



The Sacredness of Laughter

Laughter expresses our enjoyment of creation, acknowledges the paradoxes of humanity, and celebrates the joy of redemption.

by Roy Branson

IN LAUGHTER WE HEAR THE SOUNDS OF THE sacred. Laughter responds to the pleasure of creation, recognizes the complexities of the human condition, and experiences the exultation of redemption. At the heart of our merriment, we discover the holy.

At Play In the Fields of the Lord

The laughter of play is not a polite titter here and there, but the robust, spontaneous laughter that tumbles out when we touch the colors, shapes, and textures of God's world. It is the laughter of pleasure—from rolling down grassy hillsides, riding ocean waves to shore, feeling directly, on our fingertips, the softness and swellings of spring. The laughter of play responds to the tentative greens, indigos, and brash yellows of springtime. In our delight with creation and its God, how can we not

break out new Easter outfits and flock to church to celebrate the resurrection of our Lord—the one who so dramatically restored his creation?

Gerard Manley Hopkins gathered creation into himself and exclaimed:

*Nothing is so beautiful as Spring—
When weeds, in wheels, shoot long and lovely and
lush;
Thrush's eggs look little low heavens, and thrush
Through the echoing timber does so rinse and
wring
The ear, it strikes like lightnings to hear him sing;
The glassy peartree leaves and blooms, they brush
The descending blue; that blue is all in a rush
With richness; the racing lambs too have fair their
fling.*

*What is all this juice and all this joy?
A strain of the earth's sweet being in the beginning
In Eden garden. . . .¹*

No wonder at Creation “the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy” (Job 38:7, KJV). No wonder Isaiah exults, “You shall go out in joy, and be led

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back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands!" (Isaiah 55:12, NRSV).

The laughter of play comes in the Eden of our lives. Psychologists like Piaget say that children begin to laugh at about four months of age, when they are tickled, and at about eight months in response to others playing peek-a-boo.² Play is a direct, spontaneous response to the world, its shapes and colors, its movement and variety—Hopkins' "all things counter, original, spare, strange."³ Play is not even games or sport, with their time-honored, formal structures, their rules and errors, winners and losers. Play is fun, revelry, even frivolity.

The laughter of play wells up from immediate sensations, carefree movement, a frolicking through God's universe; an essentially light-headed enjoyment of pleasures yearning to be indulged. The laughter of play is the music of carefree community: "The sound of mirth and the sound of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride" (Jeremiah 25:10, NRSV); "the sound of harpists and minstrels and of flutists and trumpeters" (Revelation 18:22, NRSV). Play is sensuality without tears; a delight in flexing muscles, in developing curves. It is "the voice of my beloved! . . . like a gazelle or a young stag upon the mountains of spices!" (Song of Solomon 2:8; 8:14, NRSV). Play, as the theologian Hugo Rahner puts it, is the body moving "to the effortless measures of a heavenly dance."⁴

The laughter of play echoes God's litany of pleasure echoing through the days of Creation: "And God saw that it was good." Our laughter reverberates to God's delight in his creatures: the mountain goats, the deer, the wild ass and ox, the ostrich, the horse. "Its majestic snorting is terrible. It paws violently, exults mightily . . . It swallows the ground; it cannot stand still at the sound of the trumpet.

When the trumpet sounds, it says, 'Aha!'" (Job 39:20-25, NRSV). In the uncomplicated, direct enjoyment of one another and of the world, we emulate our Creator. To chortle at the sheer abundance of God's creation is an act of worship.

Bring In the Clowns

At about one year of age a child begins to laugh at the unusual, inappropriate behavior of adults making funny faces or walking on all fours. At two, children laugh at incongruities and try creating their own juxtapositions.⁵ Increasingly, comedy is different from play. Play is full of immediate sense impressions, carefree movement, full-bodied pleasures. Comedy is more studied. Its pleasures, especially those of wit, erupt in the mind more than the senses. Play loses itself in the moment; comedy remains one step removed.

The laughter of comedy is more nervous, sharper than the laughter of play. Comedy results from seeing unexpected connections, from putting two dissimilar situations together—a candidate for President of the greatest nation on earth, while addressing a campaign rally, manages to fall off a platform. Indeed, our ability to laugh at the incongruity of two aspects of reality, and realize that we are distinguishable from both, is not only central to comedy, but also to humanity. By seeing comic juxtapositions, we transcend our environment and become conscious of ourselves. In the laughter of comedy, we exult in the freedom of being human.

Within comedy, humans can use their freedom to create comparisons through puns. According to Stenson, puns can be sacramental. "In puns, several different lines of thought go through the same sign at the same time, and if one of those lines of thought is religious in some heightened sense, then that pun . . . will

be sacramental.”⁶

The laughter of comedy also responds to the more dramatic comparisons of wit. Rather than emphasizing parallel tracks—as in a pun—wit spotlights the single point of convergence of two dissimilarities. With wit, laughter explodes from the crash of incongruities—for example, the clash of the human and divine in the quick Yiddish response to predictions of good fortune: “From your lips to God’s ear.” To encounter a witticism, says Stenson, is to careen “into a tangle of logical falsity or psychologically self-defeating action, our train of thought thrown off the tracks of rational discourse and reasonable expectancy. . . . Having struck a witticism we can only laugh in shocked surprise.”⁷

While laughter celebrates the human freedom and creativity expressed in comedy, laughter also recognizes comedy’s underscoring of human limitation—the gap between what is expected and what arrives, between human pretense and reality, between what ought to be and what is. The laughter of comedy exposes humanity for the fools and sinners we really are. Comedy’s full bag of jest, prank, joke, burlesque, and parody snickers when the powerful and prestigious person, forgetting the boundaries, falls flat on his face. Winston Churchill, himself stumbling in the election following Britain’s greatest victory in history, commented on the man who had replaced him as Prime Minister of Britain: “The other day an empty limousine drove up to the curb, and Clement Atlee stepped out.”

One of my uncles was an evangelist who had preached hundreds and hundreds of sermons. He made a point of talking rapidly and fluently, almost without pause. However, one night he was brought up short. As he himself told it, he was giving a sermon on the Law and how it had not been done away with entirely. Reaching for the familiar text from the Sermon on the Mount, he started quoting confidently from memory, “For verily I say unto you, till heaven and earth pass,” only in amazement to hear himself say, “one tot or one jittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.” He was

so dumfounded he went right on talking and found an appropriate place to try quoting the passage again, only to hear—in horror—his voice saying, “one jit nor tottle shall pass . . .” In his many tellings of this story on himself he never attempted a recitation of the text from memory.

Reminders of the distance between human ambitions and capabilities

run throughout the Bible. Isaiah employs satire to elicit the kind of comic laughter that dissolves pomposity. A hungry carpenter, he says, selects an oak or a cedar. “Half of it he burns in the fire; over this half he roasts meat, eats it and is satisfied. He also warms himself and says, ‘Ah, I am warm, I can feel the fire.’ The rest of it he makes into a god, his idol.” The carpenter “stretches a line, marks it out with a stylus, fashions it with planes, and marks it with a compass; he makes it in human form, with human beauty, to be set up in a shrine.” Then the carpenter “bows down to it and worships it; he prays to it and says, ‘Save me, for you are my God!’” (Isaiah 44:13-19,

Joy cannot be scheduled; it does not come when summoned. Joy arrives of its own accord. Joy is the subjective side of grace. Joy overflows. It is a fountain, not a pool of bliss; not a still point, but a wave, rippling unceasingly outward toward others. Joy nurtures whatever it touches.

NRSV).

Jonah, the reluctant prophet, cuts one of the most ridiculously comic figures in the Old Testament. Plucked off a runaway cruise, dragged back from attempted suicide, Jonah suddenly decides to be the biggest prophet of them all. He will single-handedly wipe out the mightiest nation in the world, Israel's bitterest foe—Assyria. Elijah's destruction of the prophets of Baal will be a minor skirmish in comparison. Only, of course, before he can even finish his prophet's full denunciation, the people repent—and God, to Jonah's horror, forgives them.

Sulking out of the city, Jonah nags at God: I didn't want to come in the first place because I knew you would do something like this. "I knew that thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil" (Jonah 4:2, KJV). At which point this would-be warrior of the faith petulantly insists that he simply wants to die—that's all—it's better than living. The next moment, Jonah becomes rabidly attached to the gourd. When it withers, he again insists in a faint, "it is better for me to die than to live" (vs. 3).

God, in one of the most ironic speeches in the Old Testament, asks this caricature of a

prophet—who a little while before had been ready to conquer a city—"Doest thou well to be angry for the gourd?" And Jonah, shriveling in stature before our eyes, insists: "I do well to be angry, even unto death" (Jonah 4:9, 10, KJV).

A man has tried to transcend his limits as a human, and the incongruity of his aspirations and God's power shrinks Jonah to comic proportions. The author of the Book of Jonah is simultaneously inviting Israel to laugh at its condescending and punitive attitudes toward non-Israelites—even Yahweh, for pity's sake, can't squeeze within Israel's prejudices!

In the laughter of comedy, the poets and prophets of Israel created a form of dissent. Paul, steeped in the Hebrew tradition, called on his followers in Corinth to also be "fools for Christ" (1 Corinthians 4:10, KJV), the butt of derision in their community, dissenters from the prevailing wisdom. Of course, Paul, like the fool in the medieval European court celebrated by Shakespeare, believed that the joke was really on the powerful and disdainful. The skeptical establishment were really those pitiful folk who could never quite grasp what was so funny. Paul and all subsequent fools for Christ surrounded by the undeviatingly rational and solemn majority, laugh with the

A Scandalously Brief Bibliography

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assurance that they are the ones who have “got it.” Because Christ is risen, the joke is on skepticism, tragedy, and death: “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” (1 Corinthians 15:55, 56, NRSV).

Some, of course, focus so fixedly on incongruity that the delicate balance of wit is overturned. The descant of comedy loses touch with the background harmony on which it depends. The sense of what is human begins to dissolve, fall apart. Satire and irony plunge into the absurd. Laughter becomes a scream.

Good News of Great Joy

We are rescued because, in the memorable words of C. S. Lewis, we are “surprised by joy.” The person of faith insists that the absurd condition of humankind has not drowned out all other sounds. In the midst of all the paradoxes and dullness, the dry ordinariness and recurring pain of human existence, we unexpectedly hear the laughter of joy.

The respected, admired, and somewhat feared teacher says without warning: “Mary, that was one of the finest math exams anyone’s written for me. Have you thought of going on in the field?” The son, whom you loved because he had tremendous talent, and basically wanted to serve his fellow human beings, but who dropped out, writes home from a distant job: “I’ve reapplied to take pre-law. I hope you don’t die of shock.” In the midst of prickly negotiations, antagonists are astonished that they have become friends. Or, in a worship service attended routinely for years, there is the sudden, sharp delight at realizing that Someone actually does hear the anthems, does hallow the prayers.

Joy comes to humans unexpectedly, as a gift. To experience joy is to be surprised by the sacred. It is to join those in Luke astonished to the point of fear by Christ’s arrival—Zechariah,

Mary, Elizabeth, the shepherds; awed to hear, “I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people” (Luke 2:10, KJV). It is to be with Mary Magdalene and the “other Mary,” stunned by an empty tomb and a Christ that “has been raised from the dead,” then running “with fear and great joy” to tell the disciples (Matthew 28:7, 8, NRSV).

Many cultures have different words for happiness and for joy. America has defined itself by its commitment to not only life and liberty, but also the pursuit of happiness. Whether happiness is measured in achieving respect and fame, influencing the course of history, or enjoying a comfortable leisure, Americans assume that happiness is something you can pursue. But joy is not so easily within our grasp. Joy cannot be scheduled; it does not come when summoned. Joy arrives of its own accord. Joy is the subjective side of grace.

Joy overflows. It is a fountain, not a pool of bliss; not a still point, but a wave, rippling unceasingly outward toward others. Joy nurtures whatever it touches. Israel, having returned from exile to Jerusalem, gathers before the water gate for four hours of worship. The people think the appropriate action is weeping and wailing. Vehemently, Nehemiah, Ezra, and the Levites call a halt. “[D]o 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.’ . . . And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing” (Nehemiah 8:9-12, NRSV).

Those who experience the joy of holiness are propelled outward toward others. The rescued exiles, rejoicing in the joy of the Lord, shared portions with those for whom nothing is prepared. Those amazed at the news of Christ’s birth rush to share the “good news of

great joy for all the people” (Luke 2:10, NRSV). Mary, who “rejoices in God my Savior,” immediately “set out and went with haste” (Luke 1: 39, 46, NRSV) to tell her cousin Elizabeth. Anna, upon seeing the newborn Christ, “began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem” (Luke 2: 38, NRSV). The two Marys, astonished at the resurrection of Christ, “left the tomb quickly and with fear and great joy” (Matthew 28:8, NRSV), and ran to share their good news with all the others. In the overflowing experience of joy, the sacred redeems the world.

The laughter of joy does not denigrate the laughter of play or comedy. Quite the contrary. When the buoyant tranquility of joy lifts us, our pleasures become more playful, our humor less strained. The laughter of joy halows the simple experiences of life—pleasure in the tasty food of celebrations, delight in colors and form of clothes, the fun of playing sports with all the gusto at one’s command. For the person of joy, pleasures afford more laughter because we can afford to be less serious about them. The laughter of joy rescues play from frenzied obsessions. Far from denegrating our created bodies, joy allows us to enjoy our bodies more lightheartedly.

Joy likewise rescues comedy from moving through absurdity to bitterness and despair. The joyful person can afford to laugh at himself to heal his fellow participant in the human comedy: “Listen, Harry, let me tell you about the first time I asked the boss for a raise. . . .” Joy does not avoid looking at the evil comedy finds, but invites irony to glimpse a wider horizon. A sense of the sacred never destroys creation or humanity. Joy makes play more jubilant and humanity’s laughter more robust.

The relation of the Sabbath to all other days expands our understanding of the relationship of all laughter to the laughter of joy. Karl Barth, the greatest theologian of the 20th century, refers to the Sabbath as “a true day of joy,” and “the mystery of all the other days hastening toward it.”⁸ Sabbath joy does not empty meaning from the laughter of other days. The Sabbath does not drain these other days of their gaiety. Rather, the laughter of the week is intensified by the culminating joy of the Sabbath. In the week-day laughter of play we enjoy the innocence of Eden. Day by day, in the laughter of comedy, we recognize the adventure and trials of the human pilgrimage. In the full-throated, exultant laughter of Sabbath joy we hear all our laughter resonate already to the sounds of the Holy City and a God of joy.

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1. Gerard Manley Hopkins, “Spring.”
2. Jean Piaget, *Play, Dreams and Imitation in Childhood* (London: Macmillan, 1951).
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5. Avner Ziv, *Personality and Sense of Humor* (New York: Springer, 1984).

6. S. H. Stenson, *Sense and Nonsense in Religion: An Essay on the Language and Phenomenology of Religion* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1969), p. 109.

7. Ibid.

8. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1961) Vol. 3, Book 4, p. 27; and *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1960) Vol. 3, Book 2, p. 10.