

June 28, 2015

TEXT: Mark 5:21–43

TITLE: Laughing in Response

Some things you just have to laugh at. Some things you read about or hear about will cause you to shake your head and laugh in wonder. Like the irony of when a tow truck breaks down and needs to be towed, or when a fire station catches on fire. I saw a photo of a sign taped to a door in a shopping mall that read: “Mall maintenance Shop—We Repair Anything.” Underneath that in parentheses it said, “Please knock loudly on door; bell doesn’t work.”

The bible stories about Jesus are full of examples of irony—things that intentionally cause us to shake our heads in wonder. Angels appearing to lowly shepherds in the field; fishermen who become church leaders; disciples told to feed a crowd of 5000 from a few loaves of bread and they do; a woman from the street who kneels at the feet of Jesus while he’s at the home of a rich man, anoints him with perfume and tears and he announces that what she’s done will be remembered forever and it has been. These stories aren’t trying to be funny. They are ironic because they surprisingly point out how different God’s reality is from our reality—how much truer Christ’s way is than what we’re often taught about how the world works.

The double story from Mark’s gospel we just heard is full of ironic moments. An important leader of the synagogue named Jairus needs Jesus’ help, but so does an unnamed, unclean woman hiding in the crowd. A mission of mercy in which time is of the essence is interrupted by the strange question “Who touched my clothes?” A hidden act of faith (a woman touches Jesus’ robe) is loudly proclaimed to an entire crowd. A report that the girl has died and so the rush to Jairus’ house should be suspended is illogically ignored. Professional mourners, who are paid to weep at funerals, start to laugh when Jesus tells them that the girl is not dead but sleeping. A private act of healing that Jesus instructs is to be kept secret is readily known to everyone as soon as the 12-year old girl comes bouncing out of her death-chamber munching on a piece of bread. All of this ironic double story is designed to make you shake your head and laugh.

Why is that? Remember the words of the old prophet Isaiah: *My ways are not your ways, nor are my thoughts your thoughts, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts* (Isa 55:8–9). Sure, there are lots of things we have in common with God. Genesis says we have been created in God’s image, male and female. The gospels and the writings of Paul insist that in Jesus Christ God took on human flesh and became one with us, like unto us in every way except sin. But in so many ways we are not like God. We are fragile and finite while God is eternal. We are fallible and prone to sin while God is not. We have used our wisdom and creativity to create nuclear weapons and destroy life; God used wisdom and creativity to create a world that sustains life. But the big difference is

that we so quickly forget that we've fallible and fragile and sinful and mistaken, while God never forgets those qualities about us and yet still loves us, forgives us, and works steadfastly that we might be made well at last.

This past week contained a couple examples of the irony of faith bringing new hope to our world. For the longest time some people wrongly insisted that if two women or two men were legally allowed to express their love, fidelity and lifelong commitment to one another, that act would undermine someone else's commitment in their male-female marriage. Mathematically two positives cannot add up to a negative, and theologically the addition of more things in this world that are faithful, loving and good cannot by itself diminish other things in this world that are faithful, loving and good. The Supreme Court decision for marriage equality finally corrected old precedents built on flawed logic. Thanks be to God! Similarly, the shooting in Charleston pointed out anew the unholy logic that has long claimed Confederate flags can be flown in places of honor despite their past and present legacy of racism, violence and oppression. Should the flag have been taken down 50 years during the Civil Rights era or any time prior to this week due to racial violence and lynchings? Of course. But better late than never, so long as we don't forget or turn back the clock on either of these advances.

Mark's double story is memorable because of the ironic contrasts he built into the narrative. I've already mentioned several of them—the irony of Jesus interacting simultaneously with Jairus, the acclaimed head of the synagogue and some unnamed woman who has been hemorrhaging for 12 years. A man of the spotlights, a woman of the shadows. But for me the irony in both cases is most present in the two situations in which someone derisively laughs at Jesus. The first time is when Jesus stops the procession to Jairus' house, having felt power go out of him. Jesus asked, "Who touched me?" And the disciples (and likely anyone else who heard his question) answer incredulously "A huge crowd is pressing in on you from every side. How can you possibly ask, 'Who touched me?'" Yet there was a difference between the crowd's touch and the woman's touch, and Jesus would soon point that out to them.

The second time occurred at the house of Jairus shortly after his daughter's death. In a culture that didn't practice embalming, people were routinely buried on the same day they died. Family members would be in shock and emotionally hadn't processed this death of the loved one, so others would come to help them mourn—weeping the tears that parents or siblings couldn't yet produce. These professional mourners allowed their own tears to dry up and switched to laughter when Jesus used resurrection language and told them that the girl wasn't dead, but only sleeping. So Jesus locked them out and soon acted in such a way that he would in effect have the last laugh.

As hard as it is to be laughed at, when faith is involved, sometimes that's precisely the place where God's ways clash most directly with the ways of the world—and we should give those places extra attention. Think about the number

of times near the end of his life Jesus was mocked and laughed at. He was taunted by the soldiers, given a crown of thorns although he was a king, mocked on the cross saying “He saved others, let him save himself,” which in time is precisely what he did. Moments of ironic laughter are precisely when we should take heart and trust that the Kingdom of God is near.

Mark Twain was a master of this ironic laughter and the best place he used it was in his classic book “Huck Finn.” Our family read “Huck Finn” out loud a couple years ago. The most poignant part of the book comes about 2/3rds the way through it, when Huck is unable to pray to God because he knows he is committing a mortal sin by helping Jim escape. That’s what he’s been carefully taught. That’s what much of Twain’s world believed. Huck then writes a note for Miss Watson that will let her know the location of her runaway property, and as soon as he finished it, Huck felt as washed clean of sin as a baptized baby. He felt good enough to pray to God Almighty at last. But he waited a bit and thought about all the times Jim had been good to him, when Jim had been loyal and honest, grateful and true. Twain describes Huck taking up that piece of paper and holding it in his trembling hand, knowing he had to decide betwixt two things. After holding his breath, Huck said to himself, “All right, then, I’ll go to hell” and he tore up the paper. He refused to turn in Jim, the runaway slave.

It’s a powerful moment of irony and truth. It cuts to the quick of human sin and flawed religion and the brokenness we are all hell-bent on inflicting on one another—even as there are those moments when we choose hell by the world’s standards and amazingly find ourselves on the pathway of heaven.

Mark masterfully composed this story from the life of Jesus as a witness to ironic, life-giving faith. He included a wealthy synagogue leader, since people of privilege will always be with us, and a poor woman marginalized and undesirable, since poor persons will also always be with us. He told about categories of cleanness and uncleanness, categories which sadly still remain a constant in how human beings organize themselves. He recounted a miraculous healing of a child, which called to mind similar stories from the days of Elijah and Elisha. And he told of someone dead being raised back to life, focusing on this Jesus who himself would make that same amazing journey on Easter morning.

But what holds it all together is the laughter: ironic at first, faithful in the end. When the disciples scoffed at Jesus’ question, the healed woman bravely stepped forward and became an object lesson about real faith. And when the mourners became misguided laughs, Jesus pushed them out until a reborn young girl should lead them into a deeper knowledge of the power of God’s love revealed in Christ. Sometimes people wonder where in this crazy, hurting world they can put their faith into action. Where can we make a difference? Maybe we should listen for the laughter—the mocking laughter that comes when we talk about peace, healing love, gun control, campaign finance reform, anti-racism, ending addiction, rehabilitated lives instead of incarceration, living hope instead

of death-obsessed fear. Those places where people laugh the loudest at our foolish Christian dreams and visions are the first places we should direct our efforts. For the one who said “Talitha, cum” (little one, arise) also said after Easter “I am with you always until the end of the age.” The last laugh in this case is truly the best laugh of all.

AMEN