

### **“Why I...Laugh”**

A guy walks into a hardware store and says, “I want to buy a saw that can cut down 10 trees an hour.” The man at the store sells him this amazing chainsaw. The guy comes back a few days later and says, “The saw doesn’t work. I could only cut down two trees and hour.” The clerk said, “Let me take a look.” He grabs it, pulls the starter cord and fires it up. The other man says, “Hey, what’s that sound?”

A man goes out ice fishing. He cuts a hole in the ice and drops in his line, but doesn’t catch a thing. But just a little way down the lake kid is pulling fish out left and right. Finally the man goes up to the kid and says, “Hey, what’s your secret, how are catching all those fish and I can’t catch a single one?” The kid says, “mmm, mmm, mmmm, mmmm.” The man says, “What?” The kid again says, “mmm, mmm, mmmm, mmmm.” The man says, “What?” The kid spits into his hand, “Keep your worms warm.”

It’s good to laugh. My first year here at Saint Paul’s I did the top three no-nos for a pastor, all in the span of a couple of weeks. I called the church by the name of my previous church...not a good thing. I went into the bathroom between services with my microphone on, and I stood up to preach with my zipper down—that’s bad! What’s worse is that it was at a funeral! I felt a draft, and immediately asked everyone to bow with me in prayer (zip!) Now, not all those happened on the same day. But you’ve got to laugh!

I won’t mention any names, but not too long ago one of our staff members went through the church on Sunday morning with the back of her skirt tucked into her panty hose. You’ve got to laugh! She didn’t think it was that funny...the rest of us sure did!

It’s fun to watch you laugh. We all laugh in different ways, don’t we? Some people are hissers...some are snorters...some are mumble-laughers...some sound like Chewbacca from Star Wars...

I wonder if we could combine them all....

What is laughter? And why did God give us this unique ability? We’re the only creatures on earth that laugh. Some say that it’s one of the things that make us truly unique in the animal world. Some say that laughter is a sign of our higher brain development. Laughter is common to all cultures on the earth. It’s hardwired into our brains. You don’t have to learn to laugh. The first laughter appears at about 3 1/2 to 4 months of age, long before we’re able to talk. Laughter, like crying, is a way for a preverbal infant to interact with his mother and other caregivers.

Laughter is different from what happens with emotional responses. Emotional responses are confined to specific areas of the brain, but laughter seems to be produced through a circuit that runs through many regions of the brain.

Laughter is social and contagious. We laugh at the sound of laughter itself. Researchers tell us that we laugh more when we play than when we work, which is why we laugh more between the ages of 5 and 6 than at any other time in our lives. Children laugh 300 times a day. Adults laugh only 17 times a day on average.

All that information is fine and good, but the bottom line... it’s just so much fun to laugh!

A woman goes into her doctor because she’s having trouble hearing. He looks in her ear and says, “Well, here’s your problem, you’ve got a suppository stuck in your ear.” The woman says, “Well, that will explain where my hearing aid is.”

This series is called “Why I” and it’s based on some questions. Last week, “Why do I live?” Mark talked about that and about his story, about purpose, about direction, about moving beyond ourselves. Today we look at, what might seem strange a first, the question, “Why do I laugh?” Why did God create us in such a way, with this unique quality? Is it more than just a reaction, is more than just a response? As we look at this I think you’ll learn more about yourself. And then, I think we’ll all learn about God. **Why do I laugh?**

I did some research on this over the last couple of weeks and found it fascinating. Scientists are trying to figure out the reasons why we laugh, the brain mechanisms behind it, and the functions of laughter and in everything I read, I saw God. I saw reasons for laughter that point to a personal, powerful, loving God.

One of the first things I discovered is that **Laughter is a form of praise**. The Psalmist wrote this, **“When the LORD brought back the captives to Zion, we were like those who dreamed. Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy” (Psalm 126:1-2).**

When we can look at our lives and see the good things, a natural response is joy and laughter. When that happens it's a form of praise and a way to give thanks. In that passage from Psalm 126 here's what's going on. The people of Israel have returned to their homeland after being carried off as slaves. They were praising God for who God is, and thanking God for what he had done in bringing them home, and it took the form of laughter.

Maybe you've done this before. You faced a difficult situation, maybe you lost a job, and you took that to God, and later you realized that God helped you, directed you to find a new job, and the joy just poured out of you in the form of joyful laughter and you aimed it at God. That's praise. I had a friend who told me a couple of weeks ago that he was on pins and needles waiting for the results of a biopsy, very worried about cancer. The biopsy came back negative, the joy and laughter spilled out of him as he praised God for a good report.

This kind of holy laughter and joy is contagious. People see this kind of laughter and joy and it doesn't take long for them to see the God that is the source of that joy. Look at the rest of verse two. **“Then it was said among the nations, ‘The Lord has done great things for them’” (Psalm 126:2).**

The other people are going like, “Man, God has blessed you! Look at your joy and your laughter. Man, you've got something that's unique about you.” Do people say that about you? I hope they say that about me. I hope. You see, Christianity should be a joyful faith. Jesus said, **“I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete” (John 15:11, NIV).** I would even say that people who have a dour and sour personality, a dour and sour faith, have an incomplete faith, or an immature faith. Joy is at the very core of who we are as followers of Jesus.

Now we need to be realistic. Followers of Christ will have hardships and difficulties and tragedies in their lives. We're not talking about faking joy in the face of that. Real joy is independent of our circumstances because real joy is connected to the presence of Christ. Let's skip down to the last verse, Psalm 126:6, **“Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy. He who goes out weeping, carrying the seed to sow, will return with the songs of joy, carrying sheaves with him” (Psalm 126:6, NIV).**

Life is not always happy is it? I mean it's not. Sometimes, I talk to people who try to say, “Everything is great, everything is joyful, everything is wonderful. It's just happy, happy, happy. If you're happy and you know it clap your hands! There are not any problems.” I want to say, “Man, what are you smoking? Life is hard. It's full of stress and anxiety. We live in a fallen world. Loved ones get sick. They die. We get fired. People get hurt. Accidents occur. What about that?” Because Jesus will never leave us, and he is the source of joy, joy can never be taken away. It doesn't mean we fake happiness all the time. Ecclesiastes 3:1 and 4 says, **“There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven... a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance” (Ecclesiastes 3:1, 4, NIV).**

Followers of Jesus should be the most joyful people on earth. Not a fake happy, happy, joy, joy. A deep abiding joy, that nothing can touch because it's source is Jesus himself.

Laughter is a form of praise, a spilling out of joy at blessings, deliverance, freedom, restoration. Our laughter can be a way to praise God!

Laughter is also a way to build community. **“Laughter builds community.”** Research shows that we laugh 30 times more when we're with people than by ourselves. Many researchers believe that the purpose of laughter is related to making and strengthening human connections. One cultural anthropologist wrote that “Laughter occurs when people are comfortable with one another, when they feel open and free. And the more laughter [there is], the more bonding [occurs] within the group,” (Mahadev Apte).

Some believe that the first human laughter may have begun as a gesture of shared relief at the passing of danger. It creates a bond of mutual experience and trust (Philosopher John Morreall). The core staff here meet every Monday and a big part of that meeting every week is laughter. It's an outpouring of our joy and it builds us tighter together.

Singles. Listen carefully. When other singles are surveyed for what they're looking for in a future mate, one of the top things for men and women is a sense of humor. Why do you think this is? I think it's because a sense of humor points to all that we've talked about so far and it points to a presence of God, the creator.

But we have to be careful about humor, because we can be tempted to fall into unholy laughter. That is laughter that degrades others, or excludes others. Maybe that's what Jesus was talking about when he gave this sobering statement, "**Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep**" (Luke 6:25, NIV).

I believe Jesus was saying, "If your laughter is pointed in a direction that excludes others, that crushes others, that demeans others, that denies God's glory and his love of people, then you can be sure that your laughter will turn into deep sadness and regret." Woe to you who laugh unholy laughter now.

Research shows that when we're teenagers we're much more likely to engage in humor at the expense of others. It's a way to define ourselves against someone else or some other group. It's a way to make ourselves look better and feel better than someone else. It's unholy laughter and thankfully most of us grow out of it.

This is where we have to use our higher brain function to decide if we are laughing with someone, or at them. You may be tempted to laugh at someone's misfortune, but those are the moments to restrain yourself.

We use laughter in a way to build up community and build up individuals, not destroy community and crush others.

I believe that God has also given us laughter to **Diffuse anxiety, tension and grief**. I spent my Junior year of college in Japan. I lived with a wonderful Japanese family who took very good care of me. Over Christmas break my parents came over and stayed for a week or 10 days. One evening my Japanese host family took us all out for a very nice dinner. And I'm talking off-the-hook nice. We had a private room in an elegant restaurant, we each had our own server, the meal had maybe 10 courses of traditional Japanese food. It was the best of the best, and it had to have been one of the most expensive meals I've ever eaten. It was luxurious.

Now, I was used to the Japanese food by that time, but my parents, not so much. One of the courses was sashimi, which is a large chunk of raw fish. You're supposed to pick it up with your chopsticks, dip in a sauce, and bite off small pieces of it. My dad wasn't sure what to do so he put the whole thing in his mouth and proceeded to chew...and chew...and chew. He swears that as he chewed it got bigger and bigger. So there we are quietly chatting, in this luxurious environment, when all of the sudden my dad lets out the loudest gag I've ever heard! Not a polite little erp, but gigantic gag! We all froze as we looked at him, wondering if we should cover our plates. Dad took the piece out of his mouth with his hand. I wasn't sure if my host family would be offended, upset, angered. My host mother broke the tension by saying in her broken English, "You OK Mister Brown?" That brought out peals of laughter that broke the anxiety of the moment. What a gift God's given to us to ease tension!

And what about grief? I've done a lot of funerals and as I sit with families planning, talking about their loved one who has died, I almost always see a lot of laughter mixed with the tears as they tell stories, and anecdotes, and funny instances. And with that laughter among the tears, I always see a release, a joy at knowing their loved one is with God, the healing of the grief begins.

God has given us laughter to diffuse tension, to release anxiety, to ease our grief. Researchers are discovering this and articulating it. But the people of God have known this for centuries.

Another reason I believe that God gave us laughter is **To bring us health**. What happens when we laugh? New research says that our T cells are all ramped up. They're the cells that fight infection and fend off cancers. Laughter makes our endorphins really explode. They're the hormones that make us feel good. When we laugh entire muscular system relaxes. Laughter reduces our stress levels by reducing the level of stress hormones, and also helps us cope with serious illnesses. Physiologically, laughter promotes healing, by lowering the blood pressure, and by increasing the vascular blood flow and the oxygenation of the blood.

That's what happens. That's what new research is telling us. But you've got to laugh at the new research, because the Bible tells us in Proverbs 17:22, "**A cheerful heart is good medicine**" (**Proverbs 17:22, NIV**).

Laughter is God's tranquilizer; God's anti-depressant. One of the things that almost kept me from going into the ministry was the fact that so many pastors were so serious and boring and monotonous. I thought to myself, "I don't want any of that." But as I read God's word, as I began to get a better picture of the creator of the universe, of Jesus the Christ, I began to see that God wants us to have joy, complete joy, to have abundant lives. God wants us to laugh because it brings health.

One other reason God gave us the gift of laughter, **It Pleases God**.

It pleases God. It makes God smile. God has feelings too. And he smiles when I smile.

How many parents do we have in the house? Hey, parents, we love to watch our children laugh. There's nothing that thrills me more than to see them laugh from the belly. Our heavenly Father is the same way.

Remember, God could have said, "Okay, I want the prevailing attitude to be one of boredom and seriousness and solemn-ness. Galatians 5:22 says, "The fruit of the spirit is..." What? "Joy!" Yeah, outrageous, contagious joy. "I've got the joy, joy, joy down in my heart! Where? Down in my heart!" I learned that song as a kid. I kinda like that song.

"*The fruit of the spirit...*" Galatians 5 says, "*...is joy.*" What's the byproduct of joy? Laughter. What happens? I receive Jesus Christ, and the person of the Holy Spirit infiltrates my life. He redecorates my life from the interior, and I produce, Galatians 5 says, supernatural fruit. And one of the things is this thing called joy—outrageous, contagious joy. We should be known by our joy.

The fruit, though, is not just for self consumption. We don't consume all the joy ourselves. No, no, no. What do we do? We share it. We share our outrageous, contagious joy and laughter. That really pleases God!

Jesus said in John 10:10, "**I have come that you might have life, and have it to the full**" (**John 10:10**). Or your translation might read "to the abundance."

The word "abundance" in the Greek is pronounced par-a-sos. It means "overflowing." It means a life full of joy and laughter and creativity and adventure and excitement. That's the kind of life that Jesus wants us to live. It pleases God. Here's another verse. Nehemiah 8:10, "**The joy of the Lord is your strength**" (**Nehemiah 8:10, NIV**).

That's one thing I love about Saint Paul's. Our church is full of joy and laughter. If you ever go to a church and the church is not laughing a lot, it's not a Godly church. If you ever go to a church and there's not joy, it's not a Godly church; it's not a spiritually mature church. Christians should laugh more than anybody. Think about it. I mean, I'm a fallen and fallible self-centered sinner. I'm totally unrighteous, and there's this cosmic chasm separating me from God. I deserve to get nuked. I'm toast, because I'm a sinner. God's perfect. He's holy, and I'm not. So man, I'm in trouble. It's like, it should be over.

What did God do, though? God loved me so much, he loved you so much, that he sent Jesus Christ, who lived a perfectly righteous life, to die on the cross for all of my junk and funk, and yours too. Jesus rose again, and I've received what God has done for me through Christ. And because of that, I'm freed up to laugh. I'm freed up to have the kind of joy and the kind of exuberance and excitement that is not manufactured from Aaron Brown. It comes from God. It comes totally a gift from God.

So, why do I laugh? It's all about God presence. It's a form of praise, it builds the community, it eases tension and grief, it brings healing, it pleases the God who made me. I'd say that's one of the reasons Saint Paul's is so great. People say, "I've never seen a church this joyful. You people know how to have fun!" And I simply say, "You know what? The joy of the Lord is our strength." It's all about him, because God frees us up to really, really laugh. And for today, that is the Good News, in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

*I thank Rev. Ed Young, Senior Pastor of Fellowship Church in Grapevine, TX, for some of his insights into laughter.*