

Minor Heresies: (1) The Laughter of God

Dr. Donald Richardson of Union Seminary used to say that if he had a bird-dog like certain heresy-hunters in the Church who go around looking for a little -- @ -- well -- he'd shoot him for pointing grasshoppers! Certainly -- believing with a warm heart in the "laughter of God" cannot be pointed to as a major heresy. After all -- even God is given to chuckling -- He is? The thought that God is good-humored -- that the Creator of the universe is a cheerful chap is for most Presbyterians a minor if not a major heresy. The Lord of all life, laughing? The Almighty?, mightily amused?, Jehovah?, waxing jocose? The heavens? filled with humor? Well, really...to old-time Presbyterians of the Puritan strain -- that's a bit-o-blarney -- not to say -- a minor heresy. For we see God solely as the serious one of the universe, or the Sad Redeemer, or the Solemn Judge. So -- no wonder Religion plays us no joyful tune -- rather a sodden dirge.

Indeed -- to look at some of us you would think our Maker was altogether without mirth. We are so somber -- you think as B.E. Wolf said: slightly mangling his facts, that our "ancestors came over on the Cauliflower and landed at Plymouth Church."

Well -- it's true -- along with their great accomplishments and profound faith -- the Calvinists did, of course, practice a harsh brand of holiness. Death was the fine for blasphemy. To deny that Jonah was swallowed by the whale meant 40 lashes with the whip and 40 pounds to the judge. The most popular poem of the age was Wigglesworth's The Day of Doom. And the cost of swearing was 10 shillings per oath. One non-conformist was fined 80 for one long sentence. Little children were regularly referred to as "young vipers," (and I know some parents today who wouldn't demur too much). And as for adults, said the much maligned Edwards: "the God that holds you over the pit of Hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect, over the fire, abhors you and is dreadfully provoked." (J. Edwards) Even our forebear's music was deliberately harsh -- i.e., fearing that the old Sternhold and Hopkins' Psalm books were too worldly smooth -- the Puritans produced "the Bay Psalm Book" -- whose lines (as someone put it) "clonked like an engine with gravel in its bearings," which is the way I sing! But they were pleased with the roughness of it -- and explained in the preface, "God's altar needs not our polishings: Ex. 20."

King George III said -- who did not like us -- "Not one of these Presbyterians is capable of laughter." But this is an exaggeration -- they did laugh at the damned: "when the saints in glory,

therefore, shall see the doleful state of the damned (goes a typical sermon) ... when they shall see the smoke of their torment... how will they rejoice!" (Hope for better things?) But such derision – is not healthy and happy laughter. It must only be derided in turn – which caused Jonathan Swift to write these 4 facetious lines

“We are God’s chosen few,
all others will be damned;
there is no place in heaven for you,
we can’t have heaven crammed!”

But a religion that laughs not at all – except possibly at the unsaved – is – whatever it may think itself to be – not a Biblical religion. It misses the fun of the faith.

(1) For the Bible – in the 1st place does present us with a God of good cheer, incredible as it may seem to old-time Presbyterians. In the Old Testament, the maker of the universe is often merry. When he created the world and all that in it is, he was pleased, happy in his creation, and found it “very good.” (doing a little “soft shoe”!) He also finds “delight” in the prayers of his people for he relishes the company of those he created. And when they keep his covenant and obey him – he is filled with the “joy” of a good parent who discovers his child actually loves him. One of our young fathers – wanting his afternoon paper asked out loud, “Where is my Durham Sun?” Whereupon his little 3 year old boy stuck his head around the corner of the door and said, “Here I am, Daddy.” The father chuckled and hugged the boy – and his heart was warm with laughter. In much the same way – the Biblical God rejoices when his children acknowledge him and stand ready to serve him – and say with Isaiah, “Here am I, Lord, send me.”

And the New Testament? Why Jesus – again and again presents us with a God of good cheer. The 3 parables in Luke 15 – all emphasize the joy of the Father God when what was lost to him is found:

“...there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous persons who need no repentance.

“...there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.

“...it was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.” Lk. 15: 7, 10, 32.

It is indeed everywhere implied in the Bible that God is a cheerful fellow with warm delight at bringing home safe his own. Not only does he laugh with the warm delight of a good father – but also with the decided warming of a great king. Whenever you and I go about posing and posturing – feeling so important, so secure – in our fine houses, with our sensible investments, our memberships in all the right – o so right – clubs and churches – when we think our education, our social position, our money give us the license to do as we dandy well please, then we evoke – terrible thought – the laughter of Almighty God – who sees us as we really are – stripped naked of our pretensions – nothing but fancy-dressed fleas trying to lord it over the earth. No wonder – looking at the likes of us – “he who sits in the heavens laughs.” (Ps. 2:4) For he sees so clearly that our “day of disillusionment is coming.”

For example, when the self-satisfied, self important 20th century secularist rewrites the 23rd Psalm to read something like this –

He leadeth me beside 6-lane highways.

He rejuvenateth my health;

He leadeth me in the paths of psychoanalysis for peace of mind’s sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of the iron curtain,

I will fear no communists; for thou are with me; thy radar screen and thy hydrogen bomb,

They comfort me.

Thou preparest a banquet before me in the presence of the world’s billion hungry people.

Thou anointest my head with home permanents.

My cocktail glass foameth over. (E.K. Ziegler)

God’ reaction? – is not shock as though he were blasphemed – not even anger – but laughter – just peals of laughter filling the heavens – at man’s pretensions – that such a weak and frail creature could be so pompous a poodle.

Or again, last Wednesday night, some of us saw a film entitled, “Time and Eternity” – one section of which compressed two whole days of ordinary time, including a football game one afternoon, into a very few minutes of viewing time (high speed film). From the distant perspective this gave us, we laughed and laughed at the insane speed of automobiles, the mad dashing of people, and especially the ludicrous frenzy of a football game crammed into 30 seconds – and I couldn’t help but think, that from his own infinite time perspective, how God

must laugh at our mad dashing about on ceaseless unimportant errands, at our frenzied inability to be still and possess our souls in quietness and know our God.

Therefore, since this God who has a sense of humor – created us humans in his own image – and breathed his very spirit into us – the conclusion is obvious –

(2) we should be of good cheer also. Our Lord himself had a merry disposition – you can't read the synoptic gospels without realizing – he was God's good Troubadour. The poet Swinburn may have had the sad and somber Christian Church of his day in mind – but not the happy Christ of the New Testament in mind – when he wrote, "O pale Galilean, the world has grown gray from thy breath." God in Christ was anything but gray.

A fellow named Ludovic once wrote, "there is not a joke in the whole of the New Testament." And certainly none of the New Testament writers try to be comedians or entertainers – but Mr. Ludovic altogether missed the rich vein of humor that runs like a golden thread through the entire New Testament.

Though we may miss the fun – Jesus got many a chuckle from his audience of 1st century herdsmen and craftsmen and farmers – when he asked them why they went out to see John the Baptist in the desert, saying, "why then did you go out? To see a man clothed in soft raiment?" (i.e., "what did you expect to see? A dandy in the desert?") (Mt. 11:7) His listeners laughed. These plain folk chuckled again when Jesus told them of a prosperous fellow who lost his job and then whined, "what shall I do... I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg?" (Lk. 16:1-3)

And while the Pharisees took themselves with great and pompous seriousness – and practiced a solemn piety – Jesus constantly poked fun at them – and the people laughed that he dared to expose them so lightly. He called them "blind guides" – when everyone knows the one thing a guide must have is sight. In vivid strokes of pure comedy he pictured the Pharisees conscientious about irrelevant religious duties, but neglecting the weightier matters of the law – justice and mercy and faith – or so full of false solicitude for a tiny little speck of sin in the other person's eye – not realizing somehow they had a whole log of obvious evil in their own. Jesus called them pretty coffins – laughed at their long, pious faces. In the synoptics, Jesus constantly teaches by humor. Mark records 4 laughter-provoking situations. Matthew includes 19 and Luke 21.

You see laughter lowered the defenses of his listeners, increased their perspective, and got the truth across. When you can laugh, particularly at yourself, you can learn. And there's hope for your improvement.

The Pharisees (like old-line Presbyterians) – possibly because they could not believe God laughed – could not laugh at themselves. They did not know that “a merry heart doeth good like a medicine.”

Acts and the Epistles – constantly reflect joy in defeat – gladness in persecution – laughter at destruction and famine – singing in pain.

Years ago, the house of one of our members was destroyed by fire, and when the husband (@) returned and saw the burned-out house, he crossed the yard smiling and gathered his wife and children in his arms laughing – laughing, not because the house and all its furnishings were gone – but because the family was safe, because there was so much good left in life, because no fire could destroy the loves that made his home, his little outpost of heaven – the house, yes, but not his home, no never.

Well, the Christian rejoices – because he doesn't take anything this world has to offer too seriously. The important thing is that he has been found of God – that he lives under the love of God – and that's really all that matters. No cross can take away that happiness.

Poor Pearl S. Buck – doleful, morbid Presbyterians in her childhood caused her to miss the laughter – the joy – of the Christian faith. How wrong she was when she counseled young authors, “Be born anywhere...but do not be born under the shadow of a great creed, not under the burden of original sin, not under the doom of salvation. Go out and be born among gypsies or thieves or happy workaday people who live in the sun and do not think about their souls.”

(Sat. Review of Lit., XI, 1935, 513-14)

How wrong she was – laughter is not only among gypsies and thieves and workaday people. It is also – and a richer, finer laughter it is – among the people of God, for “He will fill your mouth with laughter, and your lips with shouting.” (Job 8:21) And the creed? It casts no shadow, but much light. And as for original sin – I would not wish you to be as ignorant of its reality as the lady who responded to the parson (when he asked her if she believed in it), “oh, yes sir, I do, I do,” she said. “What a fine doctrine it is, if only more folks lived up to it!”

But there is laughter – even in original sin – when in Christ it is forgiven by God – and we are enabled to live with one another no longer in arrogance and greed – but in humility and humanity.

Abraham Lincoln once called the legislators of New Jersey “an almost chosen people.” Sometimes I think we Presbyterians are God’s “almost chosen” people – we almost are, we come so near – but not quite – and sometimes I think we are the “almost chosen” just because we are the “almost frozen” – we take ourselves too seriously – we have forgotten to laugh with God and with God’s people. It’s time we awoke to the Biblical truth that you don’t have to be miserable to be moral.

(Now I don’t mean we should be giddy – for even a gorilla will giggle if you tickle his nose with a feather) – but I do mean that life under a God like Christ should be so good – that our whole life should be pervaded with lasting gladness. The joy about which Jesus so often spoke is a part, a true part of the Christian life-style.

The Apostle Paul was but reflecting the joyous spirit of his Lord when he wrote the Philippians – “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, again and again, Rejoice.”

Let us pray:

O Lord Christ, did you not say? – “Be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world” ?

Then help us – who call ourselves Christians – to feel and act that way...