

LAUGHTER, THE BEST MEDICINE
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Rappahannock
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OPENING: Welcome to the UUFR. We here at UUFR like to think that UUism is where all your answers are questioned.

OFFERING: A rabbi, a priest, and a UU minister were discussing how they divide the collection plate between church use and God.

The rabbi said that he draws a circle in the middle of the room, stands in the middle of it, and throws the money up into the air. Whatever falls outside the circle goes to the Lord, and what falls inside goes to the church.

The priest said that he does something similar. However, he draws a line. When he throws up the money, whatever falls in front of him is for the church, whatever is behind him goes to God.

The UU minister said that she also used a similar method for dividing up the collection plate. She throws up the money and she figures whatever God wants, God will grab.

CLOSING: If Unitarians were asked to form a firing squad, they'd arrange themselves in a circle.

SONG: Why are UU's the worst hymn singers? Because they are always reading ahead to see if they agree with the next line.

For years I have collected cartoons and jokes about religion. I've been thinking that jokes and laughter would make a very good sermon some day, and it would just be a fun talk to give. Every once in awhile I thumb through my file folder of sermon ideas and I come across these cartoons and jokes and spend several pleasant minutes re-reading them and laughing again.

Laughter is important. It's vital to a healthy life, I think. At the very least, laughter takes the fear and the anxiety and the stress out of life. And what could be more important than that? You can laugh and still be scared. You can laugh and still be stressed, but laughing takes the edge off the stress and makes the scary more likable somehow.

"Life is full of misery, loneliness and suffering and it's all over much too soon." –
Woody Allen

The ability to see the humor in a situation when your world is falling apart protects us from stressful events.

And, if I knew anything about anatomy and psychology, which I don't, I'd say that somehow there's a chemical released when you laugh that makes your brain work better. I believe I read once that laughter releases endorphins which may help reduce the intensity of pain in people suffering from arthritis. So, if you have a touch of arthritis, I think you'll feel a whole lot better by the time I've finished here.

I've loved Gary Larson's Farside cartoons for years. I used to keep a daily calendar on my desk at the law firm where I worked and every day I'd come to work, looking forward to tearing off a new cartoon and laughing. Some days it was the only thing I looked forward to doing at work. A part of my job was hiring and firing the support staff at the law firm. As a part of the interview process, I made sure that the Farside cartoon was easily seen from the prospective employee's chair. It was only after I was sure they had read the cartoon and laughed,-- or not,-- that I decided whether they would get the job,-- or not. Who wants to have someone in the office that won't laugh at Farside?

So many cartoons and jokes are about religion. Have you noticed that? Apparently, God is one funny guy. Or, maybe he's not, and that makes him more fun to joke about. Religion is a serious business, and a scary one. Religion splits people into definite emotional camps. Wars are fought in the name of religion. Sometimes over teensy dogmatic details. And then, there's the whole issue of Hell to get nervous about. It's a very serious business indeed.

The tablets with the Ten Commandments that God handed to Moses were no doubt a fairly serious business—certainly they were to God. They were a gesture meant to be accompanied by drum rolls and trumpets blaring. But mankind, even knowing it's important stuff and terrible things can happen to the person who doesn't follow these commandments, still can't resist making fun of God's seriousness. Laughter takes the scare out of realizing that some burning bush that actually TALKS, just handed your leader stone tablets with writing on them. God's writing, apparently. God is telling Moses that his people must follow these rules or suffer the consequences.

Picture a cartoon God, holding a large briefcase, standing on Moses' doorstep, handing him the tablet and saying, "Then, each month, you'll receive a new set of commandments. Cancel anytime and keep the first set, absolutely free."

Or, this one..."Moses trudges down from Mount Sinai, tablets in hand, and announces to the assembled multitudes: "I've got good news and I've got bad news. The good news is I got Him down to ten. The bad news is-- adultery is still in."

Man makes jokes to help him get through all the senselessness of life. All the despair and the trials and the unfairness and bad stuff that would be unbearable if we couldn't laugh about them.

Sometimes man uses jokes the way he uses philosophy. Jokes and philosophy both proceed from the same impulse—to confound our sense of the way things are, to flip our

worlds upside down, to ferret out hidden--often uncomfortable--truths about life. What the philosopher calls an insight, the jokester calls a zinger.

Telling jokes and laughing about the human condition is an affirmation of our humanness. A face-saving way to express our anxieties, fears, and other hidden emotions. It breaks the ice, builds trust and draws us together into a common state of well-being.

Jokes help us to examine, in a non-threatening way, questions like the existence of God, the meaning of life and of death. These are big **big** questions. Maybe too big to even think about if you didn't throw in a little humor to cool off your brain on occasion.

It is the nature of man, and especially in the nature of Unitarians, to try to figure out if there is a God, and to develop a philosophy of life accordingly. As a result of that thinking, we have believers, agnostics, and atheists. The difference between these ways of looking at God have meant the difference between sainthood and heresy. To a jokester, the difference boils down to this:

“An agnostic is a person who thinks that God's existence cannot be proven on the basis of current evidence, but who doesn't deny the possibility that God exists. The agnostic is one step short of an atheist, who considers the case against the existence of God closed. If both of them came across a burning bush that's saying, “I am that I am.”, the agnostic would start looking for a hidden tape recorder, but the atheist would just shrug and reach for his marshmallows.”

As I said earlier, religion has the nasty habit of dividing people into particular groups. Groups with often clearly defined beliefs and ways of behaving. Religion can make its followers do pretty silly things--all in the name of their religion. Specific haircuts can define a religious group. Specific styles of dress can define a religious group. Specific habits of daily life can define a religious group.

This is a quote from The Illuminati, a weird book I read some time ago. It kind of epitomizes for me the UU approach to the 10 Commandments. “He threw open an oaken door, and I entered a living room furnished in handsome teak and rosewood. Above an orange couch hung a huge oil painting in an elaborate gilt frame easily a foot deep on all sides. The painting was essentially a cartoon. It showed a man in robes with long, flowing white hair and beard standing on a mountaintop staring in astonishment at a wall of black rock. Above his head a fiery hand traced flaming letters with its index finger on the rock. The words it wrote were: ‘THINK FOR YOURSELF, SCHMUCK!’”

Jokes make fun of our tendency to unthinkingly identify with the attitudes and values of our own social group by showing us exaggerated instances. In other words, we all harbor tendencies to stereotype other races, other religions, other others. We all know that this tendency is not conducive to universal harmony and it sure isn't politically correct. Jokes allow us to vocalize these biases and make us laugh at ourselves—to see the ridiculous in what we thought was the divine.

Who among us can keep from smiling when they hear just the start of a joke..."a priest, a rabbi and an atheist walk into a bar..."

You just know that we're going to prise out the group stereotypes and be poking fun at all three groups—the Catholics, the Jewish, and the atheists.

A wonderful aspect of the Jewish religion is the personal relationship of each Jew to God. They debate God. They critique God.

"A Jewish grandmother is watching her grandchild playing on the beach when a huge wave comes and takes him out to sea. She pleads, "Please God, save my only grandson. I beg of you, bring him back."

And a big wave comes and washes the boy back onto the beach, good as new.

She looks up to heaven and says: "He had a hat!"

No religion is safe from the jokester. And, usually, the ones that laugh the loudest are the ones who actually practice that particular religion being laughed at.

"Another way to differentiate denominations is according to what behavior qualifies as a religious no-no. For Catholics, it's missing Mass. For Baptists, it's dancing. For Episcopalians, it's eating your salad with your dessert fork."

Thanks to Christianity, we now know that the wages of committing religious no-no's is that we are doomed to everlasting fire and damnation in an inviting little place called Hell. Now, that's a scary thought! It's difficult to wake up every day of your life, knowing the odds are pretty darn good that you'll end up stoking the Devil's furnace for the rest of eternity. So, it's only natural that man devised a scheme to make us laugh in the face of that horror.

Gary Larson asks us to picture God standing at a long line of saintly looking people with brand new wings on their backs and handing them each their harp. God says, "Welcome to heaven...here's your harp." Next frame shows the Devil standing at a long line of poor miserable looking people. Satan says, "Welcome to Hell. Here's your accordion." Of course, Heaven's kind of a scary place as well. Who wants to spend an eternity smiling and sitting on a cloud and being nice? A New Yorker cartoon shows one angel talking to another angel saying, "Wings that don't work! Harps we can't play! And these infuriating nighties! Are you sure this isn't Hell?"

Hell and Heaven are only two of the little annoying questions that plague us about religion. Man also worries the daylight out of the bigger questions.

How did all this that we call life come to be? Will there be an end? Was there a beginning? How'd it all happen?

The Bible tells us that God created the earth and everything in it in just six days—rested on the seventh. Now, that's hard to picture, but it must be true since it's in the Bible. And, if God created all that exists, did He also create evil and sickness and death?

A New Yorker cartoonist, somebody Donohue, has drawn a very despondent looking God, sitting on his cloud, looking down at the earth. He turns to his angel assistant and says, "Maybe things would have turned out better if I'd put in a whole week."

Or back to Gary Larson, showing God with a white chef's hat on in His kitchen, surrounded by spice jars labeled "Med. Skinned people", "Light skinned people." "Dark skinned people." "Insects." "Krill." "Birds." "Trees". And God says, "and just to make it interesting." And He sprinkles over the earth that he's creating a spice jar labeled "Jerks".

So, apparently, God DOES have a sense of humor. Which explains a whole lot.

On one or two of those days while God was busy in the kitchen creating our world, he managed to work in creating Man and Woman. According to Art Hicks, once a member here, this is how it went:

"So God asked Adam, "What is wrong with you?"

Adam said he didn't have anyone to talk to.

God said that He was going to make Adam a companion and that it would be a woman.

God said, "This person will gather food for you, cook for you, and when you discover clothing she'll wash it for you. She will always agree with every decision you make. She will bear your children and never ask you to get up in the middle of the night to take care of them. She will not nag you and will freely give you love and passion whenever you need it."

Adam asked God, "What will a woman like this cost?"

God replied, "An arm and a leg."

Then Adam asked, "What can I get for a rib?"

The rest is history...

We UU's love to laugh. And I believe there is no one that loves a joke on ourselves more than ourselves. We know all too well that there is usually an element of truth in the joke. places where our faith has problems and learn from them. And, as we laugh together, we grow together.

So, I'll close with a few laughs on ourselves.

What's the difference between Catholics praying and UU's praying? Catholics cross their upper bodies and UU's cross their fingers.

The Universalists believed that God was too good to damn people, while the Unitarians believed that they were too good to be damned.

This is from a UU Sunday bulletin notice: UU Bible study will be held after the service today in the Parish Hall. Please bring your own Bible and a pair of scissors.

Arguing with a UU is like mud wrestling with a pig. Pretty soon you realize the pig likes it.

Middle aged woman goes into a fabric shop, picks out some black chiffon. Asks for fifty yards. Clerk, measuring frantically, "What are you making?" "A negligee." "Well, I can certainly see black chiffon for a negligee, but why fifty yards?" "My husband is a UU and he likes the search."

Garrison Keillor says the Unitarians don't want salvation, they want closure.