

The Gift of Our Imperfections

Old Testament Reading: Job 1:1-3, 13-21; 42:10-17 (Beginning and end of the Job story)

Epistle Reading: 2 Corinthians 12:6-10 (Paul's weakness)

Gospel Reading: Matthew 16:13-18 (Peter's pre-eminence)

Preachers often like to begin their sermons with a good joke. It's interesting that they never turn to the *Bible* to find a joke. Why is that? Perhaps they assume that God and jokes don't mix. After all, God is serious business—and if the Bible is the word of God, then it's no laughing matter.

Besides, God and Jesus don't seem like the right *sort* for jokes. The key to a joke is the punchline—it's got to be something surprising, unexpected. But God *knows everything*. So he's heard all the punchlines already. You know there's nothing worse than a stale joke—where you already *know* the punchline. So for God and Jesus I guess *all* the jokes are stale. I can just imagine the frustration of Bill Cosby or Chris Rock when he goes to Heaven: "Hey, God—Did you hear the one about...?" "Ya, I've heard that one." "Well what about...?" "Ya, that one, too." For comedians, heaven must be hell!

But there's more to a good joke than an unexpected punchline. The punchline's got to disorient us a bit. Usually a good joke presents us with a contract between how we pretend to be, and how we really are. It's that contrast between pretense and perception, between expectation and reality, that gets us laughing. For example:

Once while St. Peter was manning the pearly gates he realized he needed to take a ...--well, take a break. Since he saw no one approaching he thought it would be safe to leave briefly, but he asked Jesus to cover for him, just in case. Now wouldn't you know it but as soon as Peter disappeared around behind a cloud, along came an old man up to the gates. Jesus was a bit nervous because he hadn't done this before, so he was focussing on the big book that listed the questions he was supposed to ask the old man.

"Well, old man," Jesus started, "tell me about your life."

The old man thought for a bit and then said: "I worked as a carpenter. I had a son, but he didn't come to be in the usual way, if you know what I mean. When my son grew older he fell in with some bad folks, but later there was some odd transformation. I never really understood it all."

Well, Jesus was dumbfounded. He looked up in shock and said: "Father?!"

The old man suddenly looked up too, and said: "Pinocchio?!"

Now that's a good joke, because of the contrast between expectation and reality. Though, if you think about it too long, it doesn't really work. Because, being omniscient, Jesus would have known it was Geppetto right off. He wouldn't have gotten misled.

When you see humor in this way—the bubble of expectation being burst by the pin of reality—it turns out to be a profound part of our human experience. And how could that *not* find its way into the Bible? In fact, I think that there is a good deal of humor in the Bible, but we don't tend to see it, or even look for it, because we take God and Jesus too seriously. Here's an example:

Jesus was often called on to explain what God's realm would be like. People assumed it would have to be something lofty and impressive—after all it was *God's* realm. Jesus made a number of comparisons, but my favorite is this (Mark 4:30-32):
What can we say the kingdom is like?...It is like a mustard seed which, at the time of its sowing, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth. Yet once it is sown it grows into the biggest...

Now, what do you think he says here? Tree? It's got to be big and glorious, doesn't it? After all, it's the kingdom of God. But no:

...it grows into the biggest *shrub* of them all and puts out big branches so that the birds of the air can shelter in its shade.

A shrub! A big shrub, but still, *shrubby*. Nothing lofty.

That's the version in Mark—probably the original version. It's funny—I think—because it catches us, expecting one thing, and offering another. And it's not only funny, it's profound. The kingdom of God is not something that's going to overwhelm us. It's not going to overpower, contrary to the expectations of the disciples, and us. It's a rag-tag kind of thing. It's insistent and insidious—more like a weed.

The other synoptic Gospel writers—Matthew and Luke—don't get it. They're stuck on the *lofty* conception of the kingdom. Confronted with this story, they can't stand its...smallness. So, they succumb to their expectations. Matthew says (13:32), "it is the biggest of shrubs and *becomes a tree*..." Luke (13:19) skips over the shrub stage altogether, and has it grow into a tree. Are you kidding? A *mustard tree*? Who's ever heard of that? They don't get it. Not only is the humor lost, but more importantly, so is the humility. Because the kingdom of God is a shrub...a bush...scrappy, hard to stamp out once it takes root. It's a rag-tag kind of thing. It's not what the Jews expected, and it's not what most Christians expect. There's that contrast between pretension and reality. Jesus wants us to see it. He wants to catch us out—but it's not easy to laugh at ourselves.

Jesus spent a lot of time eating with sinners and outcasts. Don't you think he must have been good at table-talk—kidding around—joking?

Here's another place I find humor in the Bible:

Peter wasn't always called "Peter". In fact his name was Simon—until Jesus decided to call him Peter. Unfortunately we read the Bible in English translation, so we miss a lot here. The name Peter is really "Petros" in Greek—the language of the New Testament—and "Kephas" in Aramaic—the language that Jesus spoke. The words "petros" and "kephas" both mean "rock" or "stone". When Jesus gave Simon his nickname, the nickname was "Rock" or, better, "Rocky". So when Jesus promotes Simon to be the foundation of his church, it sounds very profound that the foundation is a *rock*. And this image resonates through the story of the man who builds his house on rock, rather than on sand (Matthew 7:24-27).

But the image also resonates through another story. Listen to this one, from a bit earlier in Matthew (14:25-30):

[Late at night Jesus] came towards them, walking on the sea, and when the disciples saw him walking on the sea they were terrified. "It's a ghost," they said, and cried out in fear. But at once Jesus called out to them, saying, "Courage! It's me! Don't be afraid!" It was Peter who answered. "Lord," he said, "if it *is* you, tell me to come to you across the water." Jesus said, "Come." Then Peter got out

of the boat and started walking towards Jesus across the water, but then noticing the wind, he took fright and began to sink. “Lord,” he cried. “Save me!” Now, I don’t know about you, but when I hear that story, I can’t help thinking that Peter has sunk...like a *stone*. And isn’t it funny that Jesus has nicknamed him...Rock, or Rocky. The contrast between expectation and reality couldn’t be clearer.

Rocky is this *flawed* character—and Jesus fully appreciates that fact about him. And yet...and yet he makes him the foundation of his church. Rocky, who sinks like a stone; Rocky, the thick-skulled disciple who needs even the simplest stories explained to him (Matthew 15:15-16); Rocky, who blabs on about building a booth after the transformation (Matthew 17:4); Rocky, who denied Jesus three times (Matthew 26:69-74); Rocky, who struggles with whether he loves Jesus in the right way (John 21:15-17); Rocky, who becomes the foundation of the church. Rocky—what an appropriate nickname for a man who lives out one rocky life. Isn’t he a lot like you and me?

Couldn’t Jesus do better than Rocky? The answer is—No. Rocky is *just* the kind of person Jesus is looking for. The church is built out of a whole bunch of us rocky lives. How wonderful that Jesus gives Simon a nickname that they can all *smile* about—reminding us of, preparing *him* for, his foibles, yet marching on nevertheless. Jesus never meant to build his church out of a bunch of perfect citizens. He meant to build it out of a bunch of US—imperfect sinners. Not because he couldn’t do any better, but because that’s who make a church. Our imperfections don’t make us *unfit* for life together. Our imperfections are just what *fit* us for one another. We come together in our weaknesses—and that is where our strength lies.

This profound paradox was clearly professed by Paul, in his second letter to the Corinthians: “For it is when I am weak that I am strong.” How difficult it is for us to believe that. Is it okay to be flawed? How can it be that our weaknesses are a strength?

I’d like to do an experiment this morning—involving each of us. To start with, I want you to take a minute to think of something about yourself that brings you down. Perhaps you have a medical condition, perhaps you have a troubled relationship, perhaps work isn’t going right, or you were laid-off, perhaps you’re not doing as well in school as you’d like, perhaps you have a bad temper, perhaps you’re holding a grudge. I’m going to be quiet up here for a minute and I want you to actually think of one thing like that....

Okay...let’s call that thing your imperfection. Maybe you found *lots* of them, but let’s just focus on one. Maybe someone here didn’t find any. Is there someone like that? Okay, good. Because that person didn’t need to be here anyway. We’re *imperfect*—that’s why we’re here. It’s not something to be ashamed of—it’s not something to hide. It’s what the church is made of.

Sometimes we wish we didn’t have these imperfections. And of course it’s good to try to better ourselves. But let’s look before we leap:

People of African heritage are genetically more susceptible to sickle-cell anemia than other folks. This looks like an imperfection. It certainly leads to much suffering. If only we could fix it—if only we could use our increasing genetic knowledge to fix that imperfection. But it turns out that the genetic condition that disposes people to sickle-cell, also provides immunity to malaria. Not only can you see how that was once useful—in Africa, but with global warming, malaria is likely to become more common in many parts of the world. Genetic flaw turns out to be genetic diversity—a strength after all.

Do any of you have trouble remembering things? I sure do—as you get older it just seems to happen. In fact they say there are two sure signs of getting older: one of them is loss of memory, and the other is...well, I can't seem to remember the other one just now. Anyway, isn't loss of memory an imperfection? Wouldn't we be better-off with perfect memories?

Think about Job. The book of Job is one of the weirdest in the Bible. In some ways I don't like it, because it makes us seem like pawns in someone else's game. In other ways I do like it, because it offers a different perspective on God—and it shows us that it is okay to have different ideas about God. There's not just one right picture of God. Anyway, the thing that always bothered me the most about Job is that after having suffered the loss of his ten children, and having honored God through it all, Job is rewarded with ten *new* children. And everyone lives happily ever after...apparently. It says (verse 10) God "restored Job's condition," as though you can make up for the loss of ten children by getting ten new ones to replace them! I don't buy that...and it bothers me to think that God thought that Job should buy it.

Well, we don't really know if Job bought it. The story ends telling us that he lived for another 140 years. It doesn't say if he was happy—but I think the implication is that he was. How is that possible?

In fact, this isn't *just* a story about Job—it's a story about anyone who has lived through tragedy, and come out on the other side. How is that possible? What would it have been like to be Job and have a perfect memory? To remember his first children as clearly as he remembers his last? And to have these clear memories for another 140 years! The only way I can imagine being Job and living through this experience is to imagine that his memory serves him well—by *failing* somewhat. What a mercy it is for Job to have a weak memory in his later years. We are fond of saying that time heals all wounds. I'm not sure what all we mean by that—but we at least know the mercy of being able to let go of the painful past, and part of that is *forgetting* that pain. And that is how some of us can survive tragedy. The miracle of healing is at least partly the mercy of forgetting.

Sometimes we promise never to forget. That is what people were saying last week at the sixth anniversary of the Oklahoma City bombing. But memory is a harsh master, when it whips us without mercy with the continued awareness of loss. At some point we need to forgive—and, *forget*.

Now, back to your imperfection! I hope you haven't *forgotten* it already. I don't want to say we should savor our imperfections, or try to have more of them. I'm supposing we've all tried to do better, and fallen short. Now what?

Now what we do is try to find a way for that imperfection to be an asset—an opening for us to be God's children once more. We are not here to *impress* God and one another. We're here to *confess* our weaknesses and find strength in one another. We are saved by acknowledging our vulnerability, not by showcasing our ability.

Remember that tiny mustard seed that grew into the kingdom of God? How that can be, is explained in the following little story:

Once a woman's son died in a tragic accident. The woman, crazy with grief, mourned her loss so deeply that no one could comfort her. At last a friend took her to the house of a holy man, where she made a sobbing plea: "Use your

powers to bring my son back to life. Surely you are able by prayer or some miracle to induce the Almighty to lighten my grief.”

The old man spoke kindly to the woman: “Bring me a mustard seed from a home that has never known sorrow. I will use that seed to remove the pain from your life.”

Immediately the woman set out in search of the mustard seed. “First I will visit the home of a wealthy family,” she thought. “Tragedy is less likely to have struck them.” Soon she approached a beautiful mansion, knocked on the door, and spoke to the woman who greeted her. “I am in search of a home that has never known sorrow. Is this such a place? It is vital that I know.”

“Never known sorrow!” cried the woman who had answered the door. “You have come to the wrong house.” She sobbed as she began to describe all the tragedies that had touched her family. She invited the woman into her home to explain in greater detail what had taken place. The woman remained for many hours, listening and caring.

When she left to resume her search, the woman visited a modest house about a mile away. The experience was the same. Wherever she traveled, from mansion to hut, she was greeted with tales of sadness and sorrow. Everyone found her a willing and careful listener.

After weeks of travel she became so involved with the grief of others that she forgot about her search for the mustard seed, never realizing that it had, indeed, driven the sorrow from her life.

She had found the kingdom of God, grown out of a mustard seed. A scruffy sort of kingdom. Not lofty at all, but plucky and tenacious.

We all have our flaws—but they are the very reasons we need to turn to each other and to God. They are the very things that make for a church. We’re all like Rocky, stumbling along looking for a mustard seed. But we’re doing it together—not alone.

It has been several years now since I last sang this song. It’s about the flaw in each of us, and the mustard seed that each of us seeks, and how those things go together to build the kingdom of God:

From you I receive; to you I give.

Together we share; in this we live.

Now here’s the rest of the experiment: I’d like you all now to bring your flaw, your imperfection to mind. And as we sing this simple song together, I want you to find someone nearby. Don’t worry if you don’t know the person. You’ll have to stand up, if you can, and face them, and look them in the eyes, and cross your hands over your heart as you sing, “From you I receive.” And as you do that you are receiving *their* flaw from them. Then hold your hands together in front of you like an offering as you sing, “To you I give.” And as you do that you are offering *your* flaw to them. Then hold the other person’s hands together in yours as you sing, “Together we share.” And as you do that you are looking for the mustard seed. Then as you sing the last line, “In this we live,” move away from that person and find another, for the search that is the kingdom of God brings many of us together. If you don’t have a partner for a verse, go ahead and sing along anyway.

From you I receive; to you I give.

Together we share; in this we live.

If you didn't get to share that song with everyone, you're allowed to do it after the service—or, really, anytime you want. Remember, we're not giving and receiving perfection, but imperfection. For, as Paul proclaimed, "God's power is strongest when you are weak." I want to end with my favorite story, told by a female psychiatrist:

I had a man come into my practice with bone cancer. His leg was removed at the hip to save his life.

He was 24 years old when I started working with him and he was a very angry man with a lot of bitterness. He felt a deep sense of injustice and a very deep hatred of all well people, because it seemed so unfair to him that he had suffered this terrible loss so early in life.

I worked with this man through his grief and rage and pain using painting, imagery, and deep psychotherapy. After working with him for more than two years there came a profound shift. He began "coming out of himself." Later he started to visit other people who had suffered severe physical losses, and he would tell me the most wonderful stories about these visits.

Once he visited a young woman who was almost his own age. It was a hot day and he was in running shorts so his artificial leg showed when he came into her hospital room. The woman was so depressed about the loss of both her breasts that she wouldn't even look at him, wouldn't pay attention to him. The nurses had left her radio playing, probably to cheer her up. Desperate to get her attention, he unstrapped his leg and began dancing around the room on one leg, snapping his fingers to the music. She looked at him in amazement, and then burst out laughing and said, "If you can dance, I guess I can sing!"

It was a year following this that we sat down to review our work together. He talked about what was significant to him and then I shared what was significant in our process. As we were reviewing our work together, I opened his file and there discovered several drawings he had made early on. I handed them to him. He looked at them and said, "Oh, look at this." He showed me one of his earliest drawings. I had suggested to him that he draw a picture of his body. He had drawn a picture of a vase, and running through the vase was a deep black crack. This was the image of his body, and he had taken a black crayon and had drawn the crack over and over again. He was grinding his teeth with rage at the time. It was very, very painful because it seemed to him that this vase could never function as a vase again. It could never hold water.

Now, years later, he came to this picture and looked at it and said, "This isn't finished." And I said, extending the box of crayons, "Why don't you finish it?" He picked a yellow crayon and putting his finger on the crack he said, "You see, here—where it is broken—this is where the light comes through." And with the yellow crayon he drew light streaming through the crack in his body.

(Rachael Naomi Remen, in *Stories of the Spirit, Stories of the Heart*, pp. 28-30.)

We're all cracked vessels, just like Rocky. The good news is that that's how God wants us. For it's on this rocky and broken foundation that God still builds the church. Amen.

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