

1 Sermon, October 23, 2011

Text: Numbers 22:22-35, Matthew 7:1-6, Matthew 23:23-24

Title: "Holy Humor"

Central Idea: Humor is a gift from God.

Talking donkeys, swallowable camels, logs in your eye.
It all sounds pretty absurd.

And if you take the Bible without a drop of humor, you will be puzzling over how to explain talking donkeys. If you take the Bible without humor, you just won't get it when Jesus is talking about a log in the eye, or swallowing a camel.

The Bible, at least the Old Testament (Hebrew Scriptures), was first an oral document, long before it was written down. There are stories in the Hebrew Scripture that just beg to be told.

The story of Jonah is not without humor, because Jonah himself is a pathetic character, always making mistakes, always trying to avoid problems. Read the book of Jonah, and you'll see the humor in this Old Testament parable.

Today's reading about Balaam and his donkey is really about how we fail to listen to God, or pay attention to the signs that God gives us. But it is told as a story about a Holy man who is offered a big bribe to curse the Israelites. Balak, king of Moab, asks Balaam the holy man to come to him and curse the Israelites. But Balaam refuses twice, then finally says yes. On the way, an angel of the Lord stands in their path with a fiery sword. Balaam doesn't see the angel, but his donkey does. So the donkey veers from the path.

At this point in the story, you can imagine the storyteller making a big deal about the talking donkey, and the audience laughing.

When Balaam starts to beat his donkey, the donkey speaks to him. Only then is Balaam able to see the angel, who warns Balaam to only speak what the Lord tells him to speak.

In the end, Balaam cannot curse the Israelites, because God has not cursed them. Instead, Balaam blesses them.

Let's move from donkeys to camels. Donkeys may be stubborn and ungraceful, but camels are worse. Camels walk funny, they spit, they have strange lips and knees, and they look like a child's picture of a horse. I've heard at least four camel jokes, *none* of which are appropriate for a service of worship.

No wonder that Jesus told at least two camel jokes.

The first one is familiar - In Matthew 19:24. Jesus says:

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Mt 19:24 Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God."

Many scholars have said with utmost seriousness that the eye of a needle was really a low gate in the wall at Jerusalem - and it was hard but not impossible for a camel to pass through it. Other explanations have been found as well by *serious* Bible scholars. That maybe it wasn't a camel, but a typo for a ship's cable - threading a darning needle with a ship's cable.

But the most likely explanation is that Jesus saw a chance to make a point with humor.

The second camel joke that Jesus told is a little more obscure. It comes from Matthew 23, and really is funny if you take a moment to think about it. Jesus said:

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel! (Matthew 23:23-24, NRSV).

Jesus talks about all the work some Pharisees do so that they won't pollute themselves by accidentally swallowing a gnat. But, low and behold, they discover that they've swallowed a camel, complete with long neck and hump.

You can believe that kind of humor got people's attention -- and they remembered it.

Jesus sometimes conjured up ridiculous images:

"Can a blind person guide a blind person? Will not both fall into a pit? (Luke 6:39, NRSV).

It is a criticism of some Pharisees, who are blind to the Spirit of God, but claim to be holy. But it is said with some humor.

If we knew Aramaic, Jesus' own language, and could go back in time, we would see that much of his wit relies on this sort of play on words, or taking an old saying and making it different.

Elton Trueblood, a Quaker author, has written a book called *The Humor of Christ*. In this book, Trueblood lists 30 humorous passages in Matthew, Mark and Luke. There are many that I will not cover today. In fact, there is only one other humorous saying of Jesus that I'm going

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to quote for you today, and it is an instance of humor that really stands out in Jesus' preaching. Here it is, from Matthew 7:

"Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye. "Do not give what is holy to dogs; and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under foot and turn and maul you. (Matthew 7:1-6, NRSV).

Show video *Jesus Teaches* "The Log and Speck."

The video shows the natural good humor in some of Jesus' parables. He used ridiculous images to point out the ridiculousness of some of the things people do.

So what?

What if Jesus joked, and there is humor in the Bible?

Well, I think it tells us is that we shouldn't take ourselves too seriously.

Really, Jesus sometimes was trying to get people to laugh at themselves enough that they might decide to change. That they might look at their own inconsistencies, their own foibles, their own *sin* - and repent, turn around, lean on God's wisdom.

E. Stanley Jones, missionary to India and evangelist, once said:

"If you are to grow in good temper, you must grow in good humor. God has given us the power of laughter not only to laugh at things, but to laugh off things. The art of laughing at yourself is the highest kind of laughter. Good humor will make you good-tempered.

Jesus was fully human, and so he laughed. He told jokes. He calls us to be human and laugh, too — especially at ourselves.

I'm going to close with something from a first grade teacher who collected old, well known proverbs. Then she gave each child in her class the first half of a proverb, and had them come up with the rest. Here's the result:

Better Be Safe Than... Punch A 5th Grader.

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Strike While The... Bug Is Close.

It's Always Darkest Before... Daylight Savings Time.

Never Underestimate The Power Of... Termites.

You Can Lead A Horse To Water But.. How?

Don't Bite The Hand That... Looks Dirty.

No News Is... Impossible.

You Can't Teach An Old Dog New... Math.

The Pen Is Mightier Than The... Pigs.

An Idle Mind Is... The Best Way To Relax.

Where There's Smoke, There's... Pollution.

A Penny Saved Is... Not Much.

Two's Company, Three's... The Musketeers.

Don't Put Off Tomorrow What... You Put On To Go To Bed.

Laugh And The Whole World Laughs With You, Cry And... You Have To Blow Your Nose.

Children Should Be Seen And Not... Spanked Or Grounded.

If At First You Don't Succeed... Get New Batteries.

You Get Out Of Something What You... See Pictured On The Box.

God has given us grace, and often that grace takes the form of humor. As the saying goes, Angels can fly because they take themselves lightly.

Amen.