

Sermon: Rev. Diane Tait-Katerberg

- fourth Sunday in the season of Lent :

“Hilarity Sunday.”

story --friend from St. John’s Church ...

*A man and his wife,
now in their 60's,
were celebrating
their 40th wedding anniversary.
On their special day
a good fairy came to them
and said that because
they had been such a devoted couple
she would grant each of them
a very special wish.
The wife wished for a trip around the world with her husband.
Whoosh!
Immediately
she had airline/cruise tickets in her hands.
The man wished for a female companion
30 years younger.
Whoosh!
Immediately he turned ninety!!!*

good story - worth a laugh or two

-reminds me how often we think ourselves so wise – only to suffer disastrous results from our no-so-smart-after-all plans!

I like this one too:

*Three people showed up
at the gates of heaven one day.
To their surprise
there was a guard at the gate.
They immediately asked what was going on - they thought Saint Peter
would be there to meet them.*

*"Heaven has a new policy",
replied the guard.
"Before entering heaven e
everyone must pass a spelling test."*

*"OK", said the first person.
"If that is what God wants,
that is what I will give."*

*"Spell the word GOD", t
he guard asked him.
"G -O- D" replied the man.*

The gate opened and in he went.

*The second person stepped forward,
a smile on her face.
The guard glanced at her
bright sunny face,
and asked if she was ready.*

*"Most certainly",
replied the woman,
"I only hope that you will not be
too hard on me."*

"No problem," replied the guard. Spell GOD "

*"G O D", replied the woman
and the gate opened and in she went.*

*The third person watched all this
with increasing irritation. "*
*This is ridiculous",
he said to the guard.*
*"Who ever heard of something this stupid! Whoever dreamed it up is an idiot.
I worked hard all my life
- and I have to face this
when coming to my rest?!*
*As soon as I get in,
I'm going to register a complaint!"*
*"I'm sorry",
said the guard,
"but the rules are the rules.
Are you ready to spell your word?"*

*"Of course I am"
the man snapped.
"I've got nothing else to do with my time. Ask away."*

*"Very well", said the guard,
"spell Czechoslovakia"*

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Laughter. ..joy ... a gift of God.

Laughter and hilarity
-lighten the spirit
-help to heal us of the things that trouble us.

-“the best medicine”.

Theologian Marva Dawn
in her book about 1 Corinthians 12,
points out that
hilarity is more than good jokes.
It is a positive and joyous spirit
and we are invited to be a hilarious community,
filled with joy and thanksgiving,
ready and willing to serve God
by serving others in Christ’s Name.

So why is it that
-some people never seem to discover that?
-some only seem to find things to grumble about?

Me too ... a fair amount of grumbling ...noticed ... grumbling mode—> hard to stop.

Stereotypically, Presbyterians ... champion grumblers. image ... “dour” and serious.

George Hunter’s cartoon: ...
dour Presbyterian minister ...“Let us rejoice!”
- too often a reflection of the truth?

- we take ourselves far too seriously?
— and God not seriously enough?

.....

- little or no humour —
Hebrews travelling through the desert
leadership of Moses.
-further from Egypt —>the better the old life looked.
start --a few people mumbling under their breaths --> spread. —> everyone

- life wasn’t easy.
-on the move.
-Water was very limited
-food monotonous: manna & quails.

Life in Egypt looked awfully good by comparison.
slaves -but *food!*... *water!*

Murmur, murmur, grumble, grumble.

-they confronted Moses.

“It’s all your fault Moses! Why did you do it?
Why didn’t you leave us as we were in Egypt?”

Forgot

- their groaning *in* Egypt
- their cry to God for help
- God’s saving action.

- last of six murmuring stories in the book of Numbers.

-typical pattern:

- a crisis (generally about food or water),
- a cry to God, and
- intervention from God.

The complaint is made to Moses,
but it is really against God.

Previously God responded → provided for the needs of the people:

- a spring of water,
- a flock of quails.
- manna

This time, snakes – fiery serpents!
People are bitten and they die!

The people of God quickly recognized the gravity of their sin.

...recognized ...confessed

-not just about human leadership,
it reflects a complete lack of trust
in God and in *God’s* wisdom.

And where would their rebellion against God
eventually lead them?

Without God’s help, → certain death.

Negativity can be a deadly disease.

It kills hope and joy.

It kills our faith and trust in God.

-good news.

-story does not end on a note of negativity and death

God is gracious.

People: confessed, repented.

- asked God to take away the snakes.

-human solution.

But it was not God’s answer.

God provided the people
with a means of salvation.
-snakes are still there,
 but now there is hope.
bitten by a snake — look —>bronze serpent ..pole
 -God —through Moses — provided,
 -live.

-problem?
 -bronze serpent -idol?

No, the bronze serpent is not an idol.
It is only to look at, not to worship.
It is a gift of God
which serves to remind the people of God
of God's life-giving grace.
 Look beyond it in trust to see God.

- potential —> idol
 -if think that the life-restoring power comes from it and not from God.

The bronze serpent was carried with the people for many generations. Once they settled in the Promised Land, it was placed in the Temple.

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Jesus refers to this same serpent in today's Gospel reading.
Lectionary brings us into the story part way through.
-go back
 -Nicodemus and his questions that lead up to today's lesson.

Pharisees -“bad rap” in the Gospels
 - not being a Pharisee = sinful
 - had allowed themselves to get off track,
 -to miss their real purpose and function in the faith.

Pharisees:
 -elite group – “religious fraternity”
 -never more than 6000
 -membership vows before witnesses
 -give their lives to serving and pleasing God by keeping God's Law and studying the Word.
 -like most fraternities
 -expected solidarity among members
 -identity of members found in being a Pharisee

Nicodemus was a Pharisee
— ..came to see Jesus.

- came in the night – not want to be seen by other Pharisees
- came humbly and respectfully
- came with questions
- came, not because of insight, but because he was “in the dark” about Jesus and wanted to be enlightened.

He saw something in Jesus

- didn't fit his field of experience
- outside of his frame of reference.
- could see that Jesus had some kind of relationship with God – how else could he do what he did?
- BUT didn't understand it.

-first question seeks confirmation.

- statement, “We know that you are a teacher who has come from God....?”
- really a question, a “You are, aren't you?” kind of question.

Nicodemus - wants clear affirmation– yes? or no?

Jesus' response confuses him even more. *“No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”*

Nicodemus-

- think literally ... impossible.

-Jesus didn't mean going backward to a previous state - physical infancy.

- We might say,

“unless you have a new beginning, – make a radical new start – you won't even know how to see the truth.”

- a new beginning that comes from above - from God., not from our parents.

“How?!”

Jesus' response proclaimed

the means by which Nicodemus – and we -

can be born anew: believing in the Son whom God sent in love for the whole world.

- insight ... comes from looking beyond the literal, -beyond the things we see and hear and touch, -- beyond the signs.

- talking about faith: taking the step of trusting in the Son of God - completely and wholeheartedly.

- bronze serpent in the desert was a sign to which people could look. The serpent in itself didn't save them – but their trust in God's promise did.

Likewise, trust in the Son of God is our salvation.

- here because we have faith.

some a little, some more.

- seeking to deepen our faith,

to place our trust ever more deeply in God, through Jesus.

This takes us beyond simply following the rules and commandments which, in themselves, cannot save us.

Our faith/enlightenment

- not just: obeying the law and studying the Word
- letting go of our old life, old ways of thinking and being
- putting our whole trust in our Saviour.

-true enlightenment.

takes us out of our darkness and closer to the light of God.

God's purpose in sending Jesus – to show us how – in faith – we can be saved.

If, like Nicodemus, we haven't yet taken the step of rebirth, it's not too late. Our God is a God of grace and mercy, never letting go, never giving up on us.

-another story.

St. Peter – trying to keep track of all the souls in heaven - instituted a record book – soon evident that there were far more souls in heaven than were listed in the book. Fretted. Went for a walk to try and think it out – and discovered the answer: Jesus was helping people in over the back fence!

We have countless reasons to be a hilarious community, filled with joy and thanksgiving because, in Christ, we've seen the Light!

*How deep are the wealth and the wisdom
and the knowledge of God!*

*How inscrutable God's judgements,
how unsearchable God's ways!*

*From God and through God and for God
all things exist – to God be glory for ever!*