

See You in the Funny Papers June 8, 2008

"They took my joy, I want it back." That was Bettye LaVette. She is a blues singer from Detroit, my home town. But it could have been any number of people. It could have been someone in Iraq. Or someone struggling with addictions. Or someone going thru a break up. Or maybe someone who lost their job. What do we do as friends and family when people come to us and want us to help them find their joy again? This was part of my job description in a previous life. Many, many years ago, I was a stand-up comic in L.A. And I truly believed that part of that job was to create joy.

While I think that this experience has helped shape who I am today, I have found in the few times that I have had to opportunity to preach, that stand-up and preaching are completely different activities. Now, I was pleased to find out that the church and the Improv do have some similarities. When I was at the Improv in L.A. and someone said, "A Catholic, a Methodist and a Lutheran are walking into a bar," I knew it was a joke. But when I started working in the church, I discovered that a Methodist, a Lutheran and Catholics walk into bars all the time!

While there is definitely the possibility that a few of you don't fall into one of the following categories, there are some generalizations that might be able to be made. Some of you might be saying to yourselves, "ok, so you used to be funny. Let's see if you can preach." I totally get the freak factor that is my life. Another group of people saying, "So, you used to be a comedian, huh? Alright then, comedy boy, make me laugh." And a third group is looking at their watch and saying, "He knows we only preach 10-12 minutes here, right?" The longer I talk, the more people will jump into that third group. My hope is that all of you truly desire to see the connection between God and Humor and Healing.

Now, while each of our lives are vastly different, there are some things that we all share. What I have had, like many of you in the room today, is a number of events from which I have had to heal. I have flipped through the bible many times, and nowhere do I find it says, "and while you are on earth, it's going to be a cake walk." I don't even know what a cake walk is, but I know that life has not been one. What the bible does tell us in John that we will weep and we will have sorrow. As my dad used to say, no one gets out of here without taking a few lumps. That is not exactly the words my dad used, but this is a house of God and we aren't on cable. I have yet to meet anyone who, after you talk to them long enough, has lived without taking in their fair share of heartache. You find this experience among everyone you come in contact with. As far away as China and as close as the people right in this room. And this pain....connects us. Humor, like pain, connects us also. Author Fredrick Buechner states, "Laughter comes

from as a deep a place as tears come from, and in a way it comes from the same place."

This is something we share. Dr. Clifford Kuhn is one of the few people on the planet who has the dual titles of "psychiatrist" and "stand up comedian." Dr. Kuhn states, "Laughter helps us remember all the things we have in common."

I cannot think of the Pain/Joy connection without thinking of the Psalms. From Psalm 13: "How long must I bear pain in my soul". All the way to Psalm 100, "Make a joyful noise to the Lord all the earth. Worship the Lord with GLADNESS". Can we get back to gladness in the church? I know you probably got it down here but I was at a church recently when at the end they said happy words but here is how they looked, "May our light so shine, and our joy be so obvious, that all who see us may come to know God". It was kinda a hard sell. My favorite Psalm is 126: "Then our mouths were filled with laughter and our hearts filled with joy". If ever there was a book that was schizophrenic regarding pain and pleasure it would be the Psalms. Is it that different than our own papers today? Lots of good news, but an awful lot of bad too.

So the fact is, we are all going to take a few shots. What are we going to do about it? I could give you the feel-good-Dr. Phil type response. "It isn't our circumstances but how we react to our circumstances." While this is true, it sometime just strikes me as just too...I don't know...too, Dr. Phil. There is something about that guy that creeps me out.

Dr. Phil wasn't the first person to make this observation. Viktor Frankl survived a Nazi concentration camp, but many of his family members did not fair so well. In his book, *Mans Search For Meaning*, he comes to the same conclusions regarding the fact that it IS how we react an not our circumstances that dictate whether we are able to find our joy. Needless to say this carries more weight coming from Viktor Frankl.

Hurt and Humor are connected though. Humor comes many times out of pain. Carol Burnett once commented on this. After going through many painful years of dealing with her daughter and her problems with drugs, she was asked if she ever though she would be able to joke about it. She said maybe someday...but not today. She said comedy is pain plus time. Pain PLUS time. This brings up an important point when talking about humor. There is a wrong time to make a joke. While I believe that most things can benefit from the use of humor, I don't believe this means that it can work at all times.

Freud talked about humor being a sign of maturity. Obviously he had never seen a Will Farrell movie. The idea that Freud was trying to get across is that we need to get to a place where we don't take ourselves so seriously. Even John Wesley who is an old dead white guy, who also happens to be the founder of the Methodist church agrees that we need to relax a bit. He was not known to be a laugh riot, but even he agrees saying that, "Sour Godliness is the devil's religion". The point here is, **lighten up**.

When we create a space that doesn't allow for laughter and humor we are eliminating one of the ways that healing can begin. I don't know about you, but I want every tool available in my tool box.

It is generally agreed upon that humor has been with us for a long time and comes from a place deep within our souls. As some of you might know that I was talking to before service, my mom passed away almost three years ago. She had had many strokes and a variety of other ailments before she died. I was on the road with a friend when I got a call detailing my mom's current state. When I got off the phone, my friend asked how she was. I told him that in the last two year's my mom has had several mini strokes, had gotten sepsis, which can be fatal with someone my moms age, had caught pneumonia and in the last few weeks, the doctors had discovered she had, somehow, while bedridden, broke her back. He paused for a second and then said, "Jerry, if one more thing happens to your mother she could be a country western song". Now while some of you might think this is in bad taste, this friend had been through most of this with me for the past few years. When he said this I started laughing and laughing...until my laughter turned to tears. It was a tremendous way for me to actually deal with the grief and begin processing something that I had been in denial about for a very long time. Now while I am not saying that this is the approach for every situation, the fact that we were open to laughter at such a raw time proves to me that we must be open to the *possibility*. **Allow for the opportunity of humor to be part of the healing.**

Charlie Chaplin once said, "Life is a tragedy when seen in close-up but a comedy in a long shot." Sometimes the pain can be so great up close that the only thing we can do is take a step back and try to see the humor in it. The point is not about getting a laugh. It is about allowing humor to help transform the pain and help endure what would otherwise seem unbearable.

What we are talking about here is coping. In the book, *The Courage to Laugh*, Allen Klein was interviewing a hospice worker who said to him, "Humor has a force of its own. And like prayer, it can transform you."

Prayer brings up a good point. It might be worth asking, "Where is God in all this"? The answer is that God is all throughout it. Without God there is no humor. I am using humor in the broadest sense. I am viewing humor as all aspects of humor; laughter, joy, optimism, happiness. These are all gifts from God. Unlike the gifts we receive from others, these gifts are MEANT to be regifted. God's gifts are meant to be used and as friends and family, I believe we are obligated to view humor as a gift from God. Shortly after my mom's death, I found myself feeling guilty whenever I caught myself laughing. I realized I had to give myself permission to laugh again. I had to give myself permission to heal. It was the beginning of allowing myself to look forward and not back. Some bible geeks believe that the Psalm that I quoted earlier, the one with the mouths filled with Laughter, **was not an actual reporting of events but rather that they were stated in the future tense as a**

dreaming anticipation of restoration". I say, all the better. To me this is one of the best use of humor. It teaches us to use humor as a tool for hope. We need to believe that humor leads to hope.

When someone like Bettye La Vette sings with such pain about having her joy ripped away, we as friends and family won't always have the answers and somehow it seems unfair that the Gospel of John plays Kreskin and predicts our sorrow. The Bettye's of the world should be encouraged to read on, because if they do they will see the message goes on to say, "so you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your heart will rejoice, and no one...no one...will take your joy from you...and that's no joke.

Close:

Now go and Live well, laugh often and love much. Thank you for this opportunity. Amen.