

Excerpt from Laughing Pilgrims
By Howard R. Macy

From Chapter 6, "Risks and Manners"

Instead of just trying to avoid offense, however, let's consider what would happen if our humor were to grow out of our dearest values. Surely it would help us live more fully integrated, consistent lives – a hallmark of spiritual maturity. It would also help us have more fun with humor.

What kind of values might shape our humor? How about adapting the Golden Rule: "laugh with others as you would have them laugh with you?" It's a practical way to think about generous love. Wouldn't that go a long way to assuring positive humor?

But let's go further still. Jesus said the commands to love God and love neighbor sum up the Law and the Prophets (and, of course, Jesus might be right about this). So let's look: what are the values we find here? Try these themes found frequently throughout the prophets: compassion and loyal love; justice and fairness; truthfulness and integrity; respect for others, taking particular care for the people who are often targets for abuse (widow, poor, orphan, resident alien); seeking wholeness (shalom); doing the right thing. As Jeremiah and his prophet buddies point out, God delights in these things (Jeremiah 9:23–24). We can even say they make God smile. So we're hardly surprised that Jesus likes them, too, and that he gives clear teaching about humility and servanthood. The fact my word processor doesn't know the word "servanthood" reminds me that many of these values are counter-cultural – but so is signing up for the Kingdom of God.

We don't have to imagine Jeremiah, armed with siren and whistle, leading the Humor Police and giving citations to humor scofflaws. These are not laws we try to avoid breaking, but a vision of life at its best that, in drawing near to and "knowing" God intimately, makes us smile and shapes our living.

Is this too high-minded for humor? I don't think so – particularly if it flows out of our natural spiritual development. People maturing in faith would naturally, if subconsciously, be asking themselves questions such as: Is this fair? Is it truthful? Is it kind? Does it unite or divide? As we grow in our Christian walk, and as we think more about how to use and enjoy humor in our day-to-day experiences and relationships, these values will more and more shape and inform our God-given sense of humor.

To press the point, let's think backwards. Do we really want to ignore integrating such central values at any point in our lives? Do we really want to say they're not relevant, to suspend them as if humor isn't part of real life? Do we want to act as if, when we're joking, being kind, fair, and truthful doesn't matter to others? Do we want to say that having these values interwoven into our whole lives doesn't matter to us? It's hard to answer yes to any of these questions. If we care about our core convictions, then we can't do just anything to get a laugh.

Values like compassion, fairness, integrity, and respect all share a common trait: they are practiced in relationship. Some folks think there is no genuine laughter that is not shared, though I'm not quite sure. I really enjoy being with myself and sometimes laugh out loud when I'm all alone. (Please don't tell my clinical psychology students, who worry about me enough already.) Still, most of our humor, certainly our most joyous humor, is shared. Which is why we must care for our relationships. They are the framework of our fun together.