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“News from Pittsburgh: Laughing With God”

It's been a quiet week here in Pittsburgh, my adopted hometown. Final preparations are underway for the arrival of the 220th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). As if this town didn't already have enough Presbyterians, another 2,000 are being shipped in from around the country: Calvinists living out their faith, decently and in order, passionate about social issues without ever being rude or speaking out of turn. We're sort of an ecclesiastical blend of John the Baptist and Emily Post.

Pastor Robert Carlson was planning to attend the General Assembly. He and his family had recently moved to Pittsburgh from Lake Wobegon, and he had just passed the 6-month mark at his new church. Pastor Rob served the little congregation of 17th United Presbyterian Church. Given that Allegheny County has 145 Presbyterian churches in it, all the good names were already taken. In truth, Rob had fallen in love with the little church whose motto was “We're 17th. We have to try harder!” And they were quite fond of him.

Rob lived in a quiet neighborhood not too far from the church, surrounded by nice folk who were pleased to see a young family move in, even if one was a minister. Rob was never quite sure if the neighbors were potential parishioners for 17th U.P. So just in case, he worked hard at maintaining a tidy, Presbyterian-type home, whatever that meant. The biggest problem, though, was the paperboy, Vernon, who was pushing 80 and had arthritis in his paper-throwing arm, so Rob's copy of the Post-Gazette was lucky if it made it onto the grass strip between the sidewalk and the gutter. Rob liked to read the paper first thing in the morning. However Rob had never liked to wear pajamas or bathrobes. He often slept in an old T-shirt from a long ago Bruce Springsteen concert and some baggy cotton gym shorts. And if it was hot, he omitted the T-shirt. So whenever Vernon tossed the paper into the gutter, Rob would carefully look through the screen door to see if the coast was clear before making his semi-clad dash out to get the Post-Gazette.

But no matter how carefully he looked or tried to time his paper chase, invariably Marty McDonough would come around the corner just at that moment walking his fat golden retriever, Samson. To make matters worse, Marty always wanted to tell Rob the latest church joke he'd heard. “Hey, Rob, I got a joke for you. The new pastor was out visiting his parishioners one Saturday afternoon. All went well until he came to one house, where he could tell someone was at home, but no one came to door. He knocked several times, and then took out a note card and wrote Revelation 3:20 on the back and stuck it in the door: *Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to him.* The next day as the pastor was counting the offering he found his card tucked in the collection plate. Below his message was the notation Genesis 3:10: *I heard thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked.*”



There were two problems with Marty's church jokes. Invariably Rob had already heard them before, and they always took a while for Marty to tell them, which meant Rob had to stand and listen uncomfortably while some other neighbor passed by him amused at his fashion choices, and Samson's cold nose veered ever closer to his cotton boxer shorts. After the first time this happened, Rob made sure to look extra carefully for Marty and Samson before dashing out the door. But as soon as his bare feet hit the sidewalk, sure enough he'd hear, "Hey Rob, what's the difference between Baptists and Presbyterians? Baptists won't wave to each other in the liquor store." Same thing happened the next morning: "Hello Rob. Hey, how many Presbyterians does it take to change a light bulb? Five: One to screw in the new bulb and four to talk about how much they'll miss the old one." Rob tried getting up a half-hour earlier, but to no avail. As he bent over to get the paper, he heard "Mornin' Rob. Hey, why are Presbyterians such bad singers? Because they're always reading ahead in the hymnal to see if they agree with the words."

This whole experience unsettled the young pastor, so he decided to bring it up at the next Minister's Gathering. Once a month the ministers in the East End would come together to talk about faith and scripture, but mostly to talk about their churches. That seemed only fair. Every church has a weekly session for congregation members to get together and complain about the minister. It's called choir practice. Rob's ministerium met in the back room of Ritter's Diner on Baum Boulevard. Ritter's is a Pittsburgh institution; a 24-hour café frequented by truck drivers and politicians alike, a place where you always wiped off the vinyl seats before you slid into the booth, a place where the smoking and non-smoking section used to share a common air space so that the pancake syrup always came in two flavors: Maple and Menthol. Ritter's has lost some of its character now that it's gone smoke-free, but Katie the waitress is still there and she knows that on the third Wednesday of the month she should send anyone wearing khaki pants and discount-rack penny loafers to the back room, because they must be part of the Minister's Gathering.

On this occasion, Rob turned to his colleagues and broached the subject of religious humor. He told them about Marty and his repertoire of church jokes and asked how come such a serious business as religion is invariably the butt of so many jokes. This prompted a few to share the latest witticisms they'd heard before Amanda, pastor of the Methodist church down the street, interrupted and said, "G.K. Chesterton wrote that the test of a good religion is whether you can joke about it. I believe there's a lot of truth in that. If you can't chuckle at the amazing fact of God choosing to be involved in our messy, human lives, then you haven't thought deeply enough about the paradox and wonder and mystery that's at the heart of our religion."

Another minister chimed in: "I think church jokes are shorthand ways for people to talk about hard subjects, like death and what happens after we die. Everyone hopes that after death 1) we're not alone, 2) we're no longer suffering, and 3) that everything is beautiful and peaceful. But we don't really know how to talk about those wishes, so we make light of the whole subject by telling religious jokes. The jokes involve fluffy clouds,



because heaven is supposedly up in the sky; and there are tall gates of gold and pearls, because every desirable place always has a gate in front of it. And if there's a gate, there has to be a gatekeeper, whom we imagine to be St. Peter. But we also hope Jesus is standing nearby, because he knows us, loves us, forgives us and wants to welcome us inside heaven. The jokes help us deal with hard questions, like: What happens to really bad people when they die? What about all those people who've never heard about Jesus? And won't heaven be really crowded since billions and billions of people have lived on earth? Not to mention our pets, or that La-Z-Boy recliner that I love to sit in while I watch reality shows. Will those things be in heaven?"

Father Regis broke in: "The jokes can be good lead-ins for serious conversations about faith. In times of real trouble, no one is cracking jokes. In a hospital hospice unit, on a transport plane taking you to a tour of duty in Helmand Province, Afghanistan—no one's laughing then. So what happens is that people stop and ask whether all the stuff they've heard about God and heaven is really true. They say to me that I hope heaven is a place where Mom's body finally is well again, or where Dad can see his parents again, or where my partner is waiting for me. In those moments, we put the jokes aside and share words of faith. Not because they give easy answers, but because they touch on mysteries deeper than words, which we know to be true on a gut level. We say, "I don't know what heaven will be like, but I trust that that it's a place of God's design, full of Christ's love, and where we will truly be at home at last. I trust that it is a place where questions are answered, and new things are learned. And I know that thinking about that heavenly place helps me keep in focus how I want things to be right here on earth, so that those familiar words from the Lord's Prayer, 'on earth as it is in heaven,' can really start to take root in my life."

Rob listened to his colleagues while Katie passed through the room filling up cups of coffee around the table. A good religion does allow you to joke about it, not to demean it or belittle it, but as a way to laugh at our own efforts to be Masters of the Universe. For it is far worse never to think about God, never to try to put into words what heaven might be like, never to ponder even whimsically what life after death involves. During some moments in life (beside hospital beds, for example) faith conversations come easily. But for all the other times of our lives, you could do worse than to start with a joke about God or church and the laughable, paradoxical blend of heaven and earth that is all around us each and every day.

The next morning, Rob found his bathrobe and slippers and went out for the paper just as he saw Marty come up the sidewalk. This time Rob spoke first. "Hey, Marty. A woman dies and goes to heaven and St. Peter took her on a tour. They pass a dark hole where people are gnashing their teeth and wailing, and the woman says, "Who's down there?" St. Peter says, "Oh, those are the Catholics who ate meat on Fridays." They walk a little farther and see another pit with more groaning and wailing, and she says, "Okay, who's down there?" St. Peter answers, "Those are the Baptists who went to dances." And a little farther along, there was a third pit with people gnashing their teeth and crying and



rending their garments, and she says, “And those people?” And St. Peter says, “Those are the Presbyterians who ate their salads with their dessert forks.”

Marty looked at Rob and said, “I don’t get it.” Rob took a deep breath and smiled and said, “Tell you what, how about if I walk with you and Samson for a while and we can talk about the joke together.”

And that’s the news from Pittsburgh, where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the Presbyterians are above average.

