome by the brightness of new and eternal life, and that no matter what might come our way, there is nothing that can ever separate us from the love of God. *That news ought to put joy into our hearts and a smile on our faces . . . which is a tough thing to do during a Presbyterian worship service!*

A Sunday school teacher quieted the children she was escorting into the worship service one Sunday morning and asked them why they thought they needed to be quiet when they came into the sanctuary? One bright little girl spoke up and said, *“Because the people are sleeping!”*

I don’t know what troubles and concerns you bring here today; each of us brings some. But I do know that joy and laughter are gracious gifts from God that help to lift us up and lighten the loads we often carry through life.

Consider this: **See how joy and laughter lighten life’s anxieties!**

Haven't there been times when in the midst of a tense situation laughter brought a certain calm and relaxation to you? Have you ever noticed how laughter shows up at the funeral home and in the hospital? There's a reason for that: *laughter is therapeutic. Studies show that laughter relaxes our body, boosts our immune system, triggers the release of endorphins, helps protect the heart, lightens anger's heaviness, and lessens life's anxieties.*

When she was alive and serving the diseased in Calcutta, Mother Theresa used to require that her hospital wards be filled with laughter. She said the sound of laughter was one of the strongest forces for health and wholeness.

Years ago Norman Cousins wrote a book called, *Anatomy of an Illness*. What prompted his writing was a very serious and painful illness, for which he was given a slim chance of recovery. Although filled with fear, he believed that negative emotions were the worst thing he could heap upon himself, so he chose a different course to follow. Along with the prescribed medications, Cousins surrounded himself with humor. He had funny stories read to him and funny movies brought into his hospital room. Cousins said: *"I made the joyous discovery that 10 minutes of belly laughter had an anesthetic effect and would give me at least 2 hours of pain-free sleep."* Near the end of the book he wrote: *"Have you ever noticed how even in the most unlikely places, laughter relieves and makes us whole? Sometimes humor is the only thing that gets us through, it is the only thing that helps us to survive."*

The Bible is saturated with wit and humor. There are hundreds of examples of puns and humorous accounts in the Old and New Testaments. Laughter was what helped pull Abraham and Sarah through when the obstetrician told them they were going to be parents. Abraham was 99 years old and his wife Sarah was 90 when she woke up with morning sickness. Abraham almost knocked himself out laughing so hard and Sarah nearly split a gut. Imagine, a baby being born in the geriatric ward and Medicare picking up the tab! What else could they do but laugh. And, what did they name their newborn son? *Isaac*, which means, *"laughter."*

Elsewhere in the Old Testament we read in 2 Chronicles these words about the death of King Jehoram: *"Jehoram was 32 years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem 8 years. He passed away, to no one's regret, and was buried in the City of David, but not in the tombs of the kings."* Clearly, King Jehoram was not very well liked by the masses!

And then, how about the story of Eutychus in the New Testament Book of Acts who fell asleep sitting in a window sill and fell three floors to his death while listening to Paul preach a never-ending sermon? Here's the text in Acts 20: *"On the first day of the week, Paul was (preaching) until midnight. A young man named Eutychus, who was sitting in the window, began to sink off into a deep sleep while Paul talked still longer. Overcome by sleep, he fell to the ground three floors below and was picked up dead."* Sad, but you have to admit, funny!

Centuries ago, the author of the Old Testament Book of Proverbs wrote: *"A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a downcast spirit dries up the bones."* That writer knew joy, laughter, and cheerfulness have a therapeutic way of lightening life's anxieties, *and boy if there was ever a time we needed some things to lessen life's anxieties now is the time.*

Anxiety is rampant in society today. In August, the bookseller Barnes & Noble reported a 25% annual jump in the sale of books about anxiety. Anxiety is now the leading mental health issue among American youth, and clinicians say it is rising to epidemic proportions. Philip Kendall, director of the Child and Adolescent Anxiety

Disorder Clinic at Temple University recently said: *“There is definitely a rise in the identification of kids with serious anxiety. They are growing up in an environment of volatility, where schools have lockdowns, where there are wars across borders, where we have an environment that anticipates catastrophe.”*

Writer Anne LaMott begins her new book with these opening words: *“I am stockpiling antibiotics for the apocalypse, ... The news of late has captured the fever dream of modern life: everything exploding, burning, being shot, or crashing to the ground all around us, ... There is so much going on that flattens us, that is huge, scary, or simply appalling. We’re doomed, stunned, exhausted, and over-caffeinated.”*

The fears and anxieties that are so prevalent among us today are no laughing matter. People are on edge; short-tempered, angry, frustrated, anxious. The daily news is a continual litany of dysfunction, division, and disparagement. If ever there was a time when we most needed to lighten up as individuals and as a society it is now. Martin Luther King, Jr., preaching in one of his sermons about life in relationship to God said: *“With God, we are able to rise from tension-packed valleys to the sublime heights of inner peace, and find radiant stars of hope against the nocturnal bosom of life’s most depressing nights.”* King was acknowledging that with God in our lives, despite life’s anxieties, we can know joy.

An ancient scroll reads: *“I will laugh at the world. I will smile and my digestion will improve. And with my laughter, all will be reduced to its proper size.”* Make no mistake about it – God’s gifts of joy and laughter help lighten life’s anxieties.

Here’s something else:

God’s gifts of joy and laughter lighten life’s seriousness!

We take *ourselves*, our *positions*, and our *circumstances* in life so seriously sometimes. The 20th Century theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr said in one of his writings that the very essence of sin is to take ourselves too seriously.

William, a man of great wealth and self-imposed importance was feeling good about himself one evening as he drove home in his brand new Mercedes Benz from a black-tie social event with his wife. Half-jokingly he said to her, *“You do know, Clara, if it weren’t for my money we wouldn’t have this Mercedes Benz to be driving around in.”* Clara glared at him but didn’t say a word. When they pulled into the driveway of their lovely million dollar home, he said, *“Clara, you do know if it weren’t for my money we wouldn’t be living in this mansion.”* Again, Clara glared but didn’t say a word. Then, that night as they were getting ready for bed, William, still feeling proud and pompous, said to Clara: *“You’re a lucky woman, Clara. You know if it weren’t for my money we wouldn’t have a master suite like this, decorated as it is with all this exquisite furniture.”* Clara reached her limit of patience and spoke up and said, *“You know, William, you’re absolutely right! I know if it weren’t for your money we wouldn’t have all the nice things we have. But, do you want to know something? If it weren’t for your money, I wouldn’t be here either!”*

You might know that Jesus had quite a bit to say about people like William; people who are lost in arrogance and pride, taking themselves and their positions in life far too seriously. One of the things he said was something like: *“What does it profit a person if he has all the money, status, and material possessions in the world, but has lost his soul and has a cold heart?”*

Jesus focused most of his teaching on the seriousness with which people lived their lives. He saw how serious people were in their day-to-day roles, and in their relationships, and especially in their practice of religion. He saw how people worried about their looks, their possessions, and their positions. Many of the stories Jesus told were downright funny because they poked fun at the distorted ways people viewed life and lived life. In fact, it has been suggested that in front of many of Jesus' teachings should be the opening words, *"Did you hear the one about . . ."* For instance,

With regards to passing judgment on others, one day Jesus said: *"Did you hear the one about the man who was trying to remove a splinter from his neighbor's eye, while in his own eye was a 2'x4'?"*

Or, with regards to returning evil for evil and getting back at people who have wronged us, Jesus said: *"Did you hear the one about the man who when he was struck on the left side of his face, turned the other cheek and said, 'Hit me here, too!'"*

Or, reflecting on the way money for many people is more important than God, Jesus said: *"Did you hear the one about the rich man who tried to enter God's kingdom with all his wealth? Why, it would be easier for a camel to fit through the eye of a needle!"*

The comedian, George Carlin, might not have been a favorite of yours, but some of the things he said in his stand-up routines were not that much different from some things Jesus said. For instance, Carlin said,

"The paradox of our time in history is that we have taller buildings but shorter tempers, wider freeways, but narrower viewpoints. We spend more, but have less. We buy more, but enjoy less. We have bigger houses and smaller families, more conveniences, but less time. We have more academic degrees, but less common sense, more knowledge, but less judgment, more experts, yet more problems, and more medicine, but less wellness. We drink too much, smoke too much, spend too recklessly, laugh too little, drive too fast, get too angry, stay up too late, get up too tired, read too little, watch TV too much, and pray too seldom. We have multiplied our possessions, but reduced our values. We talk too much, love too seldom, and hate too often."

I have to believe George Carlin put a smile on Jesus' face with that litany of truths, because Jesus knew that laughter lightens life's seriousness. He used humor all the time to break down the ridiculous notions we have about ourselves and others. Jesus used humor to level life's playing field and to remind us that in God's eyes we are all equal, and that God in his infinite wisdom and justice always has the last laugh, particularly when it comes to those who take themselves too seriously. And so he said things like,

"Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted."

"In the kingdom of God, the last will be first, and the first will be last."

"Those who want to be great must first become a servant to others."

Do you hear what Jesus is saying in these and so many other teachings? He is saying, *"Lighten up, people! Relax! Don't take yourself, or your position, or your possessions, or your circumstances, or your preconceived ideas, or your religious convictions so seriously! Humble yourself! Laugh at yourself! Live simply! Set your ego aside! Serve the needs of others! Trust God! Let the joy of the Lord be your strength! Enjoy life while you have it, and for God's sake let other people enjoy their life too."*

Which brings me to this final point – God’s gifts of joy and laughter not only lighten life’s anxieties and seriousness,

These gifts also loosen us up to experience God’s promise of abundant life!

God desires for each of us to enjoy life and not simply endure it. In the person of Jesus God said, *“I have come that you might have life and have it more abundantly.”* It is God’s will that we enjoy life fully, freely, and joyfully. Yes, there are heartaches, sicknesses, diseases, mistakes and failures we face. *There are plenty of things that come our way that are far from being joyful or funny!* But, here’s the thing – God in God’s goodness, created us so we have the freedom to choose the attitude with which we face challenges and troubles.

While confined in the Auschwitz death camp of Nazi Germany, Victor Frankl noticed that those around him who maintained their sense of purpose and meaning were able to survive longer than those who lost hope. From this experience he wrote the book, *Man’s Search For Meaning*, in which he emphasizes the importance of our power to choose our attitudes about our lives rather than letting circumstances dictate what our attitude will be. He wrote: *“Everything can be taken from a (person) but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”*

I wonder if Victor Frankl was familiar with the writings of the apostle Paul in the New Testament? Paul was a prisoner in Rome when he wrote his letter to the young Christian church in the City of Philippi. You would never guess he was imprisoned by his encouraging words to believers to rejoice always, in any and all circumstances, remembering that in the worst of times as well as in the best of times God is with us. *“Always be joyful,”* Paul wrote, *“because you belong to the Lord. Again, I say, be joyful, always, and rejoice!”*

Like Nehemiah in the Old Testament, the apostle Paul in the New Testament tells believers to be energized by joy, specifically the joy of the Lord that is our strength. No matter the challenges in our lives, joy ought to be central to who we are and the attitude with which we live life. The Christian priest, professor, and author Henri Nouwen wrote: *Joy does not simply happen to us. We have to choose joy and keep choosing it every day.”*

My friend, Tony Campolo, the founder of Cornerstone Christian Academy where I serve, tells the story of taking his son, Bart, to Disneyland in California. His son was 9 years old at the time. At the end of the day as they were leaving, totally exhausted from being at the park all day, Bart said to his dad, *“I want one more ride on Space Mountain!”* Tony told his son, *“No way! We’re leaving!”* Bart, though, responded, *“But, Dad, Jesus wants me to ride it again!”* Tony replied, *“What do you mean Jesus wants you to ride it again? Where did you ever get that idea?”* Bart said, *“From you, Dad! Last Sunday, when you were preaching, you said that whenever we cry, Jesus cries; whenever we laugh, Jesus laughs. You said that he feels everything we feel. Well, if that’s true, then when I’m having a really happy time on the roller coaster, he’s really enjoying himself too. And if I want another ride on Space Mountain, he wants another ride too!”* Bart got one more ride!

I hope your spirit is a bit lighter for having been here this morning. God really does want us to enjoy life. God wants us to *relax* more than we fret, to *smile* more than we frown, to *laugh* more than we cry, to *listen* more than we talk, to *complement* more than we criticize, to *care for others* more than we care for ourselves, to *give* more than we get, to *love* more than we hate, to *be patient and kind* to everyone we meet, to *be* humble, and to *trust in God always*. Whatever fears and troubles you brought with you here this morning, leave them here and go out rejoicing truly believing that the joy of the Lord is your strength.