

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Rappahannock

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**“God Laughs and Plays”**

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## God Laughs and Plays

I don't usually start a sermon with a joke, but this sermon has the word "laughs" in the title, so I believe that a joke is in order. This one is told by a minister about a rabbi.

"A certain rabbi had a weakness for golf. But he had no time for it. Searching his busy schedule, he found one day in a year's time when he could play. Unfortunately, that day fell on the Sabbath.

The rabbi apologized to God and traveled some distance to a golf club so that he wouldn't run into anyone he knew.

As he teed up the first ball, an angel looked down from heaven aghast: 'A rabbi playing golf on the Sabbath!' The angel immediately told the Almighty about it.

On the third hole, God sent down a gust of wind that made the rabbi's ball sink into the cup – a hole in one!

The angel watching was puzzled. "You call that punishment?"

"Think about it," the Lord replied. "Who can he tell?"

Actually, although it's a playful joke, this sermon has a different understanding of God, as far as playing is concerned. Maybe instead, God could play golf with the rabbi. I was once lent a cute little book by Cynthia Rylant that imagined God playfully in all kinds of situations, such as the title suggested, "God Went to Beauty School". I'd like to share that little vignette and a couple more from the book.

“God Laughs and Plays” is the title of a 13<sup>th</sup> or 14<sup>th</sup> century sermon by the Christian mystic, Meister Eckhart. Also, it is the title of a poem by sociologist Elise Boulding, who credits Eckhart, as does the agnostic and naturalist writer David James Duncan, whom we heard from in the reading from his book, entitled “God Laughs and Plays”.

For some reason, this phrase sticks. Even for the atheists who don’t have a God – like Nietzsche who declared God dead, but also wrote, “I would believe only in a God that knows how to dance” – for atheists, this is a fun mythical shorthand for the good life. The phrase sticks for theists as well, even though they realize they ought to know better – either that God is not to be anthropomorphized, or that God should not seem so silly – but they enjoy the image. For those who are awfully responsible, and should question a playful, laughing God – they don’t question it – they get it. And the playful theists certainly don’t believe that God is above frolicking. Children know that play is at the heart of it all, and so should all of us.

It was said of the amazing Sufi, Hafiz, that “With a great laugh of delight, Hafiz was forever drowned in love and united with God, his divine Beloved.” Sufis are surely playful and renowned for their laughter. Buddhists understand this laughing, playing God too, even if they are usually non-theist. An elderly Buddhist nun, Ani Trime, taught, “Laughter is right next to enlightenment.” I remember a Unitarian Universalist minister once saying, “Playfulness is next to godliness.”

Somehow, it puts everything in perspective to say, “God laughs and plays.” The universe is a good place, a joyful, playful world. Michael Joseph wrote, “Notice the playfulness of nature: gurgling streams, dancing light, humming birds, fluttering leaves,

twinkling stars. All creation wants to play with you.” Truly. An open invitation is always available, writ large everywhere: “for a good time”, the universe will play for free, and you may freely laugh.

Play is good for us, though we tend to be alternately play-starved, or guilt-ridden about playing. In my previous congregation there was a playful man in his nineties, Lucien Aigner, considered by some to be the father of modern photography, and best known for his iconic Einstein photos. At his funeral, I’ll never forget his son saying that Lucien had a secret, that he was always playing, that his whole life was about playing, enjoying it all, including his work.

Jerome Berryman wrote this about playing, “I see it as a life-giving act. It makes us young when we are old and matures us when we are young....To play the ultimate game, don’t rely on will, belief, doubt, or reason alone. Play. Play in a Godly way. Play with the Creator. Enter the existential game with imagination, wonder, and laughter if you want to become new without end.” I imagine all of us would like to become “new without end”, and what better way than that we laugh and play – a marvelous version of “*Imago Dei*” – in the image of God.

There are many ways of understanding God; many wise things have been said that help explain the concept of the divine. I think of Gandhi saying that “God is Truth”, or the Biblical verse, “God is Love”, or even the disabled Vietnam Vet, Kirk, whom I met at a lake while I was watching the sunset, and paused to say three words, “God’s an Artist”. God is referred to as a Mystery or as “the One”, as a parent or a lover, as “the possibility of possibilities” and as “the Breath of Life”. This phrase, “God Laughs and Plays” is not

a “God is” definition, nor a description of God, but rather, uses a couple of verbs to help us understand the heart of sacredness – laughing and playing – Joy.

God as a verb is at the center of certain theologies, particularly process theology, where God is becoming, or rather, the universe is becoming and creating, since it is as much a philosophy as a theology. Similarly, the feminist notion of “goddess” is about creating, bringing forth, as a verbal understanding of the divine. Mary Daley said, “It is the creative potential itself in human beings that is the image of God.” These are lofty verb understandings of God, whereas playing and laughing are downright ordinary, don’t you think? Although, playing and laughing are also surprisingly spiritual, in their own way. Playing and laughing require openness, love for the world, surrender, and letting go, all widely recognized elements of spiritual practice.

I was out hiking with my congregation last summer, (a really great way to play together, by the way), and our resident naturalist felt inspired to quote Mary Oliver, from a poem in her recent collection, called *Red Bird*. “Instructions for living a life: Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it.” Wonderful! Playful, joyful. Did you notice it came in a packet of three? So often we think in threes. I don’t know if it’s because we can only remember three things at a time, or because our world is weighted with important threesomes – three states of matter, three branches of government, the Trinity, three parts to the Hebrew Scripture, the three musketeers – or, that we somehow deeply understand ourselves in threes – mind, body, spirit, (commonly), or id, ego superego. Whatever the reason, there are many profound sets of three out there.

I have my own set of three, my Unitarian Universalist Trinity, that makes sense to me, and can be understood from a God perspective or not, and which I hope is helpful to

folks. Beloved Belonging, Meaningful Peace, and Transforming Joy are the three staples I see of our spiritual life, of what we long for and seek after, and what sometimes just comes to us in a flash of grace. They are also three descriptions of the divine, of how God is.

Beloved Belonging is perhaps best addressed by Christianity and Judaism, as well as by the faithful of any religion – the sense of lovingly belonging to each other, and to the Holy, gives strength and comfort. Meaningful Peace is perhaps best understood in Buddhism and Hinduism, as well as by the mystics of any religion – the sense of being centered and being at One gives wisdom and calmness. Transforming Joy is something that the Sufis and the Pagans are good at, as well as the ecstasies of any religion, as well as those who don't know anything about religion at all, but who know how to laugh and play – the sense of becoming more alive and spirited gives joy and hope. Unitarian Universalists have a special affinity for Transforming Joy. We are seekers who hope to transform ourselves and the world, and who don't see why we can't enjoy ourselves in the process. A UU minister, Lisa Ward, wrote that “the core of Unitarian Universalism is joy....our deepest, nonrational knowledge of life's worth.”

“Joy is the most infallible sign of the presence of God” is a statement attributed to two different Frenchmen, most often, to Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Joy is at the heart of the universe, at the center of life. We are made for joy. Yogananda said, “From joy I came. For joy I live. And in sacred joy I shall melt again.”

I believe that the wisdom advice hidden in the image that Meister Eckhart gave us so long ago is this: Live joyfully, laugh and play with God, or just laugh and play to your heart's desire. May we all be so transformed by joy. Amen.