

Don't Give Up Snark for Lent

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The Bible is not a funny book, that much seems evident. But occasionally irony and cynicism and even outright humor are used to make a point. Some scholars think that Jesus' classic indictment of society as the blind leading the blind was supposed to be a real crowd pleaser, with plenty of laughs to go around. And so it is in our text from the Talmud that expounds on the story of Abraham. Abraham has a biting wit here when he is working his father's idol shop. He smashes the idols and places a staff in the biggest idol's hands and claimed that he does it. He announces his ridicule of someone 50 years old that prays to an object 1 year old. He uses the logic of the system against itself, a reduction ad absurdum argument that enlightens the reader and hearer to the end result of any sort of logical system. I would say he is the definition of snarky. If he had done such a thing to you, you may have called him a name. He takes no prisoners and he is full of disdain for a system he does not support. He is funny while doing it, but he makes a very serious point. And that's what I want to explore with you today – the values of humor in our faith, the value of irony, the value, yes even, of snark.

One of the first things that come to mind when we think about humor in our current age is that it is playing an important role as social criticism. Late night tv hosts make fun of our most powerful, comedians make jokes at the self righteous and those who hold all sorts of power. They are looked to to provide some interpretation for an inherently chaotic and scary world. I think that one of the ways that they do that is that they never punch down. They do not make fun of the poor, the struggling, those on the bottom of society's totem pole. They do not make jokes about already vulnerable people. They make fun of society's elites. They punch up at those who would be above criticism, or at least immune to the sort of wonky analysis that some prefer. And Jesus does the same when he says that the blind are leading the blind, or when the prophet Nathan goes to David and tells a long story where David is the punch line, only revealing it after David has promised to put the man to death. These are serious matters, but the images, the use of irony, it is all meant to strike at those with power in a way that other criticism can't. Those idol sellers of Abraham's era and the idols themselves are untouchable and sacred, so Abraham takes it one step further and makes them a mockery through believing that a big idol could come to life and smash the others. What are you going to do? Claim that's impossible? Then why have the idols in the first place? Humor in religion ought to be used to make fun of the untouchable and those with power.

That's why some of the best jokes are about God. Yes, it's OK to have jokes about God. To me, God is the ultimate punch up of a joke. God's God, so you don't have to worry about hurting God's feelings. You don't have to be concerned, and yet God also is funny. I don't know what it is about God that is funny but just take a look at any joke book, and

religious jokes, jokes about God and jokes about religious people, are going to be an important section in that book! And that's because God is not like a monarch who passes a law against a funny joke. God is not like a powerful person who is hilariously thin skinned. God is God, and I have to think that when you make a funny joke about God, she joins in the laughter.

And that's primarily because laughter itself is an unqualified good in our world. Not laughter in the form of scorn, but belly laughter, lose yourself in the moment laughter is important to have in your life. Someone told a joke this week and I laughed, and at the end I said, "oh I needed that – I haven't laughed like that in a good long while." And that sort of feeling after a good joke, well that's a good feeling. I'd say that it's a holy feeling. When we feel laughter deep within ourselves, a part of ourselves is touched which needs to be stirred. A part that finds mirth and joy in something simple, because all jokes need a listener, and it becomes a collaborative activity.

My favorite depiction of the trinity, a concept that many struggle with is from mystic Meister Eckhart and he says this about the trinity: "When God laughs at the soul and the soul laughs back at God, the persons of the Trinity are begotten. When the creator laughs at the Son and the Son laughs back at the creator, that laughter gives pleasure, that pleasure gives joy, that joy gives love, and that love is the Holy Spirit." Such an example of mutuality, collaboration, and love is founded on laughter! I love it, and it speaks to my sense of what the holy ought to do.

You may have heard it said that church is a somber affair, but that's hogwash. I'm not normally dogmatic, but my entire ministry has been against that idea from day one. Laughter itself is holy. And so you might have given up snark for lent – that's not a bad thing if you're snarky in an overly cynical and mean spirited way. But if your snark punches up, if it is a critique of the world as it is, if it gives voice the voiceless and mocks systems of domination, then might I suggest you keep it around in these 40 days?
Blessed Be.