

Psalm 42  
John 13:1-35

Love and the laughable God

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**ForeWord**

Last week, we recalled the genre of comedy, noting among other things that a comedy is not necessarily a funny story. It is, rather, a story that follows a particular narrative arc, opening at a comfortable emotional level before the protagonist is pushed into some uncomfortable situation, before a final resolution of some sort. Most of the stories we tell are comedies, even if most of those stories are not necessarily very funny.

But today I want to pick up on the concept of “funny”, and to come at this from some reflection on what we do when we laugh.

What’s so funny?

Why do we laugh? The obvious answer is that we laugh because we’ve seen something funny. But then we have to push the question a little harder; what is it that makes something funny?

When we watch a movie intended to be humorous, we laugh at the point at which everything goes wrong. The funny thing is that the protagonist finding herself in some difficult situation. We laugh at her vain attempts to get herself out of that situation and the silly faces that she draws as her situation gets worse and worse despite her best efforts. In a humorous story, laughter is our response to the trough in the comedic arc.

And so, the laughter stops once things begin to settle again. That final settlement might well be a place of relief, but it’s no longer a place of laughter. We might be happy there, but we don’t laugh because we’re happy. We’re happy because we have laughed and no longer need to. What makes us laugh – what is funny – is displacement. Someone is suddenly and unexpectedly where they should not be. Our laughter points to that being out of place, to that being wrong, and we stop laughing at the end because the wrongness has been resolved, and we anticipate “happily ever after”.

There is, then, something slightly sadistic about laughter. The object of the laughter – the displaced protagonist – is not the one laughing. It is we who watch them. There’s nothing that the protagonist wants to laugh about when he or she is at the bottom of the trough. She doesn’t know she’s living a comedy and fears the tragedy of never getting out again. Laughter, then, is one of our responses to suffering.

This, I think, is unexpected and provocative. But laughter gets still more interesting. We know very well that laughter is contagious but it’s not the case simply that we laugh because somebody else laughs, like catching a cold.

Laughter is invitational. It proposes a community. By noticing that something is going wrong, we invite others also to notice the wrongness, and so we create a space within which a certain sense of normality is implied. This normality is stated negatively in laughter when we see something outside of that zone: “Hey, look at him – ha ha”. Joining in laughter is not catching a cold, it is expressing agreement – “Yeah, that’s pretty weird”. Laughing with others creates community over against that weirdness.

Funny as exclusion

This is why laughter can hurt – it's socially exclusionary. It is inherently critical and exclusionary, although of course in varying degrees. There is a place for the gentle and good-natured gibe, but the nature of laughter as invitation to community also operates in more malicious circumstances, where laughter indicates mockery. Mocking laughter invites us not only to notice that the funny person is outside the group's norm, but to reject him because of this. We laugh here because he is not one of us, and the laughter marks this outsideness. Mockery makes fun of – makes funny – a black person in a white space, a woman in a male space, a captive in a free space, a native in a colonial space, a poor person in a rich space, a short person in a tall space, an awkward person in a graceful space, or a saint in an unholy space. We know all these tropes from our comic stories, funny or not.

We might wonder then, if it is a reconciled and inclusive place, whether there is any laughter in heaven. Laughter would have to be something else if there were to be.

So, with all that in the back of our minds – the dynamics of laughter and its connection to inclusion and exclusion from a community – let's listen to a passage from John's Gospel about community and the laughable Jesus.

### **Word: The Testimony of Scripture**

(→ Hearing: John 13.1-25)

### **Word: Proclamation**

#### *The laughable Jesus*

As is usual in John, a lot's going on in the passage we've just heard, but there are two things we might notice today in connection with comedy and community.

First, the funny thing – the odd, wrong thing – which happens in the story is that the rumoured messiah takes the role of the servant. No one bursts out laughing, of course; it is more a case of shock, as Peter expresses. Jesus is funny – in a funny peculiar, rather than funny ha-ha, kind of way. And this peculiarity, this outsideness, is something all the disciples see, as all Jesus' opponents have already seen. (Judas the betrayer is woven through this story, and while we don't know his internal motivation, his actions are consistent with a mocking rejection of the ministry Jesus has exercised.) The community of disciples has in common that what Jesus does is not common but is strange. In terms of the comedic arc, Jesus is here at the low point, has fallen from the messianic perch, from normality, from his place in the community. This is the cross.

But, as we noticed last week, though Jesus has bottomed-out here, the arc of the story doesn't do the natural comedic thing. He isn't persuaded by Peter, and so doesn't stand up straight, apologise and get on with being a proper messiah. And if this humility is the equivalent of the cross, there comes here no equivalent of a resurrection fix, swung in to salvage the moment now that Jesus has lost his mind.

Rather, Jesus pushes further into the humiliation:

What I have done down here in the lowly place is odd, strange, funny, mockable. And you are to do and become this as well. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this, everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another – love such as I have shown you.

This is not a call simply to do what Jesus did. It is a call to be strange, as Jesus was. It is an invitation to be remarkable by not avoiding the humiliation of the comedic protagonist who then desperately wants to get up and out again, but by becoming intentionally displaced. This displacement has something to do with the oddness of the

command to love we considered a few weeks ago. And so the imperative here is not to be “loving”, in a moral sense, but to enter into an ethic of strangeness.

*The community of the laughable God*

More pointedly, the call to discipleship is a call to be laughable, in the mode of the laughable God – the God who does weird, ungodly things. The thing about the gods is that they are all about order and appropriateness, insideness and outsideness. The gods define and guarantee the nation, or the religion, or the class, or the race or the gender, or whatever. And so the gods tell us what to laugh at, in the mocking and exclusionary sense.

The God of the gospel, however, is laughable, is the definitive outsider who does strange things. This God kneels to wash our feet, is mocked under a crown of thorns and a purple robe, is crucified outside the city.

Love is strange. In a world like ours, specialising as it does in mockery and exclusion, love which reaches further than the community of the local gods. And to be of this particular God – a disciple of Jesus – is to be learning to be as Jesus himself was. “As I have loved you” means “Remarkably”, “Strangely”, “Laughably”.

But things are twisting now, so that what was laughable and excluded becomes the means of community and inclusion. A new kind of community is proposed, in which being laughable – being different, being outside, being less than others – is embraced.

Laughter is now being transformed, rehabilitated. Instead of the laughter of the many which expresses oneness by marking the outsider, the wrong, Jesus’ action is a Laughter-of-One which proposes a community, a oneness, a normality, which is not yet there.

Because it is properly always particular, love always isolates – always laughs. Yet this is a laugh which does not exclude but embraces the funny other, the lost, the not-fitting, and gathers them in. And so, unlike with the other strong, mocking gods, this laughable God’s laughter creates a new kind of community and calls us to laugh with him, to laugh as he does, to laugh into being what does not yet exist – the community of peace and justice which comes from loving as Jesus loved us.

Laugh, Jesus says, as I have laughed you.

And all God’s people laugh, Amen.

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