



# Leave Them Wanting More: Humor in Preaching

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**A**ny essay on humor and preaching must offer a few caveats. This essay begins with three.

## A CAVEAT OR THREE

*Humor is sometimes offensive in ways the speaker does not intend.* At seminary and divinity school chapel services, sermons have a tradition of going for the laugh. Preachers and hearers alike pride ourselves on our sense of humor, and in the context of often serious and sometimes conflicted discussions of theological and biblical questions, we all need the relief that laughter offers. Yet, chapel preaching also offers frequent examples of times when humor divides rather than unites. Hearers may experience the preacher's humor as poking fun at the Bible and thereby trivializing the authority of both Scripture and the preached word. Other times, pulpit humor offends sensibilities concerning what constitutes appropriate public discourse in the context of worship. When humor misses the mark, it damages the preacher's rapport with the congregation at worship, and it strains the bond necessary for hearers to trust a speaker's words.

*Preaching is not about the preacher's cleverness.* Sometimes sermons inspire

*Humor can engage hearers of sermons and communicate the truth of the gospel in ways that entirely serious discourse cannot. Still, precisely because of humor's effectiveness, it is worth exercising with care. With respect to humor in their sermons, preachers will do well to remember the classic advice to comics: leave them wanting more.*

laughter all around, but as we leave the worship service, hearers are hard pressed to say what—if anything—the preaching event revealed concerning God. Frederick Buechner writes about preaching,

If you are any good at all with words—if you are any good at all as an actor, with an actor's power to move people, to fascinate people, to move them sometimes even to tears—you have to be so careful not to make it just a performance, however powerful. You have to remember that it is not what you are saying that it is important for them to believe in, but only God. You have to remember how Jesus consigned to the depths of the sea those who cause any who believe in him to sin and how one sin you might easily cause them is to believe in yourself instead.<sup>1</sup>

One can make a similar observation with respect to humor and preaching. If you are any good at all with humor, you have to remember not to make the sermon just a stand-up routine, showcasing you. Many hearers will be satisfied, even pleased, with a sermon that brings a smile or a chuckle, and they will offer their preacher positive feedback on such efforts. We all like to laugh more than we like to reflect on the effects of sin in the world or in our own lives. The word's radical work to kill and make alive may seem "heavy" and therefore less appealing than a sermon that is content to offer a good laugh here and there, leading hearers to the lighthearted conclusion that things are rarely as bad as they seem.

*Most of us are not as funny as we think we are.* Reflecting on the capacity of Americans to overestimate our competence at nearly everything, David Brooks writes, "Ninety-four percent of college professors believe they have above-average teaching skills. A survey of high school students found that 70 percent of them have above-average leadership skills and only 2 percent are below average."<sup>2</sup> Dave Barry includes in the list of twenty-five things he has learned by the age of fifty that "we all believe that we are above-average drivers."<sup>3</sup>

It is not hard to imagine that the overwhelming majority of preachers believe they have above-average senses of humor and superior skill in making people laugh. Meanwhile, people who come to church to hear something substantive and true about the presence and work of God in their world are not always there for the laugh. The humorous sermon can leave people struggling to recognize the proclamation of God's word in the midst of the winks, nods, jokes, and subtle ironies that pepper the preacher's words.

## SO, WHY HUMOR?

Given the dangers that attend humor in preaching, one might ask, "Why

<sup>1</sup>Frederick Buechner, *Now and Then* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983) 70.

<sup>2</sup>David Brooks, "The Modesty Manifesto," *The New York Times*, March 10, 2011; at <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/11/opinion/11brooks> (accessed February 7, 2012).

<sup>3</sup>Dave Barry, "25 Things I Have Learned in 50 Years," in *Dave Barry Turns Fifty* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1998) 182.

would anyone risk it?” In fact, at points in the Christian tradition, preachers have been advised to “Just say no” to humor within their sermons.<sup>4</sup> Yet there are sound reasons for Christian preaching to make use of humor. Humor is appropriate to preaching both because biblical texts themselves make use of it and because humor, rightly employed, strengthens the connection between speaker and hearers that is necessary to any communication. Moreover, humor involves kinds of play—play both in the sense of enjoyment and in the sense of elasticity—that help preachers draw attention to God’s redemption of and hope for the world.

*Biblical texts often feature humor.* Sometimes biblical preaching practically requires humor because a text is characterized by incongruity, irony, or even silliness. In John 5, the Pharisees choose to complain rather than rejoice when a lame man is healed. Their response is sad, but it is also funny: of all the things the Pharisees could complain about, they choose to complain that the man who had so recently been consigned to a lifetime of lying on his mat is now *carrying* it, and thereby working on the Sabbath. This is a classic case of missing the forest for the trees, which is always funny, unless you are the one missing the forest. In Num 22, it is funny that a seer’s donkey recognizes the angel of the Lord before the seer himself. Isn’t the definition of a seer one who can see things that the rest of us miss? It is also funny that the donkey, unable to make himself understood in the usual ways donkeys have of making themselves understood, resorts to engaging his master in a conversation about how his (the donkey’s) apparently erratic behavior has been in fact quite reasonable. Preaching biblical texts requires attending to the humor present within the texts themselves.

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*Humor can create a connection between speaker and hearers.* While misguided attempts at humor can damage the relationship between speaker and hearers, when humor works it lays a foundation of goodwill that the preacher can build on throughout the sermon. Humor inevitably creates insiders (who get the joke) and outsiders (who do not). When a preacher attempts humor that hearers experience as funny, preacher and hearers are bonded with one another as insiders to a common enjoyable experience. Humor also creates positive affect among those who, getting the joke, feel as if the speaker has recognized their cleverness and rewarded it. The preacher can draw on this reservoir of goodwill and attention as the sermon continues.

<sup>4</sup>For a survey of theological, ethical, and practical objections to humor in preaching and a response to each, see Joseph M. Webb, *Comedy and Preaching* (St. Louis: Chalice, 1998) 2–17.

*Humor in the sermon participates in the play that characterizes faith.* The shorter Westminster Catechism poses the question, “What is the chief end of [the human being]?” and answers it, “[The human being’s] chief end is to glorify God and enjoy [God] forever.”<sup>5</sup> Faith includes play—that is, enjoyment for its own and for God’s sake. On one level, humor in preaching is about preachers and hearers not taking ourselves so seriously. On another level, pulpit humor at its best is about enjoying God “ahead of time,” and testifying to God’s own capacity for play within the context of God’s steadfast love. The psalmist closes a long, yet necessarily partial, list of the manifold works of the Lord, saying, “There go the ships, and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it” (Ps 104:26). Innumerable creatures in the sea testify to the greatness of the Creator, and one oversized rubber ducky testifies to the Creator’s playfulness. Humor opens a window on the combination of greatness, love, provision, and playfulness that the psalmist attributes to God.

### WHAT DOES HUMOR LOOK LIKE?

So what does humor in preaching look like? The most common theories for why we find some things funny and others not relate humor to our experience of superiority, incongruity, relief, and play.<sup>6</sup> Superiority and incongruity name features commonly found in those stories, jokes, or cartoons that people find funny. Relief and play describe the activity or emotional state(s) of those creating or receiving the humor. The Bible offers examples of each type and so paves the way for each type of humor in preaching.

*Superiority.* The superiority theory of humor maintains that when we laugh, it is because we feel superior to something or someone else. We see humor, for example, in the prophet’s account of what the one who worships idols does with a tree he has planted and chosen: Half of it he uses for fuel to cook his dinner and warm his camp. “The rest of it he makes into a god, his idol, bows down to it and worships it; he prays to it and says, ‘Save me, for you are my god!’” (Isa 44:17). The pious pagan who burns half a log and bows down to the other half strikes an audience favorably disposed to the worship of the Lord as silly; we feel superior, and we laugh.

Humor that depends on hearers feeling superior is probably the type of humor most likely to go wrong in Christian preaching. It requires hearers to imagine an “other” who is not as intelligent, or sophisticated, or faithful as we are, and then to laugh at that one. The problem is clear enough: whether the device for a laugh is a dumb blond joke or a dumb pagan joke, it is hard to argue that ridicule of one’s neighbor has a regular place in a Christian ethic. Often when we are thinking of in-

<sup>5</sup>“The Westminster Catechism (Shorter Catechism),” *Book of Confessions* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 1999) 175.

<sup>6</sup>John Morreall, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor* (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009) 1–26, summarizes the first three as traditional theories of humor and suggests the fourth as a useful alternative to the others. Although each theory generally tries to account for humor overall, I am using them not as overarching theories of humor but as a taxonomy of humor. Each category is helpful to describe some occasions of humor; none of them explains the phenomenon wholly.

cluding such humor in a sermon, preachers remember the very unfunny words of St. Paul about not thinking more highly of ourselves than we ought to think (Rom 12:3), or the reminder in Proverbs that a haughty spirit goes before a fall (16:18), and we wisely decide not to ask our hearers to laugh at anyone's expense, except possibly our own.

Laughing at the expense of the preacher is, in fact, a common use of superiority-related humor in preaching, and inasmuch as it establishes rapport between speaker and hearers, it can be an effective rhetorical device. It is still dangerous: the self-deprecating preacher can be as self-absorbed as the self-aggrandizing preacher. Yet, if it is not overdone, such humor can make sermons more accessible to hearers as preachers demonstrate the capacity to laugh at themselves and ensure that any indictment the text is leveling at the hearers also applies to the preachers.

In a sermon on Heb 12:1–2, Fred Craddock remembers his experience at summer camp and his impression that zeal for the gospel must surely mean a dramatic sacrifice: "I pictured myself against a gray wall and some soldier saying, 'One last chance to deny Christ and live.' And I confessed my faith, and they said, 'Ready, aim, fire.' The body slumps; the flags are at half-mast; widows are weeping in the afternoon. Later a monument is built, and people come with their cameras. 'Johnny, you stand over there where Fred gave his life. Let's get your picture.'"<sup>7</sup>

The preacher pokes fun at a younger version of himself with a story that does two things. The humor connects hearers to the preacher: together they chuckle at the earnest and grandiose thinking of the child at Bible camp. The humor also prepares hearers for Craddock's insight from the text: for many of us, Christian discipleship is a matter of perseverance (cf. Heb 1:1) rather than dramatic sacrifice.

*Incongruity.* The incongruity theory of humor focuses on the way that humor often results from hearers' experience of having expectations overturned or seeing the juxtaposition of two things that would not normally go together. The story of Jonah may be the best biblical example of incongruity piled up for laughs. Jonah hears his commission, believes it, and goes in the opposite direction. Pagan sailors appear more faithful than the prophet as they pray to Jonah's God for mercy. Jonah delivers the briefest message of doom and has the greatest success of any Old Testament prophet. Cattle graze wearing sackcloth and ashes. Incongruities abound, and almost all of them are funny.

Some humor in preaching comes from merely pointing out the incongruities in a biblical text. In Acts 12, for example, the believers are gathered together and praying at the home of Mary, the mother of John Mark. Peter is in prison, and it is likely that they are praying for him and his deliverance from the hand of Herod. Meanwhile, an angel frees Peter from prison and deposits him on the doorstep of Mary's home. When Rhoda, a slave girl, hears his voice, she is so astonished that she runs to tell the others, leaving him outside the gate. Gates that held Peter in

<sup>7</sup>*Great Preachers: Fred Craddock, Series 1*, hosted by Bill Turpie (Worcester, PA: Vision Video, 1997), VHS.

prison are miraculously opened, yet this last one does not. Peter waits in the street while the prayer group argues with Rhoda about whether it is really Peter at the gate. The text contrasts the fervor of those praying with their incomprehension at the prospect that the Spirit has already accomplished more than they could ask or imagine. In the contrast, readers come to recognize that even a faithful church cannot keep up with the Holy Spirit.

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Without humor, a sermon from Acts 12 on the virtue of believing as passionately as one prays can leave earnest hearers with much to accomplish on their own. Hearers take the preacher's words to heart and resolve to trust more fervently or believe more fully—and, by the way, they should probably pray more boldly, too. In such a sermon, preachers are so focused on exhorting, and hearers are so busy resolving, that both of them have failed to notice how groggy and confused the work of the most faithful humans in the story looks when contrasted with the powerful, no-nonsense work of the angel. The sermon that points out the humor in this text will do what the humor does, namely bring to light the news that believers' best efforts are small and a little silly next to something like the Spirit's dramatic jailbreak of the groggy apostle Peter. The text's humor allows this insight to sneak up on hearers in a way that leaves them with something more assuring and empowering than a new item on the "to do" list: "Trust God more." A sermon that highlights this textual humor proclaims God's trustworthiness and so inspires—rather than exhorts—trust in return.

*Relief.* A third explanation of humor holds that laughter is primarily caused by the relief that happens when stored up emotion or tension breaks. In the story of the risen Jesus on the road to Emmaus with two of his followers (Luke 24:13–35), the tension builds as the followers fail to recognize Jesus, and it builds further as Jesus appears to be traveling beyond Emmaus. Readers know that the two on the road face the prospect of never realizing they spent an afternoon with the risen Jesus. Even after encountering him alive, will they continue to live as if Jesus is still dead?

Such a story would narrate one tragedy and effect another: the first would be the characters' tragedy as they remained unaware of the resurrection, locked forever in dejection and grief. The second tragedy would be the one experienced by readers who, though aware of information hidden from the characters, remained forever locked outside the narrative and unable to change its outcome.

The story goes in another direction. The pair to whom the supposed stranger

has been speaking invite him to stay with them, and in the breaking of bread, the two at table with Jesus recognize him. They run back to Jerusalem to tell the others. Relief and humor are mixed for readers of the story as we witness the disciples, who were so recently “slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared” (Luke 24:25), now rushing to share the news of the resurrection. Things turn out so much better than they might have. The story evokes relief at having come through something that could have been tragic but was not. Instead, it is something that one can look back on with both joy and laughter.

*Play.* In the synoptic gospels, Jesus tells various parables about banquets and delayed masters or bridegrooms. For example, in Luke 12:35–38, the delayed master returns to his servants and reverses roles with them, “Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them” (v. 37).

The head of the house in the kitchen? Servants seated as their master waits on them? The role reversal creates incongruity that might be funny but that would also be scandalous, since various elements of the social contract have been broken, except that this turn of events is said to be a blessing. On his return, the delayed master throws a party. He is both host and servant while his servants become his guests. Jesus speaks the parable in the context of a call to be ready, “for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour” (Luke 12:40). The picture of the end time here is at once surprising and comical. Would this householder even know how to cook? What kind of mess would be created in the kitchen? What does it mean that God, or God’s messiah, should be likened to such a one?

While this parable depends on incongruity for its effect, it also illustrates a fourth way of understanding humor: as play. There is something a little silly in the picture, especially when it is put next to other images of the end in the New Testament. Alongside a thief in the night and a conquering hero coming on the clouds, we have something like an apron-clad, flour-smudged, pancake-flipping master of the house. The picture in Luke 12 points hearers to enjoyment of God, and it stretches conventional expectations of the end. In both of these ways, the picture functions as play.

## CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

Having begun with caveats, we conclude with a few constructive observations about how to incorporate humor in preaching.

Preachers don’t have preaching coaches after we finish seminary, but we probably should. Those who are interested in employing humor effectively in preaching can benefit from conversation with one or two trusted hearers of our sermons concerning the effect of our humor. Do people identify with the foibles of the preacher, or do they experience the humor as self-absorbed? Does the playful retelling of a biblical text confuse hearers, or trivialize the text, or does it draw people more deeply into the story of Scripture? Do hearers recognize in pulpit humor

the play that characterizes faith? Or does the humor merely seem to gloss over serious or painful aspects of Christian life? Preachers can and should ask themselves these questions, of course, but having an outside voice contribute to one's understanding of one's preaching helps as well.

Good preaching rejects using humor as a way to avoid the tragic. The preacher who makes everything a joke comes across as heartless or, at the very least, socially inept. It may be true that life and Scripture are funnier than we have been led to believe. Even so, it is certainly true that not everything is funny and almost nothing tragic is funny right away. One is reminded of the definition of comedy attributed to Woody Allen: tragedy plus time. The effective use of humor in preaching, like effective preaching in general, requires a careful, accurate reading of one's context.

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Good preaching uses humor as it would use any appropriate rhetorical device, which means sparingly in any one sermon, and not at all in some sermons. Because humor in American preaching became widely acceptable sometime after World War II, many later baby boomers and Generation-X members grew up listening to preachers who began every sermon with a joke. Like any rhetorical formula, this one grows tiresome with overuse. Rhetoric works through the interplay of the familiar with the surprise. Too much of one or the other leaves an audience disengaged.

Humor can engage hearers of sermons and communicate the truth of the gospel in ways that entirely serious discourse cannot. Precisely because it is such an effective way of connecting with hearers and of proclaiming the incongruous love of God for humanity, it is worth exercising with care. Problems with humor in contemporary preaching more often involve overdoing it than setting too stern a pulpit tone. Don't try too hard. With respect to humor in their sermons, preachers will do well to remember, finally, the classic advice to comics: leave them wanting more. ⊕

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