



Humor in Preaching: Who Needs Jokes?

CHRISTOPHER C. SMITH

In the interest of transparency, first a confession. Some years ago when I preached the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31), I started my sermon with a joke. It was a “pearly gates” joke that I could not resist using. The parable itself is a sort of pearly gates story that ends with a delicious punch line, spoken by Father Abraham: “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone rises from the dead” (Luke 16:31). My lapse, however, does not make me an advocate of telling a joke in order to break the sermonic ice, for I have since repented of my sin. Let me tell you why.

Legend has it that when actor Sir Donald Wolfit was lying on his deathbed, one of his young actors said to him, “Sir Donald, after a life so filled with success and fame, dying must be hard.” To this Sir Donald purportedly said, “Dying is easy....Comedy is hard.”¹

Ain’t it the truth! Most preachers are neither comedians nor comic actors. The refrain of struggling comedians is, “C’mon! I’m dying up here!” but that could also be said by preachers. Too often preachers end up “dying up there” because they don’t have the panache to tell the joke. Or maybe they misjudge it: what they thought was funny in the pastor’s study falls flat on Sunday morning. In his sermon “Against Foolish Talk and Jestings,” Restoration preacher Isaac Barrow says of the jocular, “Its ways are unaccountable and inexplicable, being answerable to the numberless rovings of fancy and windings of language.”² Why make your sermon depend on something as “unaccountable” and unreliable as a joke?

But let’s say your joke is actually funny. You deliver the punch line and people laugh. What’s the impact? How will it really serve the preaching? To put it in Father Abraham’s terms, if all they remember is the joke, neither will they be convinced that someone actually rose from the dead. And so often, all they remember is the joke. In the weeks following my sermon, a number of people actually asked me to repeat the joke so they could tell it to their friends. No one asked a thing about the rest of the sermon.

In a recent article, Thomas G. Long named boredom as a key challenge in preaching. He does not suggest joke telling as the solution. Instead, he reminds us

¹None of the standard resources on quotations offer a definitive attribution for this story or the quotation.

²Isaac Barrow, “Against Foolish Talk and Jestings,” *Christian Bookshelf*, at http://christianbookshelf.org/barrow/sermons_on_evilspeaking_by_isaac_barrow/against_foolish_talking_and_jesting.htm (accessed August 19, 2011).

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Humor in Preaching: Life Touched by Grace

RUTHANNA B. HOOKE

The preaching task invites—even demands—the use of humor. Certainly humor can be misused in sermons, as when the preacher begins with a joke that bears no relationship to the rest of the sermon. However, even the abuses of humor suggest that there is something about preaching that makes us want to laugh and makes preachers want to provoke laughter in their hearers.

Humor in preaching is partly a response to the awkwardness of preaching itself. The monologue mode of address and the authority accorded the event can make preaching feel artificially formal, creating a sense of distance between preacher and hearers. The use of humor is the preacher's attempt to bridge this gulf.

Humor helps do this because sharing humor is a powerful way for humans to establish and signal connection with each other. It is disheartening to tell a joke and have no one laugh, because it is a sign that speaker and hearer are not on the same wavelength. It may also reveal a cultural distance, since humor is culturally determined. This is why a joke cannot be explained; it relies on a common vocabulary and sensibility, and it serves to reinforce these commonalities. So, getting a laugh out of the hearers is a sign that the preacher has found common ground with them, which helps to lessen the distance between pulpit and pew.

Humor also helps to fulfill other purposes of the sermon. One aim of preaching is to take down people's defenses against God so as to provoke transformation, and humor is an effective means of doing this. Humor calls us into the space of play—a space that is unbounded and anarchic, disconnected from ordinary life, where different ways of being can be explored. Humor connects us to our unconscious, our shadow side; it brings to the surface aspects of ourselves that we might otherwise shun, allowing them to be transformed. Being able to laugh loosens us up and gives moments of respite in a sermon, which is particularly necessary when the preacher aims to challenge people. As Oscar Wilde said, "If you are going to tell people the truth, you had better make them laugh; otherwise, they will kill you."¹ Humor functions this way in some of Jesus' difficult sayings; for instance, he uses comic hyperbole when describing the difference between the log in our own eye and the mote in the neighbor's eye. We laugh at such exaggeration, but the laughter itself eases our resistance to hearing Jesus' message.

¹Quoted in A. Katherine Grieb, "And the Bush Said *What?*": Preaching the Humor in the Bible," in *Preaching as Pastoral Caring: Sermons That Work XIII*, ed. Roger Alling and David J. Schlafer (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 2005) 120.

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of the central purpose of preaching: “We say that sermons have bored us when actually they have disappointed us, failing to be the alternative word we need, failing to be the speech that arises not from our own meager entertainments but from the life of the Spirit.”³ Should we really settle for the “meager entertainments” of a joke when our job is to proclaim the one risen from the dead? We dare not obscure the alternative word by trying to get a laugh.

Note, however, that advocating *not* telling the joke is not the same as arguing against humor in preaching. They are very different things indeed, for humor in preaching is both natural and appropriate. In the same sermon, Isaac Barrow observed that humor “commonly procureth a more easy access to the ears of men, and worketh a stronger impression on their hearts, than other discourse could do.”⁴ True enough. Humor is a good antidote for what Barrow calls “too uncouth austerity and sourness” in preaching. But he was also the first to advocate for humor appropriate to the preaching task.

Preaching the gospel—at its most appropriate—places us squarely in the territory of foolishness. The works of author Alan Gordon come to mind. He has written several novels in his Fools Guild series, each based on a play of Shakespeare. The Holy Fools of the Guild (who are actually a super-secret spy ring) refer to Jesus Christ as “the First Fool, Our Savior.”⁵ Indeed he is. Who needs jokes when you are preaching the gospel? The good news is expert at pointing out the foibles, foolishness, and sadly funny truths in what it means to be human beings saved by a crucified Savior. The phrase “I’m dying up here” really belongs only to Jesus in all his tragic foolishness. But the resurrection is the real punch line: the whole universe laughed when the stone was rolled away.

Telling a joke in your sermon is an enticing idea. But too often telling a joke goes badly. Preachers are not comedians, and if the joke is all the listener remembers, then the sermon did not succeed. Preaching is no joke, but it can be inherently funny. Jesus is the First Fool and we preachers are his assistant jesters. We are called to name the truths of life, death, and resurrection in ways that reveal our real condition and what God has done about it. That is both funny and profound, because then we are offering the alternative word that people really came to hear and preaching with humor from the life of the Spirit. ⊕

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³Thomas G. Long, “Why Sermons Bore Us,” *The Christian Century*, September 6, 2011, 31.

⁴Barrow, “Against Foolish Talk.”

⁵See, for example, Alan Gordon, *Thirteenth Night* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1999) 34.

As we see so often, humor is a vital part of the biblical witness itself. Sometimes biblical humor functions to overcome our resistance, as it might in Jesus' hyperbole. Biblical humor also functions as social and political critique, a way of unmasking the powers and principalities. In the book of Daniel, the frequent repetition of all the instruments that get played to honor Nebuchadnezzar makes a mockery of his pretensions to power (Dan 3:4–15). Humor is also a way of lampooning people's ridiculous behavior—for instance, Jonah's sulking fit after Nineveh is spared (Jonah 4:6–11). The reason we laugh at Jonah, of course, is that we see ourselves in him. Humor is often provoked by recognition; we laugh when someone describes us to ourselves in a way that is unmistakably true. Fostering self-recognition is one of the preacher's key aims—to help us see ourselves as we truly are. Led to self-awareness with the light touch of humor, we are more open to change than we would be to a more heavy-handed assault on our recalcitrance.

Humor, finally, can connect us to grace. There is much absurdity and ambiguity in the human condition. We are creatures who long for heaven and yet are incurably earthbound: we slip on banana peels while gazing up at the stars. This absurdity could be a source of despair. As Albert Camus said, the absurd is “the coming together of man's insatiable longing for life to make sense and life's inexorable refusal to do so.”² The absurd is the absence of meaning, but to laugh is to see life's absurdity as redeemed by God and thus meaningful, albeit mysteriously. Fundamentally, the resurrection is the foundation of Christian comedy: because God wins in the end, we can laugh at life's absurdities, ambiguities, and even at death itself. As Frederick Buechner points out, we expect the tragic but do not expect the comic—our world is often governed by the absurd, and God does not win. Thus, laughter becomes our way of expressing our disbelief and delight when God does in fact triumph, as when Sarah laughed when she heard that she would bear a son at age ninety. The Christian story is a divine comedy rather than a divine tragedy, and when humor touches us in sermons we are rediscovering our connection to this comedy, the deep truth of our faith and our lives. And, to paraphrase Buechner, blessed are those who get the joke.³ ⊕

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²Quoted in Frederick Buechner, *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977) 54.

³*Ibid.*, 69.