

## Wesley United Methodist Church

February 17, 2018

“What’s Wrong with Laughing?”

Luke 6:17-26

Sometimes the words of Jesus, taken out of context, can cause us real problems. Imagine if you and I were sales people and we had invited Jesus to speak at our annual sales banquet. Imagine Jesus standing up as the guest-speaker, looking us over with a strange mixture of anger and compassion, and then speaking these words:

“But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort.

Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep.

Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets.” Can’t you see the banquet hall grow suddenly still with people lowering their eyes and speaking to one another in hushed tones?

Woe to those who are rich? Isn’t that what the free enterprise system is all about the accumulation of wealth? Woe to those who are well fed? Would he prefer that we be hungry? Woe to those who laugh? Hasn’t he read about the healing power of humor? Woe to you when all men speak well of you? Hasn’t he read Dale Carnegie? We’re in sales, for heaven sake. It’s critical that people speak well of us. Developing relationships is what sales is all about. What’s going on here?

The first thing we need to see is that Jesus often spoke to specific situations and so taught specific strategies to deal with those situations. For example, the economic situation was much different in his day than ours. Many who had obtained wealth had done it by exploiting the political system. What was even more grievous was what wealth did to people. It caused them to turn a blind eye to those who were not as fortunate as they. The people at the bottom of society lived in much more wretched conditions than poor people do today.

But like today, the wealthy had built up a whole system of rationalizations for maintaining the status quo. This offended Jesus. And he said, “Woe to you who are rich.”

There were many fine wealthy people in Jesus’ time. This was not directed at them. It was directed at those for whom wealth had become an obsession.

There is a way to use wealth to brighten up people’s lives. There is nothing wrong with obtaining wealth honorably. Wealthy people have more opportunities for doing good. Wealthy people have more influence in society. Wealth can be a blessing, not a curse, if you understand the proper place of money.

And certainly, it is not a sin to be well-fed. Well, within limits of course.

One woman put an ad in the local paper: “Lost 50 pounds! Selling my fat clothes in good condition, sizes 18/20.” She was bombarded with phone calls, but nobody wanted to buy the clothes, they all wanted to know how she had lost the 50 pounds. There is nothing wrong with being well fed. There is something wrong when we ignore the hungry of the world.

Ron Lee Davis tells a heartbreaking story about a little girl named Tracy he met several years ago at a Christian camp in the Midwest. Tracy was eight years old, a child of the inner city. This was her first time at camp, and because her family was desperately poor, she had brought only one outfit for the entire week, a worn and frayed print dress.

During her first few days at camp, Tracy made a decision to receive Jesus as her Savior. Toward the end of the week, Ron Davis and Tracy were talking together as they walked on trails. “Tracy,” Davis said, “If you could have anything you wanted, anything at all, what would you wish for?” Tracy was silent for a moment, giving the question a lot of thought. “Well,” she said at last, “I guess I would wish I could get hit by a car. I wouldn’t want to get hurt real bad, just enough so I could go to the hospital. I think it would be neat to live in a hospital.” Surprised, Davis said, “Why would you want to live in a hospital?” “I’d like to live in a hospital,” she said, “because somebody told me that in the hospital, kids like me get three meals every day.” Three meals a day. Something you and I take for granted.

And certainly, there is nothing wrong with laughing. Laughter is a gift from God.

Jack Carey, of Watsonville, California visited a kindergarten class.

He happily agreed to tell the children a story. Soon the young and eager students were listening intently to an animated description of the discovery of Mammoth Cave and the strange creatures that live there. Describing the blind fish, Carey explained to the children, “Although they have lost their sense of sight, some of their other senses have gotten stronger, such as their sense of...” Pausing for a response, he could hardly stifle his laughter when Katie called out, “Sense of humor!”

I don’t know if blind fish compensate by developing a sense of humor or not, but I do know that many people who have experienced heartbreaking and even life-crushing situations have learned to cope through their sense of humor.

And researchers are finding out more every day about the therapeutic benefits of laughter on our minds, souls, and body. The ability to laugh is a gift from God.

Even our worship and fellowship events here at church would be drab indeed if we couldn't laugh from time to time.

Obviously, Jesus was talking about the laughter that comes from those who seek after nothing but idle pleasure. Such laughter is hollow anyway. If you have to get drunk or high to have a good time, then at the center of our life is deep sadness. If your only humor comes from putting down or humiliating others, then you are a pitiful piece of humanity. If you can only find humor in that which is offensive and degrading, then may God have mercy on your soul. But there is nothing wrong with laughter. In fact, one of the chief criticisms that they had against Jesus was that he enjoyed life too much. Jesus is certainly not opposed to laughter, particularly wholesome laughter. The laughter that comes from being in a proper relationship with your neighbor and God.

And there is nothing wrong when people speak well of you. In Jesus' time, Christians were a persecuted minority and Christians wore their persecuted status as a badge of honor. Rightfully so. Most were kind people, generous people, people of integrity. Even vile pagans respected them. You know people like that, don't you? It would be sad to say that such persons are not Christians because everyone liked them.

We celebrate people who are beautiful on the inside. So, be careful of taking Jesus' teachings out of context. There are people who are generous with their wealth, particularly when people are hungry. There are happy people because they do follow Jesus. There are people of whom no one has a bad word to speak because they are all filled with the love of Christ. Amen.