GIVE US A SMILE

Rom. 4:1-5, 13-17; John 3:1-17

Well, we’re into Lent, a serious season for Christians, six weeks or so to think about Jesus’ suffering and his gruesome death, to think about how far each of us falls short of the glory of God, to think about human infamy and all the ways we make life miserable for one another and for ourselves, roughly 40 days of feeling bad, religiously speaking. It’s a time when we in the Church remind ourselves that Jesus was a man of sorrows. This is the picture we mostly get in the New Testament, which is a deadly serious set of writings offered, we are told, to convey good news. I hope you will not be offended this morning if I say to you that I am a little tired of Jesus the man of sorrows, which is not the same thing as saying that I am tired of Jesus, unless, of course, Jesus really is nothing but a man of sorrows. I’m hoping that this isn’t the case. But be that as it may, I find myself these days wanting a Jesus who laughs once in awhile, a Jesus who appreciates a good joke, a Jesus who likes to have a little fun, a Jesus we don’t find in the New Testament. I’ve been through many Lents, and I would like even in this serious season to encounter a Jesus who has something more to offer than his sorrows, however much his sorrows may move me.

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. was a writer who addressed sorrowful subjects with humor and not infrequently did so with Jesus in mind. In a Palm Sunday sermon he was invited to
give at St. Clement’s Episcopal Church in Manhattan in 1980, this is some of what he said:

“"I am enchanted by the Sermon on the Mount. Being merciful, it seems to me, is the only good idea we have received so far. Perhaps we will get another idea that is good by and by—and then we will have two good ideas….

“I read from the Revised Standard Bible rather than the King James because it is easier for me to understand. Also I will argue afterward that Jesus was only joking, and it is impossible to joke in King James English. The funniest joke in the world, if told in King James English, is doomed to sound like Charleton Heston.

“I read:

“'Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. There they made him a supper; Martha served, but Lazarus was one of those at the table with him.

“'Mary took a pound of costly ointment of pure nard and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair; and the house was filled with the fragrance of the ointment.

“'But Judas Iscariot, one of the disciples (he who was to betray him), said, "Why is this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?" This he said, not that he cared for the poor but because he was a thief, and as he had the money box he used to take what was put into it. Jesus said, "Let her alone, let her keep it for the day of my burial. The poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me."

“Thus ends the reading, and although I have promised you a joke, there is not much of a chuckle in there anywhere. The reading, in fact, ends with at least two quite
depressing implications. That Jesus could be a touch self-pitying, and that he was, with 
his mission to earth about to end, at least momentarily sick and tired of hearing about the 
poor.

“The King James version of the last verse, by the way, is almost identical: ‘”For 
the poor always ye have with you, but you do not always have me.”’

Whatever it was Jesus really said to Judas was said in Aramaic, of course—and 
has come to us through Hebrew and Greek and Latin and archaic English. Maybe he 
only said something a lot like, ‘The poor you always have with you, but you do not 
always have me.’ Perhaps a little something has been lost in translation. And let us 
remember, too, that in translations jokes are commonly the first things to go.

“I would like to recapture what has been lost. Why? Because I, as a Christ-
worshiping agnostic, have seen so much un-Christian impatience with the poor 
encouraged by the quotation ‘For the poor ye always have with you….’

“Whenever anybody [in Indiana where I grew up] began to worry a lot about poor 
people when I was young, some eminently respectable Hoosier, possibly an uncle or an 
aunt, would say that Jesus himself had given up on doing much about the poor. He or she 
would paraphrase John twelve, Verse eight: ‘The poor people are hopeless. We’ll 
always be stuck with them.’

“If these Hoosiers were still alive, which they are not, I would tell them now that 
Jesus was only joking, and that he was not even thinking much about the poor.

“I would tell them, too, what I don’t have to tell this particular congregation, that 
jokes can be noble. Laughs are exactly as honorable as tears. Laughter and tears are both 
responses to frustration and exhaustion, to the futility of thinking and striving anymore. I
myself prefer to laugh, since there is less cleaning up afterward—and since I can start thinking and striving that much sooner.

“All right:

“It is the evening before Palm Sunday…. It is again suppertime…. There are two sisters of Lazarus there—Martha and Mary. They, at least, are sympathetic and imaginatively helpful. Mary begins to massage and perfume the feet of Jesus… with the ointment made from the spikenard plant. Jesus has the bones of a man and is clothed in the flesh of a man—so it must feel awfully nice, what Mary is doing to his feet. Would it be heretical of us to suppose that Jesus closes his eyes?

“This is too much for the envious hypocrite Judas, who says, trying to be more Catholic than the Pope: ‘Hey—this is very un-Christian. Instead of wasting that stuff on your feet, we should have sold it and given the money to poor people.’

“To which Jesus replies in Aramaic: ‘Judas, don’t worry about it. There will be plenty of poor people left long after I’m gone….’ (emphasis added)

“If Jesus did in fact say that, it’s a divine black joke, well-suited to the occasion. It says everything about hypocrisy and nothing about the poor. It is a Christian joke, which allows Jesus to remain civil to Judas, but to chide him about his hypocrisy all the same.

“‘Judas, don’t worry about it. There will still be plenty of poor people left long after I’m gone.’” (Palm Sunday, pp. 325-29)

I trust you get the joke. It fits well with the Sermon on the Mount. And it fits with our lessons for today. The life of Jesus is salvation, not condemnation, we are told in our Gospel from St. John. God’s way with us is not a job for us to do. It is grace
received by faith, says St. Paul in his Letter to the Romans. These are messages of hope that should engender joy in the believer. So why won’t Jesus give us a smile, show a little mirth? Salvation comes from God, and it comes by God’s grace—that’s a message which, at the very least, should cause us not to take ourselves so seriously. It would not be a bad thing if religious people and Christians in particular lightened up a little bit in response to the mercy that is God’s good news revealed in Jesus. I fully grant you that the cross is no laughing matter, but this doesn’t mean that the life of Jesus, the crucified one, was nothing but sorrow or that he had nothing more to commend to us than sorrow or that he was too sorrowful to tell a joke or have a laugh once in awhile. No one who provoked such warm responses from the crowds who came out to see him and who was so acute an observer of the human condition could have been without a sense of humor. So, c’mon, Jesus, give us a smile. Amen.

Second Sunday of Lent, February 17, 2008

Emanuel Lutheran Church