



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Life is too valuable to be taken so seriously

Clay Nelson © 24 June 2018

My flippant title that life is too valuable to be taken so seriously was a jab at myself. When I decided on it I was aware that life had become a little too serious for me. I needed to hear a sermon that told me to lighten up a little. (Let me share a secret about my sermons, I am almost always preaching to myself and inviting you to listen in if you're interested. In other words, I rarely practise what I preach but I'm trying to do better.)

The title is flippant because of course life is serious business, but from some opinion pieces in the Herald, social media, and talk radio there are a few folks that need to listen to this sermon with me. They have gone to great lengths to be wet blankets regarding our Prime Minister giving birth instead of taking a moment to celebrate new life. Yes, the coverage is a little excessive, but it is fodder for a few laughs, not disdain. Besides, it is only the second time in history it has happened that the leader of country has given birth while in office...as opposed to "in the office" as the Daily Mail reported tongue-in-cheek.

Just to understand how serious life is consider what lies ahead for Jacinda and Clarke's little girl and the 24 others born that day in Auckland Hospital. Consider the matter of just being born. It isn't easy for any of the principal characters in the drama. Mum and Dad can give up any idea of sleeping in for the foreseeable future, as if being Prime Minister wasn't hard enough. There must be times she feels like she is trying to manage a birthday party for six year olds.

Then there's the ongoing struggle to grow up – learning to walk, and falling down again and again without throwing in the proverbial towel and crawling through life.

To say nothing of spelling and learning when to say I instead of me, as in 'this sermon is meant for you and I,' which is an over-correction, since the object following the preposition 'for' requires the sentence to say, 'this sermon is meant for you and me.' See what I mean?

In his book *The Social Animal*, David Brooks quotes the linguist Geoffrey Miller who says that most adults have a vocabulary of about sixty thousand words. "To build that vocabulary, children must learn ten to twenty words a day between the ages of eighteen months and eighteen years." Wow! That in spite of the fact that we apparently use only 100 of them frequently in 60% of our conversations.

As soon as you stand on your own two feet and walk without falling and talk without making too many grammatical errors, you have to shake off your childish narcissism and consider the struggles that all the other people are carrying, and you have to have compassion for everyone you meet.

Growing up is serious business.

Then there are all the other chapters ... figuring out how this love thing works, and how it works for you, to say nothing of making friends in pre-school and later passing your NCEA exams or deciding how to make a living. Then there is marriage and divorce ... and the religious thing about God and death. And taxes. And death.

Woody Allen said, "I'm still obsessed by thoughts of death, I brood constantly. I keep wondering if there is an afterlife and if there is, will they be able to break a twenty?"

It's all very serious business, this business of living a life, to say nothing of trying to live a *meaningful* life. And being in the spotlight like Jacinda and Clarke's wee one it will be all the more challenging. That is a family that is going to need a sense of humour. Hope they get to listen to this sermon on YouTube in between changing nappies and breast feeding before entering Parliament for Question Time, which fortunately is always good for a laugh.

Having done most of the growing up thing at my age, what is dragging me down now is watching what is happening in the country of my birth thanks to the present administration. It was bad enough when I advertised the topic for this week but since then the treatment of asylum seekers and their children has broken my heart. I give thanks to the God I don't believe in for Steven Colbert, Trevor Noah, Samantha Bee, Seth Meyers, Alex Baldwin and their writers who can find humour in the situation, no matter how black it might be. It is better than none at all. I would find it difficult to go on without them. And of course, Trump has lots of company. There is no lack of sociopathic authoritarian narcissists, greedy international corporations, warlords, misogynists, racists, homophobes, and terrorists to make the world we live in serious business for those who are vulnerable and those of us who care about them. Those late-night comedians remind us how important it is to still find the joke if we are to survive.

Last week Rachel of the clan Mackintosh told me that the Irish gave the Scots the bagpipes and the Scots still haven't got the joke.

Sometimes the joke is so obvious we are like the Scots. Ministers can be very susceptible to such blindness, since church is supposed to be serious business. We are often too much like Sherlock Holmes faithful colleague Dr Watson:

Apparently the two went camping in the forest. After a good dinner and a bottle of wine, they went to sleep in the tent. Several hours later, Holmes awoke and nudged his faithful friend, Watson.

"Look at the sky and tell me what you see."

Watson answered: "I see millions and millions of stars."

"And what does that tell you?"

Watson thought a minute and answered: "Astronomically, that tells me that there are potentially billions of planets. Astrologically, I see that Saturn is in Leo. Chronologically, I deduce that it is approximately three ten AM. Theologically, I see that God is all powerful and that we are small and insignificant. Meteorologically I suspect that we shall have a beautiful day tomorrow."

Holmes was quiet for a minute and then said: "Watson, you idiot, it means someone stole our tent."

The Herald reported this week that only nine percent of Kiwis go regularly to church. I think a possible answer is that we either don't laugh enough in church or the unchurched don't think we do. Both could be right, but my experience tells me that you don't survive this long in the ministry without a sense of humour.

Pointing out the human condition and helping us to laugh at ourselves is the job of comedians. I look around and see that I am surrounded by the human condition. There has to be a joke here somewhere.

The reason it might be hard to find is that laughter has not always been considered a good thing. Plato saw it as a moral vice. He held the perspective that laughter arises from our desire to feel superior over other people. He warned that laughter could lead to an undermining of authority and ultimately to the overthrow of the state.

Jewish thought has always held a valued place for joy. Yes, there are lines in Hebrew scripture such as Ecclesiastes 7:3 “Sorrow is better than laughter” but there are also a fair number of stories and verses about dancing and joy and celebration.

The early Christian church was a fair mix of both Jewish thought and Greek thought. Clearly the Greek thought won out on the question of humour in Christianity for a long time. The Early Christian Church denounced laughter on the grounds that Jesus is reported to have wept but never to have laughed....so weeping alone led to unity with God. This is reminiscent of the Presbyterian ban on having sex standing up...it might lead to dancing.

Elizabethan England had some staunch defenders of seriousness. Laughter was considered a form of “losing control” of oneself. It was seen as uncouth, even dangerous. One critic, George Catlin, warned that regular laughter irreparably damages your teeth.

In the 1970s attitudes about laughter began to change, in part thanks to Norman Cousins. He was editor-in-chief of the Saturday Review for 30 years; he authored books and essays about politics, history, and literature; he was an unofficial ambassador between Kennedy, Khrushchev, and Pope John; and during his lifetime he was awarded the Albert Schweitzer Prize for humanitarianism, the Eleanor Roosevelt Peace Award, and the United Nations Peace Medal. He was a very serious man. He was not a Unitarian, but when he went to church it was a Unitarian one where he donated the pulpit in memory of his friend Albert Schweitzer. He did not expect jokes to be told from it.

But later in life he had an epiphany. He had an experience of illness that led him to develop what he called the laugh-cure. He was diagnosed with a form of debilitating arthritis. He was told by doctors that he had little chance of surviving. So he went about developing his own recovery program involving mega-doses of Vitamin C, along with a positive attitude, faith, hope, and laughter induced by Marx Brothers films. He found that a good belly laugh relieved him of pain for two hours at a time. He called laughter “inner jogging”. He lived another ten years.

Researchers didn’t take him seriously at first, but eventually there were studies that confirmed his findings. For example, research shows that laughter decreases the body’s cortisol levels. Cortisol is a stress-induced chemical related to heart disease and high blood pressure. Laughter also strengthens your immune system and increases the production of antibodies. Researchers state that a good laugh has many of the same benefits as a brisk walk.

Laughter increases your air intake. Increasing your oxygen-rich air intake stimulates all of your organs and relaxes your muscles. The Mayo Clinic advocates for laughter as a means to boost your immune system, sooth tension, relieve pain, and improve your mood. Laughter is a vital part of life. Even great world religious literature advocates it.

When God told Abraham and Sarah that they were going to have a child they laughed, as he was 100 and she 90. God had the last laugh. He told them to name him Isaac. I don’t know if they got the joke. Isaac means laughter.

Jesus told jokes as well, such as when he described selfishness as being as incapable of bringing happiness as a short man trying by pulling at his head to increase his stature. Then, there is the busybody, with a huge log in his own eye, rushing about trying to locate the tiny splinters in other people's eyes. And, there is the man who choked on a gnat, but could swallow a camel — and the camel that could go through the eye of a needle more easily than a rich man could get into heaven.

In Islam, the legendary master of laughter, Mullah Nassr Eddin, tells this story: “In the village plaza, under a blazing midday sun, the Mullah, sweating and covered with dust, is on all fours looking for something in the sand. One of his neighbours sees him, approaches, and asks: ‘What have you lost?’ ‘My key,’ answers the Mullah, who continues to search while his neighbour kneels down to help him. After several minutes, sweating and panting, the latter asks: ‘Are you sure that this is where you lost it?’ ‘Oh no,’ replies the Mullah, ‘I lost it at home.’ ‘But then why look for it here?’ ‘Because here, my dear neighbour, there is more light!’”

And then, of course, there are Unitarians. We love telling or hearing jokes about ourselves. On *Prairie Home Companion*, Garrison Keillor, who might be a closet Unitarian, loved to take the mickey out of us. He tells us that there are folks in Lake Woebegon who have a big satellite dish and get 500 channels on their TV — including the surgery channel, the fishing channel, and the Unitarian Channel, which is what the fishing channel would be like if they didn't actually put the fish hooks and lines in the water, but just sat around and discussed whether or not there really are fish.”

Theologically, laughter is a sign of joy. Medically, it is seen as a means of stress relief. Psychologically, it is a means of mood enhancement. Philosophically, it may mean chaos or equality for humanity. Sociologically, it is a social phenomenon of group bonding, the establishment of group mores, and a means of conflict reduction.

Although all that is true, laughter does not end the trouble and turmoil of life. Laughter does not stop depression or grief. Laughter is not an end to sadness and sorrow — only to seriousness. When we look for laughter in our lives, when we choose to meet the world with a giggle or belly laugh even in church, what withers away is not the pain or the grief. It is instead the gravity of it all that fades, the solemnity and seriousness that dwindles. Let us take all of life — the laughter and the pain, the joy and the sorrow. Life is too valuable to do otherwise.