

Acts 20:7-12 ⁷ On the first day of the week, when we met to break bread, Paul was holding a discussion with them; since he intended to leave the next day, he continued speaking until midnight. ⁸ There were many lamps in the room upstairs where we were meeting. ⁹ A young man named Eutychus, who was sitting in the window, began to sink off into a deep sleep while Paul talked still longer. Overcome by sleep, he fell to the ground three floors below and was picked up dead. ¹⁰ But Paul went down and bending over him took him in his arms and said, "Do not be alarmed, for his life is in him." ¹¹ Then Paul went upstairs, and after he had broken bread and eaten, he continued to converse with them until dawn; then he left. ¹² Meanwhile they had taken the boy away alive and were not a little comforted.

Acts 20:7-12

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Holy Humor Sunday in four meditations

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Meditation #1: The Ministry of the Word

I've never done a holy humor Sunday, so if this doesn't work, I won't do it again, but I like the theology of laughter in the wake of death and resurrection. I spent a long time pondering what to preach on today, and then Brad suggested this lesson from the 20th chapter of Acts.

Admittedly, it is probably one of my favorites, though it never shows up in the lectionary. Paul, the greatest evangelist that ever lived, literally bores someone to death. The lamps are burning in the room. It's warm – maybe a little too warm – and heaven only knows how long Paul has been preaching, but it's midnight, and he's still going. No matter how boring I may be, I've never bored anyone to the point where they fall out a window to their death. Paul, being an apostle of Jesus Christ, goes and picks the boy up, restores the life in him, and continues to preach the rest of the night. Dan Sedwick will tell you a little later about another way to describe a long sermon. For now, let me assure you that I will never preach until midnight. The lesson picks up on the theme of resurrection – one will continue to celebrate for the next several weeks. It also picks up on the realities of ministry with people. It's complex, messy, and often unpredictable.

My father spent years – decades – collecting cartoons. As a pastoral counselor, he believed humor was profoundly necessary for the healing of the mind and the heart and our relationships with each other. In the past several months, I've been attempting to wade through the banker's box filled with cartoons that he collected. This morning, I'd like to share some of them. I can't credit where they come from, so my apologies to the artists who aren't getting credit. Since we started this morning with sermons, I'll start with cartoons on the ministry of the Word, otherwise known as the sermon.

Sometimes, when a preacher shares stories, they hit a little too close to home for some in the congregation. (#9) Here's a wife assuring her husband, "I'm sure he didn't mean YOU, dear! Heavens, he'd have to know you as well as I do!" (#10) But this wife isn't so nice. She says to her husband, "he certainly has *your* number!" (#11) Meanwhile, here's a husband assuring his wife, "he is NOT talking about me!" (#12) Even the kids pick up on it. This little guy asks, "Are you SURE he's not preaching about dad?" (#13) But lest you wonder, here's the pastor himself, "The sinners referred to in my sermon are fictional. Any similarity to members of this congregation is strictly coincidental!"

Many times, preachers receive encouragement, but it's not always helpful. (#14) For example, this preacher explains, "Your enthusiasm during my sermons is flattering, Andy, but I must ask that you stop pumping your fist and yelling, "Woop! Woop!" (#15) And I'm not sure what to make of this sweet lady, who tells her preacher, "Your sermon was simply wonderful... I never felt so sinful in all my life!" In case you were wonder, I want you to know your sin to defeat it, not to wallow in it. Sometimes we hit the mark. (#16) These gents in their boxers declare, "That was the best sermon on giving I've ever heard!" And sometimes we miss the mark. (#17) Paul would empathize with this poor pastor, lamenting, "It doesn't bother me for members of my congregation to pull out their watches, but it irks me when they put them to their ears to see if they're still running." And everyone is a critic. (#18). This preacher's wife notes, "You've had sermons on war, peace, poverty, housing, civil rights, free speech, and law and order! How about doing a nostalgic one on sin, dear?" And then there's everything else. (#19). This preacher laments, "I probably shouldn't be going on vacation. My assistant is fine on sermons, but I don't think he can manage all the announcements." (#20). This preacher shares the agon. He begins his sermon, "We interrupt the announcements about the United Methodist Women, the church bazaar, and the United Methodist Youth Fellowship to bring you a sermon from our sponsor."

And I'm going to interrupt this meditation with some jokes from Madeline.

Meditation #2: The Ministry of the Church

When trying to make a deep point about truth, Shakespeare would often employ an unlikely device: the fool. The fool's job was to be funny while telling us the moral of the story, so to speak. Cartoons can fill the same purpose. As we continue to ponder God's call on our lives, consider these truths on the ministry we share. For one, ministry requires us to get along. (#24) This young man reports home, "Choir practice ended early tonight, dad. The pianist and the choir leader got into an argument during the singing of Love Divine!" It also should challenge us, (#25) as it does for this narcissist, who tells his therapist, "I had to stop watching the news – it was making my own problems seem insignificant." But when we get it right, it's beautiful. (#26) This little guy tells his mom, "Me and Jackson are exactly the same age. Only he's different. He's left-handed!" He doesn't see skin color. And this pastor reminds his people (#27) "Love even thy bigoted neighbor!" Which is a modern rendition of "love your enemy".

And I love this one from Pearls Before Swine (#28) Catch fairy here (thump). "Hi magic fairy Mary." Says pig. "Hiya Pig, what do you need?" Pig says, "I need you to fix the whole world, the virus, the racism, the planet, the hungry." Okay, just one problem," says the fairy, "I don't exist. But you do." And when little pig falls whump back to earth, he goes to help at the food bank.

After all, Service is vital to the ministry of the church, even when it's not what we expect. (#29) For example, in this cartoon, one usher says to the other, "Remind me never to ask the youth group to help fold the church bulletins again!" I think paper airplanes make great bulletins. But not everyone wants to serve, (#30) as evidenced by these trustees lamenting, "Two people signed up to scoop gunk out of the gutters and 35 signed up as prayer support." And this guy mowing the lawn complains (#31) "Frankly, Reverend, this isn't exactly what I had in mind when I asked if there was something I could do for the church...". This usher is devoted – he chases down a church members who complains, (#32) "Ferguson, did it ever occur to you that I might have a good reason for leaving before the final hymn was finished?"

But while we're serving, it's important to remember that caring for others in Christ's name is what we do. This group has forgot that. (#33) While a person is drowning, the leader tells the committee, "I think we just have time for one more quick question." (#34) And as this little guy gets ready, he laments, "The only thing I got against Sunday morning is I can't be me!" Sometimes, folks lose sight of what matters. This guy tells his wife, (#35) "We have to get to church early or all the seats in the rear will be taken!" (#36) And this guy is a real piece of work taking his picture against the night sky saying, "Make sure you can see how insignificant I am." (#37) But all it takes is a little faith to shake us back into place, as this little guy explains, "What I like best about church is when the organ makes the whole place shake!"

Let's shake with laughter a little more while Kathy Jimenez tells us a story about when her brother was a youngster...

Meditation #3: Pastoral Ministry

Some folks are set apart for special ministry among us – the ministry of pastoral leadership. But it's no walk in the park. Sometimes, it's very intimidating, like when we're called to visit those in our parish. (#42) This little guy informs his mother, "Mommy, God's here!" And this woman wonders aloud to her husband (#43) "The minister is coming to call on the people next door. Do you suppose that's good or bad?" (#44) Sometimes, we don't represent God very well. "Thou hast eyes to see, and sees not!" (#45) So is it any wonder that our parishioners say things like this at a protest, " why it's our minister, Adele! I never figured him for a do gooder!"

Part of pastoral ministry is holy conferencing with others, seen here, (#46) "tennis racket, jogging shoes, golf clubs, and dueling pistols... All set for the annual conference!"

Part of pastoral ministry is dealing with challenges. As this pastor points out (#47) "Having completed the formation of the earth, on the 7th day the Lord rested. Then, on the 8th day, the Lord said, "let there be problems, and there were problems!" Committees can be a big problem, particularly when they don't appreciate the pastor's ministry. (#48) This SPRC notes, "He's a highly creative, forward-thinking, innovative pastor ... What can we do about that?" (#49) And these ushers tell us, "For weeks, he's threatened to do something drastic to get 'em closer to the pulpit..." Sometimes we try to think of ways to help people understand what Jesus is telling us. (#50) This pastor carries a sign, "Put up with thy neighbor". I'm not sure that's quite what Jesus had in mind when he instructed us to love our neighbor. And sometimes we council people. (#51) This youth asks a very hard question, "What I don't understand, Reverend, is how do you tell what's temptation and what's opportunity?" I wish I had an answer!

(#52) When a pastor enters ministry, so does the whole family. This pastor's wife is either crying or laughing as a neighbor looks on, commenting, "All I said was it must be nice being married to a minister and not having any family problems!" We're human, too! (#53) as evidence by this little guy, who warns dad, "Watch it dad she's not forgiving trespasses today."

And now Dan Sedwick is going to tell us some more jokes....

Meditation #4: The Ministry of Prayer

I'll wrap this up as we prepare to head to prayer time with some cartoons that reveal some of our truths and misconceptions about the ministry of prayer.

(#60) Simply defined, this little girl understands prayer well enough when she asks, "Can we talk? God loves to listen to us, but sometimes I think he wishes we'd listen back. (#61). I appreciate this guy, who says, "And if you can't answer my prayers, I'd still love some feedback. Thanks!" Many people worry that God doesn't really hear our prayers. (#62). This guy sure does! He says, "I've got voicemail, email, a pager, fax machine, and a cell phone. So how come it takes God so long to answer my prayers?" But have you ever thought about what it might be like if God actually did answer every prayer? (#63) Here's God commanding his angels, "Move the heavens! Align the stars! Jen is running late for the dentist!" Which isn't to say that God doesn't care about you getting to the dentist, but being on time is up to you....

(#64) Sometimes, people mistakenly believe prayer is only for Sunday. Here's the custodian saying to the pastor, "There's a man in the church.... Do we let people pray on Wednesday?"

And sometimes people think God is like a referee. (#65). This little guy prays, "About this afternoon, God... If you'll take a look at the instant replay, you'll see it wasn't my fault." I didn't know God had instant replay technology. But kids often expose our deepest prayer needs. (#66). Is there a child alive who hasn't, at some point, said this: "You all pray for me now!" when mom or dad was angry? And I appreciate a child's honest prayer: "Well, Lord, I hope things went better for you up there today than they did for me down HERE!"

Peg Wilken is going to tell a few more jokes before we go to God in prayer as we wrap up our backwards service this morning.