

*“HOLY LAUGHTER”*©

Sermon Notes for the Rev. Joyce Kelly, Supply Minister of Worship & Pastoral Care  
Bloor Street United Church  
Second Sunday after Epiphany – Sunday, January 24, 2010

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*Based on Readings: Proverbs 8, Philippians 4, John 20 – see end of sermon*

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A while back, Bruce and I were at the Canadian Open at Glen Abbey. Perched with 1000s on the steep slope at the back of the par-3 15th, we watched Jesper Parnevik (bright orange shirt, skinny white pants, peak of his cap straight up) land his tee shot a foot short of the hole, right in front of us. Somebody behind me moaned “Oohhh, he left it short. I’d’ve used my 5-iron and put it right up there.”

I didn’t dare laugh in that crowd, but it did strike me as very funny.

Two minutes later, V. J. popped it about 2 feet past the hole and it spun back to an almost-hole-in-one (there are a lot of ‘almosts’ in golf). The whole crowd (as one) moaned; it was almost awesome!

That struck me funny, too.

There we were – 40,000 people spell-bound by little groups of celebrities on a 5-mile walk, trailed by aproned servants heaving huge bags of long sticks, yardage book Bibles in hand, all to poke pocky little white balls into 18 perfect little holes cut into immaculate greens, nary a wayward blade of grass.

A young boy’s voice rang out, “I saw Sergio. He looked right at me!”

And, “Mike, Mike” floated like incense in the air.

I think God, who loves us, and puts up with so much, must find our solemnity over tiny purposes funny – drivers, said to be ‘forgiving’, sports commentators drawing us into hushed reverence as would-be heroes find their ‘zone’, who tell us: Now they’re thinking ‘this’, now they’re visualizing ‘that’ – all for the perfect, and awesome, shot.

# I

Spirituality is often seen as such serious business that the notion of God laughing or 'playing' seems frivolous. Yet Thomas Aquinas, very serious old Mystic, says that "being in touch with God requires a sense of play" – the same 'spirit of play' described in today's reading from Proverbs. Lady Wisdom (feminine Greek word Sophia) says, "The Lord created me at the beginning, the first of God's acts ... Before the beginning of the earth, I was at God's side ... delighting God day after day, ever at play before God's face, at play everywhere in God's world, sporting with the children of earth." This translation from Latin (Aquinas' favourite) was later reduced. 'Played' became 'rejoiced' (lest we be frivolous). But there is no mistaking the original image of Wisdom playing and cavorting to ripples of God's holy primordial laughter – sheer joy.

Isaiah 55 (12) says, "The trees ... clap their hands."

Psalms 114 (4, 6): "Little hills skip like lambs."

Job 38 (7): "On the day the world was formed ... the morning stars sang together and the children of God shouted for joy."

No wonder! God's world of nature (and us in it) at play with long-necked giraffes, and burrrupppping bullfrogs, tuxedoed penguins strutting into the sea, egrets stalking beaches with backward knees, camels (one hump or 2?), and kookaburras laughing from their safe branch, as one did in Australia right after Bruce hit a bad golf shot. Surely God laughs with dolphins frolicking in the surf for sheer delight, and otters lolling on their backs grinning, and babies (oh, babies), who leave only the sourest face without a smile.

Babies – just the word brings joy; and where joy is, holy laughter is not far behind.

Last Tuesday, French rescuers reached 23-day-old Elizabeth (one week after the earth quaked in Haiti) – cradled in a hollow beneath the rubble. They handed her to her mother, who pressed her to her breast. "It was pure joy!" they said.

The other night, a CNN reporter stood at the front of a disaster scene, describing death, hunger, desperation. Behind him, where he couldn't see, some children were chasing each other through the rubble – and laughing.

Children laugh like birds sing – because they’re made that way. They come, says Wordsworth, trailing clouds of glory from whence they come.

Studies show that pre-school children laugh up to 400 times a day. By the time we’re (so called) grown up, it’s down to about 17 little chuckles.

## II

Laughter - far from removing us from reality – helps us see more clearly.

No one would laugh when an old woman falls on the street. But let it be a preacher after a too solemn sermon, or a high court judge returning from the washroom with toilet paper stuck to his shoe – a different matter.

That’s Holy Laughter, the stuff of clowns and jesters that brings perspective. “The kings of the earth set themselves up, and rulers take counsel together,” says Psalm 2, “but God who sits in the heavens laughs.”

Eleven years ago, Christians from around the world converged on Harare, Zimbabwe, for the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Assembly of the World Council of Churches. We came in all colours – I’m not talking ‘skin’, but robes - white & black & saffron, blue, red, purple, even pink. There were tall hats & square ones, round ones & wimples, glorious-coloured African head-wraps and Tilleys.

And there was standard North America garb – jeans and t-shirts. What a kaleidoscope!

Who did we think we were? As I thought about it, the bigger the hat, the wilder the colour, the funnier it seemed! Was God laughing, too? Wisdom herself – laughing?

One of my favourite people in the world is Peter Gordon White. Unassuming, with quick wit, quiet smile, and understanding heart, he is, down the years, one of the United Church’s most influential and loved leaders. I met him at the first General Council meeting I ever attended, in 1984, when an announcement on the big screen read, “Peter Gordon White, Jesus wants you for a sunbeam.” I wasn’t sure what it meant, but it made us all smile.

Not long ago, Peter took part in a big formal family wedding. On cue, the long processional started up the aisle.

First came Peter's son-in-law Steven, an ordained minister, who is very tall.

Then came Peter, who is very short.

Steven – gowned in white alb and colourful stole – beside Peter, who'd dug out his old Sunday costume – black Geneva gown, white tabs, stole, academic hood – the whole bit.

Slow and stately, they processed up the aisle.

And as they moved past the end of the family pew, a grandson too young to have ever seen Peter dressed like that, whispered loud enough for everyone to hear, "Who is Grandpa pretending to be?"

Peter loves to tell that story. I'm sure God loves it too.

G K Chesterton says, "Angels fly because they take themselves lightly."

### III

Where there are children, there is Holy Laughter. And Love is never far behind. New Yorker writer Adam Gopnik's beautiful little book *Through the Children's Gate*, talks about his family's first five years after moving back to New York from Paris.

Seven-year-old Luke comes home from school every day bubbling over with all the exciting things that have happened – eager to tell all. By the time Luke is twelve, the answer to "What happened today?" is always the same – "Nothing" – as Luke rushes to his room, closes the door, and settles in to text all his friends.

Adam finally figures it out. He texts his son. And Luke texts him right back – with all the details of his day. This is good!

Adam's fingers learn to fly on the little keypad. He learns short forms, like LOL, and ends most messages that way. One day, at the airport, as he was about to leave for a week, he texts Luke a serious message, continuing a weighty conversation they'd been having – ending, as usual, LOL.

Long pause!

Luke texts back, “Dad, do you know what LOL means?” “Lots of Love.” “No, No, Dad; LOL means ‘Laughing Out Loud!’”

Oh no! For months Adam had been texting lots of people, including his grieving sister, always ending LOL.

Laugh Out Loud – Lots of Love! Oh well, he thinks, Love and Laughter go together!

#### IV

And where there is Love and Laughter, there is Healing.

Physical Healing! Norman Cousins, in *Anatomy of an Illness*, tells how laughter helped him recover from disease that had doctors stumped. Told he had little chance of surviving, he chose a positive attitude for his life – love, faith, hope, confidence, the determined will to live. And, he chose to laugh – head-thrown-back full-face laughter – like Willis Wheatley’s *Laughing Christ*.

Proverbs (31) says that God’s faithful “laugh at the time to come.”

For weeks Cousins stayed in a hotel, watching one Marx Brother movie after another, laughing his head off – actually, laughing his illness off!

He said, “Ten minutes of real belly laughs had an anesthetic effect, and gave me at least two hours of pain-free sleep.”

Later, as UCLA medical faculty, his biochemical research on human emotions showed that:

- laughter can boost endorphins, our natural painkillers;
- it may increase activity of Natural Killer Cells that destroy viruses and tumours;
- it does exercise our lungs and increases the oxygen in our blood.

God’s not finished with us yet!

And there’s Laughter’s Spiritual Healing!

Francis of Assisi knew laughter as a child; as a rebellious teenager, even as an adult. But he discovered a deeper kind of laughter when he gave himself over to God – what he called the ‘healing laughter of redemption.’ Such Joy was born in him that he preached the Good News about ‘God’s laughter and love built into Creation’ to sparrows that perched on his palms, to sunbeams, to raindrops as they fell; and to all the world as he danced in the village square.

“Unless you become as a little child” ...

And there’s Laughter’s Emotional Healing!

Even at the most tragic funerals, tears and laughter are never far apart. Blessed are those who can laugh together as they cry together. Holy Healing Laughter was here before the world could do its’ worst – and is here still – soul-deep Laughter that cannot be destroyed. “There’s a time to weep and a time to laugh. God has made everything beautiful in its own time.” (Eccl 3)

## V

On Tuesday, a searcher in Haiti reached into a dark pit of rubble, only to feel a small hand reaching back, and then squeezing. Laughing, she said, “It felt like the hand of God.”

What about those with no hand to reach them? The 200,000 quaked to death?

The thousands unnamed in mass graves?

The 100,000 Haitian-Canadians still waiting to hear? The answer – God only knows.

All I know is that “God has made everything beautiful in its own time.”

How often people say: God was with me. I was rescued. I was healed. It’s true – not only in Haiti, but everywhere, and always, perhaps in your life – because God works that way.

So does that mean that God is not with those who (as we quaintly say) 'don't make it'? Every Sunday, we say that this is not true. We are not alone; God is with us; in life, in death, in life beyond death. Thanks be to God! We all 'make it' – in this room of God's great mansion – or the next. And Holy Laughter chases round all the rubble of pain and tears, past all the quaking of sorrow and fears, cavorting with the tremors in our own hearts this morning, with all the children of earth.

Laughter was at the beginning, will be at the end, and at the new beginning.

"God has made everything beautiful in its own time. Yet still we cannot know the wonders that God does."

What wonder is God doing today as French, Turkish, British, Israeli, Brazilian, Mexican, Caribbean, Cuban, Haitian, American, Canadian (the world's) hearts work as one? And pray – oh, so many prayers – received with Holy Laughter!

What wonder was God doing last Friday night as entertainers channeled the world's generosity (over \$16 million from Canada, over \$50 million US) into Haiti – and still more. And as we make generous donations to eat Soup for Haiti this morning, and put cheques on the offering plate marked for Haiti? Holy Laughter in the heavens!

What wonder is God doing as our government, surprised by Canadian generosity, removes the \$50 million cap on dollar-for-dollar support for Haiti – we're over 67 million already, as world leaders meet in Montreal tomorrow to build a plan to rebuild!

What wonder is God doing as, beside crumbled churches Haitian spirits soar as people of faith pray and praise, sing and dance – and laugh?

O Laughing Light, first-born of Creation, with the children of earth, at play before God's face, delighting God day after day.

As novelist-preacher Fred Buechner says, "Blessed is the one who gets the joke."

Amen

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## SCRIPTURE FOR TODAY:

Among the wisdom sayings in Proverbs, we find this in Ch 8 (30-31) Lady Wisdom is speaking: Listen.

The Lord created me at the beginning,  
the first of God's acts of long ago.

Ages ago I was set up, at the first,  
before the beginning of the earth.

I was by God's side, a master craftsman,  
delighting God day after day,  
ever at play before God's face,  
at play everywhere in God's world,  
sporting with the children of earth.

△△△

John's gospel – in chapter 20 – says that the disciples were heart-broken. All their hopes had died on a cross. But it's not over.

When it was evening on that first day of the week, the disciples had gathered together, all the doors in the house locked. Jesus entered, stood among them, and said, "Peace to you." Then he showed them his hands and side.

The disciples, seeing the Master with their own eyes, were exuberant. Jesus repeated his greeting: "Peace to you. Just as the Father sent me, I send you."

Then Jesus took a deep breath and breathed into them. “Receive the Holy Spirit,” he said ...

Now, these things are written, John said, so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God; through believing you may have life in his name.



Paul urges Jesus’ people at Philippi thus – in chapter 4. “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard you hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure. Whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

The Peace of Christ be with you.                      Amen