

**Jan 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2023**  
**Summerland United Church**  
**Spiritual Affective Disorder: Lighten Up**

Our current worship series is all about finding profound meaning and spiritual depth in the seemingly ordinary activities and experiences that make up our everyday lives. Life can be serious business. If we pay any attention to the news, we know it is often difficult to find anything good in the world. Sometimes when we look at the world around us we also feel guilty when we find humour and delight, amidst so much suffering. But we know that humour can help us, when we laugh the world becomes a little less bleak and it can give us strength to tackle the hard jobs in our lives and in this world.

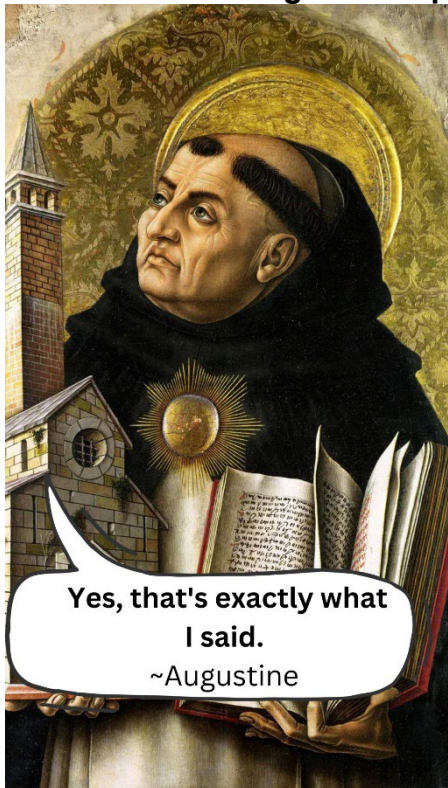
This week we choose to lighten up—to “spin” life in a little different way as we look for the delight and especially, humour, in life.

A lot of people cite the ability to make us laugh as the number one thing they look for in friends and spouses. Many comedians have the knack for seeing everyday life in ways that make us laugh. Sometimes laughing is the first step out of the gloom of depression or grief. Perhaps the saying is true laughter is the best medicine.

**Scripture**

*Isaiah 9:1-4 NRSV*

**Reflection: Belching the Gospel**



Yes, you read that title right. Today I am going to reflect on Augustine and belching the gospel. I recognize that by using that word in reference to the gospel some of us are now very uncomfortable, and perhaps a little miffed. Many of us grew up believing that church is a serious place, the gospel, God and Jesus are serious things and not something to laugh at or make jokes about.

And especially if we share even a drop of blood with Scottish Congregationalists (which I do) there's a desire to purse the lips and fold the arms and step away from anything remotely close to Shenanigans happening anywhere near the church.

But we're missing out on a lot of very good theology and connection to our faith if we refuse to allow humour into it. There is humour in the bible, it can be a little hard to find, but it is there.

In Genesis, Sarah laughs at the absurdity of her having a baby at her age. She laughs at God and is rewarded for it.

In Exodus, Moses comes down off the mountain and discovers his brother Aaron has made a Golden Calf. Aaron refuses to come clean and says of the people – they made me do it. *And look I just took their gold and tossed it in the fire. It came out like a golden calf. Don't ask me how that happened.* A bit like when there's a bite out of all the cookies and your toddler insists the cat bit them all.

In 1<sup>st</sup> Kings, Elijah ridicules "the priests of Baal who wailed and slashed themselves in the hope that Baal would send fire from Heaven. "Shout louder!" Elijah calls, "...Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling; or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened!" (1 Kings 18:27)

Humour is used to teach as well.

Proverbs 17:12, Better to meet a grizzly robbed of her cubs than a fool hellbent on folly.

Proverbs 17:28, dunces who keep quiet are thought to be wise; as long as they keep their mouths shut, they're smart.

Proverbs 26:17 Like someone who takes a stray dog by the ears is one who meddles in the quarrel of another.

And

Proverbs 4:7 succinctly says, "The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom..."

In the Gospels, Jesus uses absurdity to get his point across and is downright sarcastic at times.

Matthew 19:23-24

And Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly, I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven. 24 Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God."

John 1:48

Nathanael said to him, "How do you know me?" Jesus answered him, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you." 49 Nathanael answered him, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" 50 Jesus answered him, "Because I said, 'I saw you under the fig tree,' do you believe? You will see greater things than these."

And my favourite humour story is in Matthew 8 and it is also shared in Luke 8. Jesus is walking through a graveyard when he meets a man possessed by demons. Jesus asks the man, or rather the demons what its name is. The demon replies 'Legion' implying

that there are 1000 demons within this person. Jesus looks around and casts all the demons into a herd of pigs that is nearby.

The pigs in their distress race down a hill and drown themselves in the sea of Galilee.

Now, this is a pretty weird story just by itself and not exactly funny to us modern readers. But to the Jewish people of Jesus' time, this story is hilarious. And this is all to do with Jewish cleanliness laws. Pigs are unclean animals; they are the worst of the worst. They are our mosquitoes.

So these unclean and loathed animals who are reviled as much as demons are, become possessed by those demons and would rather drown in a lake than deal with it. Imagine being plagued by a swarm of mosquitoes that suddenly turn and fly straight into Okanagan lake. We would probably sigh with relief and we would laugh.

So the Jewish people in Jesus' time would also sigh with relief and would laugh at this ridiculous story. And what's more, they would remember it. They would go tell their friends this funny story and the word of Jesus would spread.

Because that's the thing about funny stories- we remember them and we share them. Because they made us feel good we tell others because we want them to feel good too.

So here's where we get to Augustine. I'm currently in a class at school where we're reading sermons from people who are considered "Doctors of the Church". This is a title given to different theologians who during their lifetimes were worthy of following and didn't challenge the orthodoxy of the day.

Augustine, according to the Church (big C, catholic church) is both worthy of following and never challenged the canon and custom of the church in the 5<sup>th</sup> century.

If you've heard anything about Augustine, it's probably his 'confessions' which he wrote after his conversion to Christianity. He presents himself as a model Christian, the kind of Christian that puritans and congregationalism alike would be proud. He foreswore all the excess in his life and pushed for regular penance for worldly sins -which were basically anything that satisfied the human body or mind that wasn't God.

Generally, we assume, and rightly so, that his writings are dry and joyless. And I've read his *Confessions* and this assumption is not wrong.

However, his sermons are another matter, or at least parts of them are. His sermons were written for an audience of both the well-educated high-class nobility and illiterate and uneducated lower-class people in the city of Hippo. And because he firmly believed the job of a preacher was to ensure the salvation of his listeners, he employed any number of literary devices to engage his audience such as word pictures, metaphor, question and response, rhyme and in some cases humour.

In the sermon I'm about to quote, Augustine has been discussing 'the nature of the word' describing to his listeners how important it is for each person to experience "*The word*" to truly understand what it means to have Jesus in your heart.

He uses a couple of different metaphors prior to this section, And while he clearly states this concept is beyond mere words and explanation, he goes on to use this metaphor...

He says, "Let us turn our attention to the Lord's festive supper (what we solemnly refer to as the Last Supper). The disciples were all reclining at the table with the Lord; John is described in the gospel as being in the habit of leaning back on the Lord's breast. So what would he say about his divinity?

The Lord of the feast, after all, and the Lord of those feasting would hardly allow his disciple to fill his belly at the table and not fill his mind at his breast."

This is an odd image. And while it calls to mind a mother nursing a baby, it's more than that. Think about how comforting it is to lay your ear against a loved one's chest and hear their heart beating. When we do this, we connect with the person on a deep level. When our minds connect to the heart, one's inner heart can be known.

So back to Augustine who says, "He, for his part, having drunk his fill gave a good belch and that very belch is the gospel. And so, with the eyes of faith in the gospel you have seen the [disciples] feasting, now listen to him belching: *In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the Word was God. ...*

How am I to understand [Jesus] being word and God?" [you may ask.]

May the one who gave the [disciple] his fill also cause you to drink. Meanwhile, just listen to the one who's belching, believe his belching, so that you to may climb the ladder of faith and take your fill of lively understanding." (sermon 341).

Complicated theology and mixed metaphors aside – what I want to make note of is the fact that Augustine humour – and potty humour at that – to help his listeners understand faith.

I can guarantee that I will not forget that Augustine tried to explain how we experience Christ through crass bodily functions.

And if we're intent on parsing out what he's trying to get at it's this: Understanding faith is indescribable, It is something to be experienced and not easily put in words.

However, listening to words, listening to *The Word*, creates the space and opportunity to experience faith.

So go to the feast, drink your fill and listen to the belching of the gospel and believe in it – and eventually you to might be able to belch the gospel as well.

So humour and faith have a long history of working together to draw us deeper in and closer to God.

Humour keeps us healthier in mind and body and soul. A CBC article published online, Jan 6<sup>th</sup>, says, “There’s a growing body of study on the use of humour, amusement and levity for well-being and positive health outcomes.” It goes on to say that “HealthLinkBC, says -humour therapy- the use of smiles and laughter to aid healing – allows people to view chronic disease as more manageable, while also allowing the release of fear, anger and stress. All of which can harm the body over time.”<sup>1</sup>

It can feel wrong to find humour in hard situations. We look around the world and see a lot of suffering and strife and laughing and being happy can feel privileged, making us feel guilty.

But allowing the light of humour into our lives doesn’t mean we stop taking things seriously, the things that need to be taken seriously. We still need to do that. Yet, giving ourselves permission to relax and laugh creates resilience which in turn gives us more strength to engage the harder parts of our lives.

Ecclesiastes famously reminds us there is a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance. And Proverbs 14 says even in laughter the heart may ache, reminding us that sometimes joy and sorrow live simultaneously in our hearts.

Isaiah, in the passage we heard today, calls us to rejoice. To honour the harvest with thanksgiving and joy. When we honour our daily lives with thanksgiving and joy the gloom in our lives is overshadowed by the light of dawn.

So, give yourself permission to lighten up, notice the absurd and amusing moments in your life and remember that Laughter and light are gifts from God and I firmly believe that when we laugh God laughs with us.  
May it be so, amen.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/why-you-should-find-more-humour-in-life-1.6687881?cmp=newsletter\\_CBC%20British%20Columbia\\_1633\\_829680](https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/why-you-should-find-more-humour-in-life-1.6687881?cmp=newsletter_CBC%20British%20Columbia_1633_829680)