

Getting the Joke

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell

 *Isaiah 65:1-5; John 19:1-16*

A guy walks into a bar with his dog. He takes a seat at the bar and the dog jumps up onto the stool next to him. He says to the bartender, “I’d like a scotch on the rocks and my dog will have a beer.” The bartender says, “Hey buddy, we don’t serve dogs here.” The guy says, “You don’t understand. This is a special dog.” “What do you mean?” asks the bartender. “Yeah,” he says, “this is a special dog. This dog talks.” “Your dog doesn’t talk,” says the bartender. “No he does. Watch. Fido, what’s the long tall grass alongside the fairway on a golf course.” Fido says, “Rough!” “OK, Fido, what’s the big thing that sits on top of a house?” Fido says, “Roof!” “OK Fido, who’s the greatest baseball player of all time?” Fido says, “Ruth!” The bartender looks at the guy and says, “That is the lamest thing I have ever seen. This dog doesn’t talk. Out you go and he grabs the guy and the dog and he throws them out onto the street. The guy and the dog roll to the curb and the dog looks over at the guy and says, “You think I should have said DiMaggio?”

Now I must confess to you that there is next to no redeeming value to that story. In fact the only redeeming value to that story is that it made some of you laugh. You laughed. You chuckled. You snickered. And according to a growing amount of medical studies – those seconds in which some of you laughed repositioned the chemicals in the body a little bit to relieve a little bit of stress, set off a certain amount of endorphins, and stimulated some of your life essential organs.

In his book *Anatomy of an Illness* Norman Cousins told the story of when he was diagnosed with a crippling illness and he decided that he was going to treat his illness with laughter – so he arranged to have a bunch of Laurel and Hardy and Candid Camera films shipped to his house and he watched them over and

over again and he laughed and he laughed and he laughed and he got better.

There is something intrinsic within our being – within our reality – that bends toward joy and goodness and health.

Like the three guys who went to the diner and the waitress came up and asked what they wanted and the first guy said, “I want a cup of coffee but make sure it’s hot, I like my coffee hot.” The second guy said, “I want a cup of coffee and put in two sugars. Two sugars, I like two sugars in my coffee.” The third guy said, “I want a cup of coffee but make sure it’s a clean cup. I like a clean cup.” So the waitress left and came back a couple minutes later and said, “OK now who gets the clean cup.”

I detected fewer of you laughing on that one – so I will stop with the jokes. But what I won’t stop with is this wondering about what lies behind the veneer of your life and mine and whether or not we are embracing or accepting life for what it was always meant to be. Is there something intrinsic within our being – within our reality – that bends toward joy and goodness and health? Were we created for something that we have yet to claim?

Because you know at the beginning of the whole story you have this wonderful picture of the creator who appears before there is anything else – In the beginning when God created – and we hear about the light that peels through the darkness. We hear about the formation of the deep blue sea. And we hear about the sun and the moon and the stars. And we hear about the plants and the flowers. And we hear about the animals and the fish and the birds of the air. And we hear about human beings created in the image of God. There is this incredible kaleidoscope of creation emanating from the pallet of God – and it ends up with Adam and Eve in the Garden – this beautiful garden called Eden. And then the Genesis writer tells us that God called it good. After taking a rest God decided when the sun was starting to go down and the trees of the garden were filled with a

“Joy really is the serious business of heaven.”

nice cool breeze – that he was going to take a walk in the garden. And he wants to take a walk in the cool of the garden because that’s where Adam and Eve were of course. And there’s nothing God wants more than to be with his friends. Maybe, maybe God has a story for them. Maybe he’s got a good joke. And because he’s God it’s a really good joke. A side-splitting tears in your eyes kind of joke. Maybe God wants to make them laugh. Hilariously laugh. “Oh wait till Adam and Eve hear this one!” he says to the heavenly host. This will really get ‘em going. Something to give them pleasure, joy. Something to get those endorphins going. Because there’s nothing better for you than to get those endorphins going.

So imagine God’s surprise as he is making his way through the garden in the cool of the evening that instead of his friends running up to him to hear the latest joke – Adam and Eve are huddled behind some shrubs and they are hoping that God won’t find them. Hoping that God will pass them by without them being seen. Imagine God’s surprise when he sees those four beady eyes peering out from the forsythia – and God says, “What are you doing there?” And Adam and Eve say – “We are afraid. We are afraid of you.” Imagine the complete and utter divine shock? We are afraid of you. God gets the big push back. What happened to smelling the roses? What happened to the evening stroll? What happened to those big belly laughs? “We are afraid of you. We are anxious. We are ashamed. We are stressed. We are busy. We are worried. We are lonely.” Imagine the disconnect. But, but, but, God says – what about the kaleidoscope? The pallet of colors? The cool breeze? The juicy oranges? The sand hill cranes? The

making love? The punch lines? What about all these wonderful things I want to give you? This goodness, this health, this joy? This love?

And from there it kind of goes downhill. Things go from bad to worse. No more garden, no more jokes, no more laughing – instead you got Cain and Abel, 40 days of rain, bondage in Egypt, wars and rumors of wars – and along the way God says to his children who had long since plowed under the garden and put up a parking lot – God says to his children through the words of Isaiah, “I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask, to be found by those who did not seek me. I said, “Here I am, here I am,” to a people who did not call on my name. I had this really, really good joke, but nobody wanted to hear it.

But then before all was lost – angels appear and heavenly host sing and a baby is born in Bethlehem – and God has come back to the garden. God take a stroll through the dusty the trails of Palestine – and he walks from town to town and he says, “Come on, come on – let’s play. Everybody gets to play. Come on, I’ve got some good stories for you. Some good punch lines. You’ll laugh and you will love and you won’t worry what people look like or act like – because the whole point is to enjoy life. And you’ll be healed and you will help people and you will feed people and you will comfort people and no one will have to be lonely or anxious or stressed or angry or judgmental.

What’s not to like, right? What’s not to like? Apparently a great deal. Because we just got through reading about the baby in Bethlehem – the good shepherd – the grand comedian – whipped and scorned and pressed upon with a crown of thorns.

Examined and cross-examined by the powers that be. Condemned to death. And they're laughing – but it's not one of those endorphin laughs – it's one of those sinister laughs. Evil laughs. And they say to him, we don't want your kind. We don't want what you got to sell. It's not the way the world works. We want our stress, our condescension, our alienation, our anxiety, our division, our segregation, our violence. It's just the way the world is. And don't try to change us. Don't tell us one of your corny jokes. Don't try to get us to laugh.

Now it would take about a hundred sermons to try to explain how on earth we human beings could get ourselves to such a place where we got so afraid ... so anxious ... so suspicious of this garden walking God, this side splitting punch line God – but suffice it to say that it hasn't gotten much better since that day when Jesus stood before Pilate. We still live in this crazy upside down world where the one who loves us most is the one we hide from. The one who can't wait to embrace us is the one we run from. When someone says "religion" we think – dry, dusty, irrelevant, boring downer. When someone says "church" we think dry, dusty, irrelevant boring downer. When someone says "Jesus" we think dry, dusty, judgmental, boring, killjoy, downer. So when CS Lewis says that Joy is the serious business of heaven – we really find it hard to believe. So stressed we are, so anxious we are, so afraid we are, so lonely we are, so sad we are – that somehow we've backed ourselves into this corner that makes us think that this is just the way the world works.

But nothing could be further from the truth.

Remember when Jesus is having dinner and a woman comes in and she's got this really, really expensive jar of perfume – and it smells so sweet and luscious – and she decides to pour it on Jesus' head and feet and wipe it with her hair. And it is so beautiful and it is so lovely and it is so joyful – and somehow the folks nearby get so stressed and anxious and afraid and they get so huffy and they say that she's got no business being so extravagant. And Jesus says, "What the heck are you talking about? She's the only one

that gets the joke. Life is to be loved. Life is to be enjoyed. Life is this extravagant thing to be seized. And he tells the story about the father who throws the party for the lost son – and the band is going and the fatted calf is being served and the wine is pouring and the folks are dancing the cha cha slide – and there's the older brother out there stewing and he's stressed and anxious and angry – and he just doesn't get what this religion is about – this extravagant feast is all about? And the father says – "Come on in! Come on in! Grab a glass and a chicken leg and did I tell you the joke about the three lawyers?"

Gerard Manley Hopkins in his poem, *As Kingfishers Catch Fire*, includes the line, "Christ plays in ten thousand places." Christ plays in ten thousand places. Christ plays. Can you imagine that? Christ plays. He plays now. He plays in the present and wishes to play with us. Wishes to play in us. Wishes to give us joy. Wishes to show us the kingfishers catching fire with their kaleidoscope of color. Wishes to show us the Sandhill cranes walk stately across the field. Wishes to show us the two 80 year olds holding hands. Wishes to show us the little child gathering a fistful of daisies. Wishes us to show us the best friend visiting his best friend in his hospital room. Wishes to show us the family out for their family picnic. Wishes to show us the 75 year old teaching the 15 year old long arithmetic. Wishes to show us the sandy beach and the pink horizon. Oh so much to show us ... if we would just let him.

It was the great British apologist, GK Chesterton, who said once, "It is possible that God says every morning, "Do it again," to the sun; and every evening, "Do it again," to the moon. ... it may be that God makes every daisy separately, but has never got tired of making them. It may be that He has the eternal appetite of infancy; for we have sinned and grown old, and our Father is younger than we."

Christ plays in ten thousand places. Joy really is the serious business of heaven. The Father strolls in the cool of garden's evening. But what do we see?

It makes me think of a time years ago when I was paying a pastoral visit to a parishioner. I went up to the front porch and rang the doorbell and there was no answer. I rang it again. No answer. So I went back to the backyard and I saw Linda – the one whom I had come to visit -- kneeling and gardening in the back of the yard. And next to Linda was her German Shepherd Duke. I had never seen or met Duke before. But when I stepped into the backyard Duke heard and saw me and Duke came charging. Running right for me. And I thought Oh boy. Charging German Shepherds run pretty fast ... fast enough that I didn't have the chance to make up my mind to run or scream or cry or wet my pants. "Oh Lord, please protect me," is the prayer I imagined I prayed as I saw Duke advance and within about three feet of me stop, jump, wrap his legs across my shoulders and with jaws wide open – smother me with licks. Duke had come to lick me to death. Actually he licked me to life for never have I passed so quickly from such fear to such joy. Like a resurrection.

As anxious and as fearful and as worrisome and as stressful and as aggravating as we might want to make out this good old life – it's we who may have grown old and our father is the one who wants to play. For joy is the serious business of heaven and Christ plays in ten thousand places. The Lord still strolls in the cool of the evening. And every day another punchline.



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