

“What’s So Funny About Church?”

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
September 11, 2022

A blessing I’ve appreciated as long as I can remember is the gift of a sense of humor. Not that I can recite a slew of jokes at the drop of a hat. But often I’m able to see something curious or amusing in the juxtaposition of two unlikely elements.

For instance, in a town we used to live in there was a small medical office building shared by two very different practices: a gastroenterology clinic and an optometrist. The building’s main road sign had a primary panel featuring the gastro clinic’s name, and below that was one of those message boards with the moveable letters which, at this time, advertised an offer by the optometrist. The primary sign displayed the rather indelicate name of the gastro practice, “Community Rectal Clinic,” and the moveable letters below spelled out, “Free Eye Exam.” I remember thinking, “That’s a rather awkward path for getting your eyesight checked.”

Across the years, a wall in my office became the collection point for cartoons about various aspects of religion in general and being a minister in particular. As I took them down a few weeks ago, it occurred to me that several of the drawings had scriptural truths or messages about this time of pastoral transition that might speak to you today. So let me describe a few.

For the first let me introduce to you a character drawn by Doug Marlette in his comic strip “Kudzu” about “a good ol’ country preacher” named Rev. Will. B. Dunn. In the first strip, as one of his parishioners greets her pastor at the door after the service she says to him, “*Preacher, have you ever thought of publishing a collection of your sermons?*” Blushing, Rev. Dunn answers, “*Why, no, Miz Dubose... no, I haven’t!*” As she walks away she says, “*Good.*”

I think of sermons, and of worship services as a whole, as being like sandcastles. They’re there to offer beauty, inspiration, perhaps an insight. Sermons and services are to be experienced and appreciated... for a while. But then they’re erased by the waves of time. We may remember a part of the worship experience, we might recall a particular image or comment, but for the most part our week-by-week worship experience is fleeting. What remains is an impression. We hope and pray that, by our habit of worshipping weekly, we are being shaped more and more into the image of Christ, as we hear in 2 Corinthians 5:17 that “Anyone who is joined to Christ is a new being; the old is gone, the new has come.”

Another comic strip features the Rev. Will B. Dunn in the midst of something we’re all familiar with: a stewardship campaign. Referencing a verse in 2 Corinthians¹ the preacher says to one of his parishioners, “*Remember, Brother Tadsworth – the Lord loves a cheerful giver!*”

¹ 2 Corinthians 9:7

"Oh, all right, all right!" he responds. "I don't like it, but here's a check for your dadgummed Building Fund!... Now get off my back!"

As the preacher walks away, check in hand, he thinks to himself, *"Of course, a grumpy giver is nothing to sneeze at!"* We should be happy about being stewards of all that God has made. Stewardship is at the heart of the Christian life because as the Letter of James declares, "every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights."² And John the Baptist said, "No one can receive anything unless it is given from heaven."³

The New Testament letter to the Colossians contains this little nugget that summarizes how our commitment to following the example of Jesus should be seen in our daily lives: "...as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience."⁴ In other words, a Christ-like life should fill you, overtake you. Christlike behavior should not be something you put on only when it's useful or expected. That's captured in a little cartoon that focuses on a pastor, but could apply to any of us. The pastor walks into his house and gruffly says to his wife, *"Am I glad to be home! I'm sick to death of having to go around being pleasant to everybody!"* But no, the Bible says we "clothe" ourselves with Christ.

With a caption reading "How ministers know who dozed off," I have a cartoon depicting a man greeting the pastor after the service. The guy says to him, *"Great sermon! Especially the part where the giant toast tells me to stop flying around the room because I'm late for my chemistry final exam...."* (Sounds like one of my dreams.) It's an old joke about people falling asleep in church.

A brief side-trip: an organization called the Interfaith Hospitality Network used to provide homeless families with temporary housing in churches a week at a time. (Nowadays the successor organization has its own facility providing temporary housing.) But "back in the day" Faith Presbyterian Church in Lakewood was a host site for homeless families every few months. They were able to do that largely because our church and Lakewood Presbyterian Church partnered with them to help staff the program. Members of our churches would volunteer to be with our "guests" for the afterschool shift, or to cook and serve the dinner shift. Then there was an overnight shift where a couple of us would actually spend the night sleeping in the church, just in case any of our guest families had an emergency or something.

I would always take an overnight shift, sleeping in the church basement, or the church library or one time in the sanctuary. I know Pastor Lou Will from Faith Church would do the night shift, as would Rev. Jim Butler of Lakewood Presbyterian. Since they always wanted a man *and a woman* on the overnight shift, an octogenarian woman who was a member of Faith Presbyterian often volunteered for the overnight shift. With a twinkle in her eye she used to tell people that she'd slept with all the Presbyterian pastors in the area.

² James 1:17a NRSV

³ John 3:27 CEB

⁴ Colossians 3:12

Anyway, back to the cartoon of the guy who dozed off in church.

Did you know there's a story in the Bible about someone falling asleep in church? Look up Acts Chapter 20. One Sunday the apostle Paul had a lot to say. He preached until midnight – *midnight!* A young man at the service named Eutychus was sitting on the windowsill. Because of the length of the message and the lateness of the hour and the smoke from the oil lamps Eutychus dozed off and fell out the window! (He was okay – maybe that's how he got his name Eutychus, which means "fortunate" in Greek.)

Perhaps to avoid the fate of Eutychus, some people focus their attention by doodling during church, and sometimes they hand me their drawings after the service. Several ended up on my cartoon wall: like pictures of me, or a child's drawing of a thankful person, or an ethereal drawing of a pensive angel, or a hand-drawn cartoon of a Los Angeles tourist expecting to find the Hollywood sign in the Holy Land – I presume it was inspired by a sermon about Mt. Sinai.

The first Sunday that I'm not here, the Rev. Sharon Core will be leading worship. Like me, Sharon has been a pastor of churches. Now she's the head of the presbytery, working with all our presbytery's congregations and their pastors. From her experience working with other churches entering times of transition I'm sure she'll have some words of comfort and hope and encouragement. I'm also sure you won't give her the kind of welcome depicted in a cartoon that might remind you of your schoolgirl or schoolboy days. A worshiper in a crowded church whispers to the person next to him in the pew, *"The minister's a sub, so we're all going to sing the wrong hymn.... Pass it on...."*

I'm guessing that one of Sharon's topics will be what's captured in a cartoon of a parishioner greeting his minister after a service. He says to his pastor, *"Great message on the church's need to change with the times. For a minute there I thought you were talking about our church."* Change is hard. Change can be scary. It's easier to remember how things *were* than to imagine how things *can be*.

In the book of Exodus, the Israelites who have fled Egypt to journey through the wilderness began to have second thoughts because life wasn't the same, and frankly some things were harder. They complained, "We wish that the Lord had killed us in Egypt. There we could at least sit down and eat meat and as much other food as we wanted. But you have brought us out into this desert to starve us all to death."⁵ A little later, "They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water there to drink. They complained to Moses... 'Why did you bring us out of Egypt? To kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?'"⁶

Remember: their long and challenging journey resulted in their arrival at a place they couldn't have imagined when they had first set out, a promised land flowing with milk and honey. Along the way, they were changed. They became a people, a nation; they found out who they were. That's the opportunity that awaits this congregation as you move beyond my retirement from this pastorate next month.

⁵ Exodus 16:3 GNT

⁶ Exodus 17:1-3 excerpts GNT

One final cartoon. A minister and spouse in a remote cabin are surprised to be greeted by a park ranger who's flown in by helicopter. He says, "Sorry to interrupt your retirement, folks. But your congregation has called twenty-eight times to say they can't find the communion cups." Separation is going to have its challenges – for my wife Mary and me as well as for you.

A Presbyterian policy developed in order to promote healthy pastoral transitions will have me staying away from this church for at least a year. As much as many of us have worked to "dot the i's and cross the t's" to make for a smooth transition, inevitably there will be bumps on the road.

But you'll handle it.

You've done it before. I remember twenty years ago when I was away for sabbatical: you visited the sick, welcomed newcomers, led worship, handled the church's business and staffing changes and *how many* funerals over the space of three months! You've covered my vacations. You'll handle this. You'll handle it with grace... and I hope, with a touch of humor. You'll embody the words of Psalm 126:2

Our mouths were filled with laughter,
our tongues with songs of joy.
Then it was said among the [peoples],
"The Lord has done great things for them."⁷

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⁷ Psalm 126:2 NIV