



# FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

## “HOLY LAUGHTER”

**Scripture Lessons: Micah 6:1-8; I Corinthians 1:18-31; Matthew 5:1-12**

*This sermon was preached by Dr. Joseph S. Harvard III on Sunday, January 29, 2017  
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

*Gracious God, once again we come asking to you let your Word speak to us, that it be a lamp unto our feet, and a light to our path that we may find our way as disciples of Christ our Lord, in His name we pray, amen.*

Most people don't associate laughter with being a Christian. Someone has often asked does God have a sense of humor? I'm here to tell you that God does have a sense of humor. But the caricature of being a Christian is what someone once wrote about Calvinist: "A Calvinist is someone who is worried that there is someone somewhere having a good time." We are seen as being real serious, intellectual.

There is story about Calvin and Luther standing at the foot of the cross. Luther was jumping up and down and said, "Isn't it great! Isn't it wonderful that Christ died for us! Isn't that great news?" And Calvin turned to him, "Be quiet, Luther, I'm thinking." We're serious, and no more serious than when we gather on Sunday morning. But, I'm inviting you to understand the laughter of God, this holy laughter.

I want to suggest this morning that the Good News of the Gospel provides us with humor. The Apostle Paul writes to the church at Corinth about the foolishness of the Gospel. God chose what was foolishness in the eyes of the world to confound the wise. God has a sense of humor.

A number of years ago I read a very important book for me by a theologian and sociologist named Peter Berger. The title of the book was A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Recovery of the Supernatural. Peter Berger talks about certain "signals of the transcendent." Certain things in our modern society when God has been pushed to the corners, it enables us to be aware of the fact that there's more to life than meets the eye. There's more to life than simply the mundane and the ordinary.

One of those signals for Berger is humor. He said most of the narratives we tell about ourselves and about our lives have us trapped. You're born, you live, you die and that's it. He said when you realize that you are not trapped, the consciousness of that gives you a sense of humor. It's not just the sense of humor that laughs at jokes or funny stories, but enables us to look at the humor we make as human beings.

One of my favorite plays is one by Herb Gardner called "A Thousand Clowns." He tells the story of a man who wants to help a young man grown up and develop into a mature human being. When it becomes time for the young man to leave and go out on his own, the man who has been mentoring him says, "You know, I want him to go. I want him to live an independent life. But before he goes, I want to make sure that he knows how to laugh. He knows how to see the humor people make simply by being alive. He said, "I want that kid to know the subtle, sneaky, important reason he was born a human being and not a chair." The important reason that you were born a human being and not a chair. That's baptism talk. We're moving toward a signal of the transcendent. A sense of humor. Let's see if we can "get it" this morning together.

There are studies which suggest that we feel better when we laugh. I enjoy a good joke as good as anyone else. I am suggesting what Berger is talking about. I am suggesting something deeper. When you look at the

world – when you look at the way we describe reality – when you look at conventional wisdom about how things work and then listen to the Gospel narrative – of a young, son of a carpenter from a little town called Nazareth, who came into the world and preached and taught, was crucified, and rose again. And he calls us to live lives in service and obedience, and in praise of God who turns our sense of reality upside down.

You know, every once in a while you meet someone who gets it. When I was serving as pastor in Durham, North Carolina, it's a downtown church, we had an urban ministry program where people in need, people in crisis could come to the church. There was a minister, a woman named Mary Banner, an ordained Presbyterian minister, who was head of that ministry. She spent her days listening to people who were struggling, trying to help them find the resources they needed to get their lives back together to deal with addiction. Whenever Mary came into the First Presbyterian Church, we knew she was there because she had this incredibly, wonderful laugh. It was a laugh you could hear all over the church. She prayed with them. She not only talked to the people, she prayed with them, served communion to them. Sometimes I wonder how does she laugh? She sees the world through the eyes of these folks who were struggling. She didn't laugh at their circumstances. She took them very seriously. What kept her going, I realized, and what enabled her to laugh was that she knew another narrative. Not just the ones they told her about their lives, she also knew another narrative, that despite their difficult circumstances, they were loved by God. As James told the children this morning, God loves them and cares for them, and nothing could separate them from God's love.

The Beatitudes do the same thing. The Beatitudes turn the world's values upside down. Beatitudes say what is true for those in God's kingdom is a flat reversal of what is considered to be true in the culture. The ones who are truly blessed are the poor in spirit, the meek, the peacemakers. We live in a world which pronounces the benediction over the self-sufficient, the assertive, the power brokers. To talk about the poor in spirit and the meek and the peacemakers as those who are blessed, who are full of joy. The people the world sees as pitiful, mournful, persecuted are the people that Jesus says are truly joyful.

If you want a glimpse of this discrepancy, watch the ads on Super Bowl Sunday. Who are the joyful people in the ads – the people who wear the right clothes, the people who have the "right stuff." Not the mournful, the merciful! The Beatitudes make it clear that the community of Christ are joyful people – even when we are persecuted and when we mourn, even when we die. Even when we are struggling to make peace in a world determined on making war. The source of our joy is not that we live comfortable lives in a happy world or that things are getting better. The source of our joy, the source of that deep joy, is that we know the God in whom we can trust. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." A God's whose coming reign has already broken out among us and will someday be fully realized in our midst. How do we know this? Because we've met this God in Jesus Christ who came and dwelt among us full of grace and truth.

I like to watch bumper stickers. I'm going to write a book one day on bumper sticker theology. I got behind a truck the other day. On the bumper sticker it said, "My boss is a Jewish carpenter's son." I looked at the guy driving the truck. He looked a little like a carpenter's son himself. I thought, "Hey buddy, who are you kidding? Do you really try to follow that Jew who lived 2,000 years ago, who came from a small village whose dad earned his living by building things? He was a peasant – and was finally tried for sedition by the Roman government and hung on a cross to die a humiliating death and his followers said he came back from the dead – and that he is still with us – right now. In fact, we are bold to proclaim that he meets us at the table when we come. Is he really your boss, buddy? Well good luck!" I thought these things as I passed this truck – and then I laughed again – because I too am trying to follow that Jewish carpenter's son.

In a few minutes we will stand to repeat the Apostles' Creed. It is not something that we laugh about – we take it seriously. But it does provide us with a narrative that turns the world upside down. It says we believe that our lives in this world are not controlled by any power brokers, any managers, anybody but God the maker of heaven and earth. Who created the whole world – who came to us in that Jewish carpenter's son – who was crucified, dead and buried – who descended into hell for us – who was raised from the dead. He is the one who will come – not some powerful world leader - not some judicial official – not some law enforcement person - but he is the one who will come to judge the living and the dead.

We will go on to say that we believe in one holy Catholic church, as discussed last week, that is united. We believe in the forgiveness, that difficult reality that our neighbors down the street taught us a lot about when nine of their church members were shot at a Bible study. We believe we can be forgiven and we can forgive. Yes, we believe in the resurrection of the body and life everlasting.

Last week, a week ago last Friday, a member of this church, a longtime member, Bud Johnson, died. He had come to this church a long time and he loved the church. Even late in his life when it was difficult, he would come back. As we were leaving the church, we put his casket in a hearse out on Meeting Street. Maggie and I were in our cars in front of the hearse, and we kept waiting, and kept waiting. Police cars came, and there was a lot of traffic there. We were wondering what in the world, why doesn't this process get underway? Let's get out to Magnolia so we can finish this process. Finally one of the guys from the funeral home came and tapped on my window, and I put it down. He said, "Do you have any jumper cables?" The battery in the hearse was dead. Bud's children got a big laugh out of that and said, "Dad is really enjoying this." But you know what else we did when we had the casket at the back of the church? We placed a pall on it, a white pall with a cross on it. That symbolized Bud's baptism gown. As he was buried with Christ in Christ's crucifixion, we were proclaiming that he would be raised in Christ through his resurrection.

Do you get it? It's a baptismal joke. It is holy laughter! That is what defines you; that is what makes you who you are – not what people say about you, not what you wear, not what you have, not your degrees. Your baptism is what defines you.

Do you get it? The foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom. When you get it, it's a cause for holy laughter. Thanks be to God. Amen.