

## Topic: Humor, Humility and Humanity

Spring 2004 Convocation of the Greenfield Group

### Humor and Pastoral Care

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I might demonstrate what I once heard about what makes one thing funny and another not by asking *you* to ask *me* the following question: What is the hardest thing about being a good comedian? As you were asking that question and as you were saying “about being” I would interrupt you with one word- the word- Timing. This of course would throw off the question but make the important statement that humor is about right timing. Using humor in many circumstances and especially in pastoral care situations is about timing.

I assume that all of you from time to time receive emails, which contain funny one-liners, jokes and zingers. Yet however humorous these are I would not in the first ten minutes of a first meeting with a guilt ridden person say to them- “ah guilt- the gift that keeps on giving.” Nor to demonstrate that I too have dealt with issues of guilt and reconciliation would I say, “Well as Mae West once said, I used to be Snow White but I drifted.”

In this regard, I can agree with the cautions given in Barry Sanders book, *Sudden Glory* ...excessive laughter- even of the most gentle sort- can easily turn into derision and scorn. So use it sparingly; it’s exotic stuff and doesn’t come cheaply.”<sup>1</sup> He also writes of Socrates speaking about laughter like salt - a seasoning that can spice up food, or can hurt when rubbed onto open wounds.

Humor can be used effectively in pastoral care when used carefully and appropriately. Plus it can be used to season up a session. As we read and as we know life is a mixture of glad and sad, mirth and misery, laughter and tears, joy and sorrow and when engaged in pastoral care the line between the two is sometimes very thin indeed.

People who come to us for pastoral care are usually looking to deal with at least one of the following areas: ethical dilemmas, value confusions or distortions, religious conflicts, fear of death or looking to find meaning in their life. Howard Clinebell, in the classic *Basic Types of Pastoral Care & Counseling* defines pastoral care as “the broad, inclusive ministry of mutual healing and growth within congregations, and its community, through the life cycle”. “Pastoral counseling”, he writes, “one dimension of pastoral care, is the utilization of a variety of healing (therapeutic) methods to help people handle their problems and crises more growthfully and thus experience healing of the brokenness. Pastoral counseling is a reparative function needed when ... growth is jeopardized or

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<sup>1</sup> Sanders, Barry. *Sudden Glory: Laughter as Subversive Activity*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1995. 88

blocked... People need pastoral care throughout their lives. They may need pastoral counseling at times of severe crisis, usually on a short term basis.”<sup>2</sup>

In his book there is not one mention of the use of humor as a therapeutic tool. Perhaps we can infer that he is thinking about the use of humor when he writes, “right brained methods of healing and growth (intuitive, metaphoric, imaging approaches) should be used more than in the past and integrated with left brain methods (analytical, rational, intentional, problem- solving approaches).”<sup>3</sup>

One smartaleck quipped, “A conclusion is simply the place where you got tired of thinking.” Sometimes right brained thinking can lead to new solutions, new perspectives which may assist in healing. Humor can serve an important function in challenging linear, rational thinking.

Clinebell offers no cautions against the use of humor either, except in the veiled concept that “pastoral care should utilize the unique professional identity and role of ministers, including their positive authority and socially-defined expectation that they will take the initiative in actively reaching out to offer help to those who need care and counseling.”<sup>4</sup> The challenge I see to this notion is that by and large society tends to view ministers as a humorless group of individuals who much prefer to pray over a lost soul than laugh with a lost sheep. The August 9, 2003 *Christian Century* devoted an entire article titled, “And Jesus Laughed: A Joking Matter”, to discussing the church’s unease with laughter and jokes and to discuss whether Jesus laughing is a way to celebrate Jesus’ earthy humanity and his joy in living.<sup>5</sup> If we clergy are unable to enjoy the earthiness of humanity, the frailty of human nature, the vagaries of human experience without laughter and humor then we will never be able to help those who seek our assistance heal. If we clergy are unable to demonstrate humor to those who seek us to offer them support and nurture, or guidance and assistance as they try to reconcile to the reality of living, or if we are unable to model appropriate use of humor what a world of doom and gloom we will live in. It is true that often others project onto clergy perceptions that are not necessarily accurate. They assume that clergy represent the joyless, harsh religious figure they have been running from for years, they assume that clergy represent certain ethical values and judgments and expect behavior based on these. They assume that clergy will not be accepting or open to their confessions of inadequacies and or shortcomings. Sharing laughter, humorous stories, jokes and demonstrating a willingness to be engaged in humorous ways with others may help to break down some of these barriers.

Humor more than an emotion is a quality that one has or does not have. It is the ability to perceive, express and enjoy that, which is amusing, comical, or entertaining. I have seen instances where humor has stood old ways of thinking on its head. Plus humor can cut through layers of defenses and can touch others at deep levels through the process

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<sup>2</sup> Clinebell, Howard. *Basic Types of Pastoral Care & Counseling: Resources for the Ministry of Healing and Growth*. Nashville, Tn: Abingdon Press, 26.

<sup>3</sup> Clinebell, 27

<sup>4</sup> Clinebell, 27

<sup>5</sup> *Christian Century*. “And Jesus Laughed: A joking Matter”, David Heim August 9, 2003. 27-30

of identification, the sharing of common values and breaking down perceptions that keep unhealthy distance and impede healing.

I have found group humor to help in breaking the ice so that people can realize that even though I am a clergy person I do have that quality called humor. This has been crucial in my role as Chaplain in a predominately male dominated field. The inability to maintain a sense of humor could cause me to be ineffective and resented.

For example, for over fifty years firefighter retirement parties were male only events. They tend to be “roasts” of the retiring members where retelling stories can hit on faults, mistakes, and where comedic events are retold in colorful language. When I was invited to attend some of the guys expressed anxiety that my presence would dramatically change the nature of the events. I knew that I did not want that to happen and that I needed to remain the Chaplain “Clergywoman”, but I also needed to demonstrate that I could take teasing and tell a joke with the best of them. At the most recent retirement roast the Chief turned to me and said, “ It is good to have our Chaplain here tonight, by the way I like your hair color of the month.” To which I remarked, “Well at least I have some to color.”

I learned some of the best stories while working in the alcohol drug abuse field, and I would tell the following story at group meetings to begin the process of breaking through the barriers of denial and resistance. I have used the same story during a parish committee meeting, which I classify as a pastoral care situation. Don't you?

A farmer bought a work- horse from the next county. The seller told the new owner the work- horse responded well to kind words and loving petting. Satisfied with the deal the new owner took the horse home to begin plowing the fields. The horse stood in the middle of the field unmovable. No matter what kind word, soft touch, loving petting the new owner tried the horse would not move an inch. In exasperation the new owner stomped over to the old owner and complained against the horse and insisted that he come and show him the trick to getting the horse to work. The old owner said of course and walking to the field he picked up a 2x4 and hit the horse on the side of his flank whereupon the horse began to plow. The new owner looked incredulously at the old, and said, “I thought you told me he responded to love and kindness”. “Yes”, said the old “but first you have to get his attention”.

I have found humor helpful when doing a general mental status examination. This exam is thumbnail view to evaluate evidence for or against psychosis, depression, suicidal danger, or brain injury. The response to or lack of response to humor can help me assess the persons mood and energy level, their affect whether it is flat or fixed, changeable, or not. Remember humor can prick through standard ways of thinking and give new perceptions and associations to free up mood, emotion and intellect.

I can sometimes use humor to evaluate the content of their thinking- is it concrete or bizarre, is it full of loose associations and tangential thinking and are they able to make connections using imagery and metaphor or is it rigid or so loose that as one person quipped, “I can see clearly now, the brain is gone.” Because jokes are often topical and about current information humor can help evaluate the person's intellectual ability. Are

they alert, can they concentrate, do they have a general fund of current information and is their response appropriate or inappropriate?

Using appropriate humor can let me know whether I can be effective or not or if I need to refer them for more intensive care. Sometimes I can determine the severity of their symptoms and intervene more appropriately.

Not surprising given my Chaplaincy work, I was once referred a person whom his senior officer suspected had traumatic stress syndrome. Usually I can ask a few questions about sleeping, eating, substance use, perceived stress, and self-perception of symptoms and get to the core issue to then assess whether I can do anything or whether I need to refer. This one person was not forthcoming with much information about the level of stress and tension he was experiencing or about the particular event his officer suspected had “thrown him over the edge”. So I asked him if he could identify with the following statement. “I am not tense. I am just terribly, terribly alert”. He laughed uproariously and I knew then that we could work together to alleviate his immediate symptoms and get him back to work.

Using gallows humor after a particularly distressing event is not uncommon. It has the effect of reminding all of us of our mortality. It also has the effect of bringing relief that this time the event did not happen to us or to our loved ones. As Sanders said “we have all found ourselves laughing, almost against our wills, certainly against our better judgment, and certainly through our own sadness, at another person’s misfortunes. But we also feel tremendous relief that it is not we who have received that nasty barb, or fallen on that slippery banana peel, or been afflicted with that crippling disability. And so there we stand, trapped inside our emotions, laughing and feeling sad at the same time”.<sup>6</sup> This laughter is part and parcel of being in relationship with others. If the rescue worker cannot laugh at themselves and at the circumstances that they find themselves in, I think they lose the ability to be compassionate caregivers. For who knows, there may be truth in the statement, “but for the Grace of God there go I”. As Chaplain when I first started listening to the fire radio if I heard a rescue call that someone had fallen and could not get up, I could not help it, I would snicker. I did not mean too, and I was sorry that they might be hurt but I would remember that inane commercial of the person with the Medical Alert Button, or the drunken person lying on the floor singing that foolish song.

Yet those words “I’ve fallen and I can’t get up” also speak to me of the irrepressible desire of the human spirit to get up and begin again. Niebuhr in the article, *Humour and Faith*, had one of the most crucial statements about this quality when he wrote, “All of us out to be ready to laugh at ourselves because all of us are a little funny in our foibles, conceits and pretensions. What is funny about us is precisely that we take ourselves too seriously”.<sup>7</sup> He goes on to tell us that we are not the center of the universe and that laughing at and with ourselves helps to bring us humility and honesty, and contrition, all of which I think can lead us to a balanced and joyful nature.

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<sup>6</sup> Sanders, 38

<sup>7</sup> Niebuhr, Reinhold. “Humour and Faith”

I close with a story from the February 2003 'O' magazine. Anne Lamont recounts the story of a woman who goes to the zoo and sees a male gorilla sleeping against the bars of his cage. This magnificent beast mesmerizes the woman, and so she reaches out to touch him. The gorilla awakes, grabs her arm and mauls her half to death before the zookeeper can intervene. She is in intensive care when a friend comes to visit and remarks, "God, you look like you are in a lot of pain". "Pain", says the injured woman, "you don't know pain. He doesn't call, he doesn't write...." Life is like that gorilla, magnificent, powerful, beautiful, irresistible, and humorous and sometimes pain filled. But our existence would be so much worse if we did not reach out to those who need and seek our pastoral care with caring connections filled with laughter, joy and humor.