

Sermon: Is This a Joke?

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, June 16, 2024)

I think all preachers should take a course in humour. I say this as someone who has trouble being funny naturally, as someone who learned about the art of telling jokes through, of all sources, the internet, and as someone who tries to incorporate humour into sermons, and have watched you respond to my jokes – sometimes positively, sometimes with a puzzled look, and sometimes with a stone-cold silence. It is not easy trying to be funny.

Humour in a sermon is a two-edge sword. When it works, it warms the hearts of hearers, opening them up to receive the core message of the gospel. But when it doesn't work, it can be quite embarrassing for both the preacher and the parishioners. You know it's bad when the preacher is the only one laughing at his or her own joke. Even worse – after delivering the punch-line, while the congregation is sitting there scratching their head, there is this one guy sitting way at the back, laughing out loud! What is he laughing at? At the joke, or the embarrassing way the joke is told? It is not easy to be funny, indeed!

Now I am telling you all these because I think Jesus is quite funny. He doesn't tell jokes in a way that a stand-up comic would. Jesus tells parables. Jokes and parables share many similarities. You either get it or you don't. Try explaining a joke to some who doesn't get it. You might succeed, but it is no longer funny. Both jokes and parables are meant to be heard as a whole, to be appreciated in its original form, and not to be dissected into parts and pieces, attached meanings to each, then reconstructed into some moral teachings.

With that in mind, let us listen, again, to the parable of mustard seed that Jesus once told, in Mark 4, *“With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth, yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”* Now isn't that funny? So why am I the only one laughing?

I think part of the problem for us is that we are not familiar with the mindset of Jesus' original audience. The Israelites, in the time of Jesus, some 2,000 years ago, were expecting the coming of the Messiah – God's

anointed, to deliver the people from the evil Roman Empire; and to rebuild their shattered nation into a mighty kingdom.

Ezekiel had long ago prophesied such a hope, in chapter 17:23, "*On the mountain height of Israel I will transplant it, and it will produce boughs and bear fruit and become a noble cedar. Under it every kind of bird will live; in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind.*"

The prophet had used the imagery of a cedar tree, which was the tallest and mightiest tree in the lush forest of Lebanon. According to Ezekiel, God will transplant it from a foreign land onto the mountain of Israel. God will make low trees grow tall, will make dry trees flourish. Such message of comfort gave hope to the Israelites who were, at that time, exiled in the land of Babylon. It contains the promise of restoration, that the kingdom of Israel will one day be restored, and will grow to such height and such might as to offer protective shade to all who seek refuge under it.

So when Jesus told his parable, his hearers were familiar with Ezekiel's imagery of that tall cedar tree. "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth, yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs..." Hold-on a second, a mustard seed? The smallest of all seeds. Growing up to be the greatest of all 'shrubs' - really?

In reality, mustard 'bush' is a garden variety, low utility vegetation. Really more of a weed or a shrub, than a tree. It is neither tall, nor mighty, not capable to provide shade. And Jesus used such an imagery to describe the coming Kingdom of God?! Is this a joke?

I imagine when Jesus first told this parable, it must have been met with a stone-face-silence from the crowd, except for that one guy sitting at the back, bursting out laughing-out-loud (LOL), exclaiming, "A mighty shrub, indeed!" until he realized that no one else in the audience found it funny. But it is funny! It is a joke.

The joke is on the Israelites who thought they knew how God was going to bring salvation to them. They thought they got it all figured out with their religious feasts, with their observance of the Law, and their rebellion against Rome.

Jesus reminded them through yet another parable (v.26-27), "*The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow,*

he does not know how.” Another joke, telling us that we really don’t know how God works.

The fame author and theologian Frederick Buecher once asked, “Is it possible, I wonder, to say that it is only when you hear the gospel as a wild and marvellous joke that you really hear it at all? And jokes are everywhere in the Bible. Those parables of Jesus are like God’s joke to us in the form of invasive organisms. They get into us even when we don’t understand it. They slowly work its way into the core of our being, and they change us, until one day we say AHA! We get it now!

God’s redemptive work in the world is a wonderful joke on all of us. It started with the humour of the LORD Almighty coming in the form of a servant. It took the path of a noble and dignified unwed mother. The joke of the royal Son of David growing up in a poor carpenter’s home, in an insignificant town. It continues with the Holy Son of God dinning with prostitutes and sinners. And this great joke culminates in the Passion of Christ dying a pathetic death on the cross.

Just when we thought the joke is over, here comes the punch line — the resurrection — in one single act, God turned the table on human history. In the end God has defeated death itself while many are still offended by the joke. Isn’t that funny?

How then should we live our lives in light of this humours God? In 2005 when I went to Taiwan as part of the delegation from Knox College. We had the chance to visit the Aletheia Universtiy in Tamsui, in the northern part of the island. This university is built beside the original Oxford University College, which was started by Dr. George Leslie Mackay.

While visiting, I came across a plaque that listed three characteristics that Dr. Mackay lived and taught, and they became the guiding principles of that university — the 3 Hs — humble, humane, and humours. When I think about Dr. Mackay’s life as a missionary in Taiwan, the 3 Hs — humble, humane, and humours — really comes to mind.

There was one story of Mackay travelling on foot through a village, preaching the Gospel to peasants. People were laughing at this ‘black bearded barbarian’. Someone threw a bucket of manure at him. Mackay just laughed it off, brushed away those stinky shit, and continued on to preach Jesus.

Though Mackay was not a medical doctor, he did pick up a quite an useful skill while training as a missionary in Knox College: he learned how to pull out rotten teeth. He applied that skill most liberally in Taiwan,

particularly throughout Indigenous mountain villages. There were pictures of him offering his teeth pulling skill to anyone who had need, and people lined up to have their rotten teeth pulled by this ‘black breaded barbarian’. Reportedly, Mackay had pulled over 20,000 teeth while in Taiwan.

As a missionary, Mackay never align himself with the colonial power of the day, that was Japan. Rather, he became one with the people, learned the local dialects, dressed as a local, and even married a native Taiwanese woman (張聰明; Tiuⁿ Chhang-miâ).

Only last year, I had the privilege again of representing the Presbyterian Church in Canada, as one of the delegates of the Moderator’s visit to Taiwan. We had visited a number of Indigenous churches in the mountain, and were welcomed most wholeheartedly by the people. We learn that among the Indigenous population in Taiwan, over 90% are Christian. Evidently, the legacy that Dr. Mackay left for these mountainous people, through the work of the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan, included a number of key institutions in health, education, language and faith.

Even today, Canadian missionaries from PCC continue to play a key role in bible translation to Indigenous languages. One elder told us that: it is only in the church during worship, do Indigenous people ever get to use their mother tongues, and no where else in the rest of the society. Mackay’s legacy, his humanity, his humility and humour grew the mustard seed of faith in Taiwan into a mighty bush, a bush that is constantly burned but never consumed.

This has become something that I keep on reminding myself, on what being a Presbyterian is all about – to remain humble, humane and humours. The challenge for us as individuals and as a church trying to figure out what God is doing in us, through us, and with us is that we simply don’t know. Yet we can remain humble, filled with hope and joy, love one another, all the while anticipating that God of humour is and will be good to us.

I will leave you with this fruit for thought, a quote by Robert H. Schuller, “Anyone can count the seeds in an apple, but only God can count the number of apples in a seed.”

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**