

REJOICING IN JUSTICE

A sermon by Scotty McLennan, Dean for Religious Life
Memorial Church, Stanford University
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"Rejoice and be glad," Jesus says in his Sermon on the Mount.

Imagine a vast crowd arrayed before him as he preaches. Put yourself in that crowd, say a hundred yards away -- the distance from one end of a football field to the other. There aren't any loudspeakers. There's no amplification in those days. People around you are jostling each other and making noise. "Shh...Could you be quiet, please?" you say. Someone else agrees, "Do you mind? I can't hear a word he's saying." Your friend thinks he hears Jesus saying something important. "What was that?" Somebody nearby answers, "I think it was 'Blessed are the cheesemakers.'" Cheesemakers? "What's so special about the cheesemakers?" a woman asks. Your friend answers, earnestly and authoritatively, "Well, obviously, this is not meant to be taken literally. It refers to any manufacturers of dairy products."

Jesus goes on, and another person in the crowd says, "You hear that? Blessed are the Greek." Your friend asks, "The Greek?" The man answers, "Mmm. Well, apparently he's going to inherit the earth." "Did anyone catch his name?" Finally, after a lot more

straining to hear, and a lot more "Blessed"s, somebody sums it all up: "Well, blessed is just about everyone with a vested interest in the status quo, as far as I can tell."¹ So much for justice. So much for Jesus as prophet, challenging the status quo of his day.

This dialogue will be familiar to those of you who've seen the 1979 Monty Python movie, The Life of Brian. It's very funny.

A different perspective on the Sermon on the Mount. And we need a different perspective from time to time. We need humor.

"Rejoice and be glad," Jesus says.

As the Dean for Religious Life, I've been preaching to you about serious topics for a long time now. One of them, actually titled "Blessed are the Peacemakers" and delivered last September, compared three traditional Christian positions on war. The Sunday after September 11 my sermon title was "Healing for Lives Touched by Violence." I followed later in the fall with "Nothing to Fear But Fear Itself," and then "Thanksgiving Conversations in a Time of War." A couple of weeks ago it was "Conscientious Nonviolence." There were some more upbeat sermons around Halloween and Christmas, but generally there's been a lot of doom and gloom.

So this week I thought I'd give you a respite and lighten up,²

even as the Secretary of Defense warns us that the United States is likely to suffer another terrorist attack soon, probably nuclear, that could be much more devastating than what we saw on September 11.³ For religion is as much about joy and rejoicing as it is about grief and suffering. It's about affirming life, and living it more abundantly.⁴ Holidays are "holy days" etymologically and historically. On the seventh day of creation, according to Genesis,⁵ God rested, and the Ten Commandments ask us to rest every seven days too. Singing and dancing and feasting all have roots in religion, as does much of drama and the fine arts. To eat, drink and be merry, says Ecclesiastes, is a gift of God.⁶ There's a Proverb in the Bible which explains that "A merry heart is a good medicine; but a downcast spirit dries up the bones."⁷

A divinity school professor of mine, Harvey Cox, wrote a book on festivity and fantasy thirty years ago, entitled The Feast of Fools. In it he laments how much we modern people have lost our capability for celebration. We're working too hard and seem to have too little time. In our scientific age we are obsessed with facts and dominated by our ever-evolving technologies.

Cox lists three reasons why he thinks it is critical that we regain our capacity for festivity and fantasy if we want to

survive and flourish: 1) By nature we are creatures who not only work and think, but sing, dance, tell stories, pray, and create holy days to celebrate. No other animals relive legends of their ancestors and blow out candles on birthday cakes. As we lose this ability, we dehumanize ourselves. We treat ourselves and everything around us as objects, becoming automatons ourselves and poisoning our natural environment. 2) Human survival is also tied to the capacity to change. Festivity breaks routines; think of Mardi Gras this week in New Orleans, along with the Super Bowl. Festivity opens us up to our rich wealth of experience from the past, while fantasy opens the door to the future that simple calculation ignores. Cox explains that "when a civilization becomes alienated from its past and cynical about its future, as Rome once did, its spiritual energy flags. It stumbles and [falls]."⁸ (3) Finally, without the ability to celebrate, we lose the sense of ultimate meaning and purpose in life. Celebration allows us to grasp our lives within a larger historical and cosmic setting, rather than being insignificant creatures without either origin or destiny.

Many of the biblical psalms are drenched in words of praise like this: "O sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things...Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth;

break forth into joyous song and sing praises. Sing praises to the Lord with the lyre...With trumpets and the sound of the horn...Let the floods clap their hands; let the hills sing together for joy."⁹

Cox distinguishes having fun in a religious sense from having fun in a mindless sense by reminding us that religious festivity is neither superficial nor frivolous. It recognizes tragedy. Perhaps this is why I've found that those who seem most oppressed can also appear to be having a lot of fun in their religious lives. I've watched impoverished campesinos in base Christian communities in Central and South America, after backbreaking work in the fields for negligible wages, get together around a few instruments and sing hymns with enormous spirit and thanksgiving.

I remember the North American civil rights movement in the 1960's as drenched in the joy and emotion of African American gospel music. The Passover seder has always been a celebration of liberation from slavery in Egypt, and a reminder now that we must continue the struggle for liberation now. Easter for Christians comes after 40 days of repentance and self-reflection in Lent. The triumphant resurrection of Jesus comes after the ghastly suffering of his crucifixion and the loss of his followers' hope for three days following his death.

On an everyday level, making fun of clergy is an age-old way to rejoice and be glad. Jesus called many in his day hypocrites, because they didn't practice what they preached. As an engrossing speaker himself who certainly knew how to turn a phrase, when he could be heard, Jesus seemed to be a master of hyperbole and absurdity when skewering clergy. "Blind guides!" he said. You strain off a midge, yet gulp down a camel!"¹⁰ In another humorous commentary on religious officials, he exclaimed: "How can you say to your brother, 'Brother, let me take out the speck that is in your eye,' when you yourself do not see the log that is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take out the speck that is in your brother's eye."¹¹

Hypocrisy remains an active generator of clergy jokes today. Take this one, reminding us that any minister may have his or her price:

A woman called on the Presbyterian minister and asked him if he would preach a funeral for her dog who had died.

"I can't do that, ma'am," he said. "Why don't you try the Baptist preacher?"

"All right," she said, "but can you give me some

advice. How much should I pay him -- four hundred dollars or five hundred dollars?"

"Hold on," he said, "I didn't know your dog was a Presbyterian."¹²

By good luck I had a college roommate who became a cartoonist -- Garry Trudeau, the creator of Doonesbury. He's had a lot of fun caricaturing clergy over the years, often portraying them more as naive than wise. Some of the words one might use to describe his Rev. Scot Sloan character are simplistic, earnest, jargonizing, and presumptuous. Yet, this character is also idealistic, passionate, hopeful, and kind. Several times in my career I have delivered sermons entitled "The Gospel According to Doonesbury", because in having fun with religion, Garry also conveys a profound spiritual message wittingly or unwittingly. I believe it's precisely that summarized by the prophet Micah in the eighth verse of chapter six, as you heard earlier: "What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

To do justice: In many ways Doonesbury has become the conscience of the nation. Day in and day out in the morning newspaper it makes morality a public and objective matter, not just a private and subjective one. It manages to hold us all to

account, often through the classic mechanism of revealing hypocrisy. To love kindness: It brings very diverse people together, both in its panels and in its readership -- conservative and liberal, Christian and Muslim, black and white. To walk humbly with your God: It goes everyone's ox, revealing all of our vulnerabilities and foibles in such a way that we can smile and empathize with each other, remembering our common humanity. The Gospel of Doonesbury is threefold: Ethics and the struggle for a better world really matter (Do justice). We are all in this together (Love kindness). Let none of us take ourselves too seriously along the way (Walk humbly with your God).

One of the cartoons I have on my wall at home dates back to January of 1971, less than three months after the strip was launched. The first two frames read: "Good morning, Brother! Welcome to "The Exit," the coffeehouse where people can really relate! Reverend Scot Sloan's the name. Perhaps you read about me in "Look." I'm the fighting young priest who can talk to the young." Addressing a helmeted college football player and fraternity man, B.D., Rev. Scot goes on in the third frame: "My specialty, of course, is setting up dialogues. Often I am successful in getting people to look at themselves honestly and meaningfully." In the final frame B.D. speaks for the first time,

saying, "Good for you, Sweetheart. One black coffee to go."¹³

In the prior day's strip, Rev. Scot had been discussing plans for his coffeehouse with Michael Doonesbury: "It's just a hunch, see, but I can't help feeling you youths need someplace to come when you feel like relaxing. This coffeehouse can be the perfect milieu. Dynamic, exciting, now. And the good Lord willing, perhaps it will even turn a profit." Doonesbury asks what the profits will be used for. Rev. Scot's idealism and naivete are linked as he responds, "To wipe out poverty, hunger, hate, war, frustration and inadequate housing." All Doonesbury can say at that point is "Oh."¹⁴

In terms of Micah's second point -- loving kindness and our all being in this together, collections of Doonesbury comics have been introduced by commentators across the cultural and political spectrum, including Garry Wills, William F. Buckley, Jr., Gloria Steinem, and Studs Terkel.¹⁵ What medium other than Doonesbury could have put a stars-and-stripes-forever American soldier into a fast friendship with a Vietcong terrorist during the Vietnam War?

In one panel, when the Vietcong explains how he longs for a bowl of his mother's rice and laments how she's worried sick about him, the American soldier responds, "Amazing...I didn't know Commies had mothers."¹⁶ Who other than Garry Trudeau could have a juror

explaining his feelings after a trial this way? "At first it seemed cut and dried. After all, these guys were tobacco executives! Pariahs! Case closed! But then I thought, hold on! They're not tobacco executives, they're human beings! They have families and friends! They have feelings and dreams just like other human beings! But then I thought, hold on! They're not human beings -- they're tobacco executives!" The panel ends with his wife saying, "Heavens! What a pickle!"¹⁷

Finally, Doonesbury preaches humility. In early 1980 Rev. Scot is heading off to Iran and Michael Doonesbury asks him, "So what exactly are you planning to do in Tehran, Scot?" The minister responds: "Well, my main mission is to visit the hostages, of course, to offer them comfort and let them know they haven't been forgotten." In the next frame Rev. Scot explains, "Also, if the opportunity arises, I was thinking of overpowering one of the guards and holding off the others until I could radio for another rescue attempt." In the final frame, Rev. Scot reconsiders: "But I dunno. People might see that as just a big ego trip." Doonesbury ends the panel by saying "Yeah. You have to guard against that."

Religious life, as a life committed to justice, should never be a deadly serious affair. A sense of humor is one of the most

important ingredients of a vital spiritual life. Enthusiasm is another -- maintaining an attitude of eagerness and delight in the face of the struggles of life. Enthusiasm can also bring appreciation of the small everyday joys along the way that renew us and fulfill us. A professorial colleague is fond of reminding me that the etymological root of enthusiasm from the Greek is en theos, "God within." So, in the words of Jesus at that hard-to-hear Sermon on the Mount, "Rejoice and be glad." AMEN.

NOTES

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1. Quotations from The Life of Brian are taken from the script as reproduced at www.mwscomp.com/movies/brian/brian-02.htm
 2. Much of what follows comes from the chapter entitled "Rejoicing" in Scotty McLennan, Finding Your Religion: When the Faith You Grew Up With Has Lost Its Meaning (HarperSanFrancisco, 1999), pp. 184-204.
 3. Donald Rumsfeld, as reported in an article entitled "FBI: Remain on High Alert" in the San Jose Mercury News, February 1, 2002, p. 22A.
 4. John 10:10.
 5. Genesis 2:2.
 6. Ecclesiastes 3:13.
 7. Proverbs 17:22.
 8. Harvey Cox, The Feast of Fools: A Theological Essay On Festivity and Fantasy (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969), p. 13.
 9. Psalm 98, verses 1, 4-6, 8.
 10. Matthew 23:24.
 11. Luke 6:42. See also Matthew 7:4-5.
 12. Guy Wesley, "Forget to Ask," in Loyal Jones (ed.), The Preacher Joke Book (Little Rock, Arizona: August House, 1989), p. 33.
 13. G. B. Trudeau (Universal Press Syndicate, 1971).
 14. Ibid.
 15. Respectively in The Doonesbury Chronicles (New York: Holt,

Rinehart and Winston, 1975); Doonesbury's Greatest Hits (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1978); Doonesbury Dossier: The Reagan Years (New York: Henry Holt, 1984); Doonesbury Deluxe (New York: Henry Holt, 1987).

16. G. B. Trudeau, Flashbacks: Twenty-Five Years of Doonesbury (Kansas City: Andrews and McMeel, 1995), p. 25.

17. G. B. Trudeau, Doonesbury Nation (Kansas City: Andrews and McMeel, 1995), p. 27.