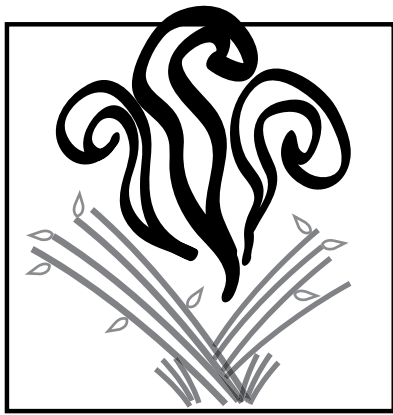


HOW CAN I KEEP FROM LAUGHING?

Rolf Jacobson



Christians have not always known what to make of laughter or what to do with joy. Since the earliest days of the church, there has been a widespread impression that the children of God are a joyless and somber bunch. The sixth-century *Rule of Benedict* speaks against laughter several times.

Do not speak words that are idle or suited to laughter. (ch. 4)

But buffoonery or words which are useless and provoke laughter—these we condemn on all occasions with a perpetual ban, and the disciple is not permitted to open his mouth for such conversation. (ch. 6)

The tenth degree of humility is not to be quick to laughter, as it is written, a fool exalts his voice in laughter. (ch. 7)

The church carried the quandary about what to do with laughter as it crossed the Atlantic. A friend of mine tells that when she was a child, her congregation frowned—literally—on the practice of anyone who smiled during church. Worship was a time to be silent and bored. This prohibition against joy extended into the larger Sabbath observance; keeping the Sabbath was interpreted in some parts of North America as a prohibition against games or having fun.

In North American Lutheranism, the dilemma of how to understand joy and laughter was institutionalized in the split between the “Happy Danes” and the “Sad Danes.” The schism of 1894 originated in a doctrinal dispute, but the ecclesiastical divorce was embodied in their adoption of two different stances on the place of such joyous expressions as dancing in the Christian life. Eugene Fevold writes that the group that became the Sad Danes was characterized by “[s]trict standards of conduct, such as abstinence from common amusements.”¹

But a rejection of joy and laughter reflects an anemic interpretation of the Scriptures. The Christian life does embrace joy and laughter, though in its own peculiar way.

On the one hand, the scriptural injunction to be in the world and not of it does not mean total withdrawal from

earthly pleasures. Indeed, Jesus came that we might “have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). So laughter, pleasure, and joy have a place in the Christian life. Yet on the other hand, this does not mean that the Christian is freed from bondage to sin in order to live a life of hedonism. Rather, we are freed to embrace life and God’s creation in ways that breathe in life deeply and include joy and laughter—not in destructive, self-indulgent ways.

Laughter in the Order of Creation

The Scriptures teach that laughter is part of the order of God’s creation. To embrace creation is to laugh; to laugh is to embrace creation.

In Genesis 2:9, we are told, “Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food.” God did not create nature solely for the utilitarian purpose of supporting and sustaining human life. Rather, God’s intention for creation includes *beauty*. God’s intention in creation includes aesthetic joy in the wonders of nature.

In Psalm 104, the singer goes so far as to confess that God delights in creation, indeed laughs at it. The traditional translation of vv. 24–26 reads:

O Lord! How manifold are your works!
 In wisdom you have made them all;
 the earth is full of your creatures.
 There is the sea, vast and wide,
 with its creatures beyond number,
 living things, small and great.
 There go the ships, and Leviathan
 that you formed to sport in it.

The last phrase might just as well be translated, “and Leviathan, whom you formed in order to laugh about him.” The Hebrew root *sāchaq*, translated variously as “sport” or “laugh,” means to laugh, amuse, revel, or joke. The psalm thus confesses that God made Leviathan—perhaps a whale or a crocodile—for the fun of it, to laugh at its frolics or its funny form.

Elie Wiesel famously said that God made human beings

because God loves stories. Taking a clue from both Wiesel and Psalm 104, there might be room to conclude that one of the reasons God made you is because God likes to laugh at red hair

God made Leviathan for the fun of it.

or funny big ears (if you look like me). Thus, to laugh is both to embrace God's aesthetic intention for creation and to follow God's example of finding joy and pleasure in creation.

The laughter of the suffering and sinful

The Scriptures teach people of faith to hear the pain and power of sin in the laughter of those who suffer.

Creation is fallen, and so not all laughter is joyful and life-embracing. Laughter is often the way in which humanity expresses the pain and fear of living in a broken creation. For the person who follows Jesus, this means that we learn to listen not just to the laughter of others, but to what is going on behind the laughter. Laughter can be the supreme sound of sin's power over us.

The story of Sarah is a case in point. God promised that Sarah and Abraham would be the ancestors of a great nation. But Sarah remained childless into old age. And then one day, when Sarah was already old, God appeared with an announcement.

[The messengers of the Lord] said to Abraham, "Where is your wife Sarah?" And he said, "There, in the tent." Then one said, "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I have

grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?" The LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too wonderful for the LORD? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son." But Sarah denied, saying, "I did not laugh"; for she was afraid. He said, "Oh yes, you did laugh [*sāchaq*]." (Genesis 18:1–15)

Now pause for a moment and try to listen back across the centuries and hear the pain in Sarah's laugh. It is the pain of a woman who lacked the social status that the ancient world granted to matriarchs of large family systems, but still believed God's promise that she would have both a son and corresponding status someday. She believed that promise for as long as she could afford to believe. And then, like any of us would have done, she bailed. She sent her husband in to have sex with her slave girl—never mind, by the way, whether Hagar thought this was a good idea—and Hagar had a child. But the birth of Ishmael didn't make Sarah feel any better; in fact, it made things worse. When God's messengers showed up to renew the promise that she would have children, Sarah was

Laughter can be the supreme sound of sin's power over us.

alone in her tent, with nothing to keep her company in the heat of the day except her brokenness and her pain. And when she heard the promise—"I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son"—she laughed.

Those who follow Christ must hear in laughter more than an embrace of creation. They must also develop an ear to hear in some laughter the deepest pains of life in a fallen world. They must hear in some laughter the cyni-

cal expression of disbelief in God's promises.

Laughter as a weapon

The Scriptures recognize that sometimes laughter is used as a weapon. The Scriptures call sinners to repent of such violent laughter.

A person can be the victim of someone else's painful laughter because hurt people hurt people. That is the first rule of dealing with damaged folks—hurt people hurt people. When we human beings feel diminished by the power of sin, our broken natures tend to lash out and seek in turn to diminish others, to cut them down to our own size. Proverbs 26:18–19 talks about this kind of laughter: "Like a crazy person who shoots deadly firebrands and arrows, so is one who betrays a neighbor and says, 'I am only joking!'" Everyone has experienced this sort of laughter—a barbed comment from a friend who then says, "Just kidding."

The story of the suffering Job also bears witness to this sort of cruel laughter. Job, the righteous object of a bet between God and God's adversary, complains bitterly that rather than comforting him in his suffering, some people actually increase his suffering by making fun of him: "But now they make sport [*sāchaq*] of me, those who are younger than I, whose fathers I would have disdained to set with the dogs of my flock" (30:1).

Most poignantly of all, the New Testament passion narratives relate how Jesus, the sinless one who entered into the world to know human sin for our sake, was forced to suffer this type of laughter.

Then the soldiers led him into the courtyard of the palace (that is, the governor's headquarters); and they called together the whole cohort. And they clothed him in a purple cloak; and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on him. And they began saluting him, "Hail,

King of the Jews!” They struck his head with a reed, spat upon him, and knelt down in homage to him. After mocking him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him. (Mark 15:16–20)

The soldiers mocked Jesus. Beset with their own pain, they found one at whom they could laugh, and in so doing alleviated the dull and deadly boredom and numbness of their own broken lives.

As we listen back across the centuries to the laughter of those who mocked Jesus, we recognize that laughter can be among the most violent, hurtful weapons in the arsenal of human speech. What child growing up in our culture has not been scarred by being laughed at in a moment of pain? What teenager, forced to live in that great American experiment known as junior high, has not been brought close to or beyond tears by the mocking laughter of a group of peers? What adult does not remember what it is like to feel the serrated edge of laughter’s cutting blade?

The world is filled with this dark and violent laughter. And of such laughter the Lord calls his followers to repent. Christ bids us acknowledge first and foremost that yes, I may have at various times been the victim of this type of laughter, but I’ve also been the one laughing, the one hurting others with my humor—and usually hurting someone who is close to me. Because the Lord enters into relationship with me and calls me to love my neighbor as I love myself, I am to repent of this sort of laughter as I follow Jesus. I am to learn not to make jokes at the expense of others. Not to laugh with those who fling cruel barbs at others. Not to diminish others with humor.

Laughter transformed

The Scriptures promise, finally, that God turns painful laughter into echoes of Easter joy.

But this advice is not the only way that God deals with the pain-filled and cynical laughter of the world. The call to repent of *sins* is not God’s final way of dealing with the fallen condition of

God gave Sarah a child and she named her child Laughter.

sin. In fact, it is not even the primary way. God’s primary way of dealing with the empty laughter like Sarah’s is to turn it upside down, inside out, and resurrect it as the joyous laughter of one who has experienced Easter. God’s dealings with Sarah didn’t end on that scornful note. The story of Sarah and God continued.

The LORD dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as he had promised. Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him. Abraham gave the name Isaac [*sachaq*] to his son whom Sarah bore him. (Genesis 21:1–3)

The messenger of God had said, “Is anything too wonderful for the LORD?” The messenger probably intended this as a rhetorical question and didn’t anticipate a response from Sarah. But Sarah’s laugh was in fact a *de facto* response that basically said, “Yes, there are some things that are too wonderful for the LORD—like God giving an old woman a child, or keeping a promise to someone who victimizes her slave girl.”

But God does not deal with us according to our sins. God keeps promises. And thus God showed Sarah that after all nothing is too wonderful for the LORD. God gave her a child and she named her child Laughter. God took Sarah’s cynical laugh and turned it into joy. That’s what God does; that’s who God is: the one who resurrects the dead, forgives sins, keeps promises, and turns weeping into laughter. In the words of Psalm 30:5, “God’s

anger is but for a moment, His favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning.”

The Christian life is about learning this new kind of laughter. God turns our pained laughter into joyful laughter, and we have to learn how to laugh in this new way on a daily basis. We have to learn this new kind of laughter not only for ourselves, but for all the Sarahs whose lives have been transformed and for all the Zaccheuses to whom God has said, “I’m coming to your house today.”

A student once asked me why Martin Luther is so fun to read, since most other theologians are so boring. As readers of *Lutheran Forum* will know firsthand, Luther does theology with a combination of bawdy language and Easter faith. The results are often gut-wrenchingly funny. My mother loves to tell that she always knows when my father is reading Luther, because he’s laughing. Luther was funny precisely because he knew that God raises the dead, forgives sin, and turns scornful laughter into joyful laughter. Luther had been beset by a dour, silent fear of God’s judgment. But when the gospel message broke through to him, he learned God’s brand of Easter laughter. And having learned the new laughter, Luther knew that you cannot be a good theologian without a sense

The world is filled with this dark and violent laughter.

of humor. To be a person of faith means to learn to laugh about God’s Easter victory over sin, death, and the power of the devil.

In the final analysis, the laughter of a Christian is an echo of heavenly joy. It embraces creation and repents of the sin and violence we do to each other, even with our laughter. It hears the pain in another’s laughter and at the same time believes that the risen Christ is at work in such laughter,

raising it from the dead, transforming it into the crying of an infant child named Laughter. Sarah's initial laugh was a hollow echo of a freshly dug grave. But God transformed her laughter in the ringing echo of an empty tomb.

The laughter of the Christian is an echo of angelic joy, because "there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine persons who need no repentance" (Luke 15:7). As the prodigal's father said to

his righteously responsible older son who could not join in the laughter at the prodigal's homecoming, "We had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost, and has been found" (Luke 15:32). *LF*

ROLF JACOBSON is Associate Professor of Old Testament at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota. His articles on biblical theology and Old Testament interpretation have appeared in *The-*

ology Today, Interpretation, and Word and World, among other places. An earlier version of this essay was delivered on September 25, 2007 at Augsburg College as part of the Christensen Symposium lectures.

Notes

1. *The Lutherans in North America*, ed. E. Clifford Nelson, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 168. See pp. 267–71 for discussion of the schism.

THE BREAD OF LIFE

Thomas R. Decker

The fathers
had it wrong
when they said
fasting was an exercise
in discipline. From what
I can tell after one day of going
without cheese and milk, and then
blowing it completely with a turkey
pastrami sandwich at lunch, is that
fasting marks not discipline but
failure, proof positive that we
need the Lord's help in all
things, especially in
satisfying the
hunger of
the world.

THOMAS R. DECKER was born and raised in the west, served two parishes in South Dakota, and since retirement as an army chaplain in 2002 has served an urban parish in Long Beach, California. He has been a pastor in the LCMS since 1969.