

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Sunday, September 2, 2018
Rev. Dr. David Thompson

A merry heart is good meds!

Text: A merry heart does good like a medicine

Perhaps you remember Norman Cousins, the former editor of the Saturday Review? He was diagnosed with the fairly rare disease of ankylosing spondylitis. He was given a 1 in 500 chance of being healed from this disease. Generally, this crippling disease is irreversible. But Norman had a great sense of humor.

One day Cousins was at an airport making a call using a quarter. The machine swallowed his quarter with no dial tone resulting. He was able to get through to the operator however and so he called her and said "I put a quarter in and didn't get my number. The machine collected my coin."

"Sir," she said "If you give me your name and address, we will mail the coin to you." Cousins knew that all she had to do was press a button and the machine would spit out his quarter and so he was appalled.

"Operator," he said, "I think I can understand the difficulties behind AT and T. You are going to take the time and trouble to write down my name on a card and then you are probably going to give it to the person in charge of such matters. He will go to the cash register, punch it open and take out a quarter, at the same time recording the reason for the cash withdrawal. Then he will take a card with a recessed slot to hold the coin in an envelope, first taking the time to write out my address on the envelope. Then the envelope will be sealed. Someone else will then affix a stamp on the envelope. All that time and expense just to return a quarter. Now operator, why don't you just return my coin and let's be friends?"

"Sir," she repeated in a flat voice, "If you give me your name and address, we will mail you the refund!" Then by way of an afterthought she said "Sir, did you remember to press the coin return plunger?"

"Truth to tell, said Cousins "I had overlooked that nicety."

He pressed the plunger. To his great surprise it worked and the badly constipated machine opened up its bowels and began to spew out coins of every denomination. The profusion was so great that Cousins had to use both hands. While all of this was happening, the noise registering in the telephone was not lost on the operator!

"Sir," she said, "What is happening?"

Cousins reported that the machine was giving up all its earnings for the past few months!

"Sir, said the operator, will you please put the coins back in the box!"

"Operator," said Cousins in the flattest voice he could muster "If you give me you name and address, I will be glad to mail you the coins!"

Cousins had often wondered whether humor was a healer. Knowing that the medical profession could do little for him he discussed with his specialist a radical program for recovery.

One of the characteristics of this disease is a high sedimentation rate of the blood. It was a good indicator of illness. The higher the rate, the sicker you are. The sed rate is the rate at which red blood cells settle in a test tube. A normal illness might have a range between 30 or 40. Beyond 60 or 70 that doctor knows that there is a real health problem. Cousins first total was 88 and within a week he was up to 115. Simply stated, Cousins was coming unstuck. His connective tissue was disintegrating. He was getting stiffer and stiffer in his arms, legs, hands, fingers and neck. He began to have difficulty even moving his jaw.

So, Cousins proposed to his specialist that he be hooked up to a Vitamin C intravenous drip so that massive amounts of vitamin C could course through his body.

To know whether he was on the right track, Cousins took a sedimentation rate test and then administered 10 grams of ascorbic acid. The sed rate dropped by 9 full points.

Then Cousins took wise old Solomon's advice; that a merry heart is good meds. He knew that negative emotions affected health. Anger and frustration elevated blood pressure and made ulcers worse. He reasoned that laughter might just have a beneficial effect on the body, reducing stress and perhaps having other effects.

He said' It was easy enough to have hope and love and faith, but what about laughter? Nothing is less funny than being flat on your back with all the bones in your spine and joints hurting!

So, Cousins developed his own laughter program. He watched funny Candid Camera episodes, Old Marx brothers films, comedies etc.

His first discovery was that ten minutes of belly laughter had an anesthetic effect and gave him two hours of pain free sleep.

Then Cousins went back for a sedimentation ratio test. After a laughter session, his sed rate dropped by 5 points. "Hmm," thought Cousins, "Vitamin C and laughter!"

His sleep became increasingly prolonged. Eight days later he was able to move his thumbs without pain. His sed rate continued to drop. Gradually he began to heal. Over a period of months, he slowly got better until he was able to return to work, to play tennis and golf again, ride a horse and hold a camera with a steady hand. Vitamin C and a merry heart does good like a medicine! Cousins eventually died years later from natural causes.

Churches are not particularly known for humor.

Erma Bombach in her book At Wits End writes that she was intent in church on a small child who was turning around and smiling at everyone. He wasn't doing anything bad. He wasn't gurgling, spitting, humming, kicking, or tearing the hymnal up or rummaging through his mom's handbag. He was just smiling at everyone.

Finally his mother had had enough and she jerked him around and in a stage whisper that could be heard across the church said 'Stop that grinning! You are in church!' With that she gave him a belt and as the tears rolled down his cheeks she said 'That's better!'

I often think in church services how important control is to us. I can remember my debut on national radio CBC that went across Canada. I was the organist. I had an old clunker of a pipe organ that had once been wonderful and I had been up in the loft tuning that old darling for hours for the big day, getting old pipes to play that hadn't played in years.

The great moment came. It was a Live Easter broadcast from All Saints Anglican in downtown Toronto. It went right across the country all suitably introduced with the sotto voce of the announcer who usually read the news.

I had worked for weeks on my preludes and postludes and I opened up the service with Healy Willan's Vulpius. I pulled on the pedal trombone, the single loudest stop on the pedal organ and began to play in true Easter style i.e. Loudly! Suddenly, early into the piece, a stop stuck on. It was the precise pitch of a tractor trailer hooting at a miscreant on the 401 on the pedal trombone.

The note stuck on throughout the entire piece while I tried everything I knew to get it off, while continuing to play the piece. Any resemblance of my rendition to the original intent of the composer was purely accidental. At the very end of the piece I pushed on and off the full organ button and miracle of miracles the pipe shut off.

Time and time again this sort of thing happens in a church and I have found that the best response is just to laugh. It seems to me that the Divinity reminds us from time to time that we are not in

control. Stuff happens. If we greet these times with a merry heart, perspective can return to us and our stress just disappears!

In the Gospel lesson we read about little children playing at the game of weddings and funerals. When one group of kids wanted to play at weddings the other kids wanted to play at funerals. Both were elaborate ceremonies in Christ's day and the street children loved to imitate them. When the kids couldn't agree which to play, they ending up fighting.

Christ used these children's games to make an important point. John the Baptist was the no nonsense serious type- no alcohol, no meat and no haircuts! He lived in the desert and deprived himself. He was a very serious fellow indeed. He preached repentance and a complete change of life values. His critics didn't like John one little bit. He was taking his religion too seriously if he expected people to change to suit him.

And Christ?

Well he was the very opposite! Christ ate and drank and made merry with sinners. Christ's critics said that people who took God seriously would never hang around with prostitutes, publicans, donkey drivers, muleteers and tax collectors. They were all sinners for goodness sake. What was Jesus doing hanging out with these sorts of people?

In answer to his critics Jesus said:

"You are like children playing at Weddings and funerals. You say spoiled sport! We played the flute for you and you wouldn't dance. We sang the funeral dirge and you wouldn't beat your chests."

What is true is this: people who "sit in the seat of the scornful" have little or no sense of humor when it comes to themselves. In fact, it is rather rare for a critical person to laugh at him or herself. They take them selves too seriously for that. They have no insight into how pathetic they are with their righteous indignation. Tragically, the one thing that would bring perspective- being able to laugh at themselves is seriously lacking.

A medical Doctor Dr. John McBride writes: "The first symptom of the mentally ill is the lack of laughter."

Edward E. Ford, an industrialist and board member of the IBM Corporation and a multi-millionaire who invested in secondary education once wrote: "The opposite of laughter is not sadness but negative criticism."

Joyce Martin a spiritual author once wrote: "I think that we have had it wrong for centuries. Christ had a happy life. It was His joy that attracted others to him- his suffering and death was only a fraction of what his life was about. Too long we have lived and acted on that fraction of His life. We have had nothing to offer but suffering."

Frequently Stewardship committees think that guilting people to give is the right approach to the budget. But St. Paul says that if we give out of merry hearts the church will prosper. Why? Because God loves a cheerful giver. The Greek word for cheerful is our word for hilarious or merry. Are we hilarious about our giving campaign? If not why not? A merry heart does good like a medicine. Will we take the cure and laugh our way to psychological, emotional, spiritual and financial health or will we let these things weigh us down?

But you say to me I get the connection between laughter and health but there are some things one can't laugh about. How for instance can you have a merry heart knowing you are going to die?

Helen Luecke's mom Bessie had just been diagnosed with terminal cancer. She was given three months to live at the most. She was discharged from the Houston hospital and they went to the airport. Helen was really depressed; her mother strangely was not.

They got on the plane together and shortly thereafter a tall young man got on with a 7-year-old girl.

He got the little girl settled in her seat and then said; “Have your mother call me as soon as you get home. You can come back in July and spend the summer with us.” Stroking her hair he whispered, “I love you honey, and I will miss you.” Abruptly he stood and almost ran from the plane.

The little girl’s name tag read “Lisa.” She sat still, her head tilted. A big tear started to run down her cheek and she tried to conceal it.

But Bessie who was seated close to her got out a tissue and wiped the tear and said: “Now, where is the smile?”

Taken by surprise, Lisa blue eyes opened wide and before she could speak a smile covered her face.

“There! I knew it would come.”

Bessie said to the little girl “Did you know that Lisa? There is always a smile behind every tear?”

Lisa shook her head and said “How did you know that?”

“Oh,” said Bessie “I just learned it through the years.”

Suddenly Lisa said “I just wish my mother and Daddy would live together again, but they won’t. Daddy is married and Mother has a boyfriend.”

Bessie said “Sometimes people can’t get along together and decide that it is best to part. You want them to be happy, don’t you?”

“Yes” said Lisa, her voice trembling.

“How old are you Lisa?”

“Almost seven.”

“Let me tell you something else Lisa” said Bessie her weak voice beginning to strengthen. “These next years will fly by. Before you know it, you will be out of school, out of college and then you’ll be married and have kids of your own.”

“You are right,” said Lisa with startled eyes.

Helen’s mom continued:

“Being separated from your parents isn’t fun, so make the best of the time you share with each one. When you are with your father, love him, help him and try to get to know his wife. Your mother can be your best friend. A mother is someone special, she loves you no matter what. Don’t be afraid to tell her your problems. Then when you are grown, you will have the love of two of the most important people in your life. You will always have the happy memories of the time you spent with them.”

Listening to her dying Mom speak so beautifully, Helen was a basket case, swallowing scalding tears; tears that came from the times over the years when she had seen her mother cry and then eventually smile and go forward...

Her mother Bessie continued. You will have problems and lots of tears. They come in everyone’s life, but just remember; that smile will always follow. Sometimes it might take longer because the problem is tougher, but take my word: the smile will come.”

Three people got off that plane changed.

You know, you and I don’t just have an ordinary faith. It’s an Easter faith. Long ago the tears came and coursed down Mary of Magdala’s face, and through her tears she saw someone she thought was just a Gardener. But when he said “Mary!” She knew him.

And the smile came.

No matter what you are facing today, cry the tears until you have no more, then reach down deep inside you to where your Easter faith lives, and let the smile come!