

“Gnat and Camels”, Patricia Weatherwax, MDiv. July 25, 2010

First Presbyterian Church, Battle Creek, MI

Matthew 23:23-25

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel. Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean."

### Introduction

Ecclesiastes 3 is a scripture passage that I use a lot at funerals. One line says there is: "a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance."

Jesus was the master of life and knew all this wisdom. He also had a way with words, using parables, puns and he often used satire and sarcasm to make a point. There are several instances where he would have very likely laughed out loud and expected others to laugh, too.

I know we don't find the message of Jesus very funny. Most of his sermons sound like scolding or are really lofty, at least the way we hear them. But, Jesus was a good teacher. He used his funny lines to grease

the wheel, to open the ears, minds, and hearts of his audience. So what about *this* text?

### About this text and translating

Here's the frame of reference:

Leviticus 27:30 "A tithe of everything from the land, whether grain from the soil or fruit from the trees belongs to the Lord; it is holy to the Lord." And in Deuteronomy 14:23 the foods to tithe included "grain, new wine and oil." The law *required* these, but the Mishnah, the interpretation of the law, claimed that everything- even the herbs from the kitchen were to be tithed- that is 1/10th of everything edible was to be given to the Lord, and so to the priests for their use. Do you suppose that the priests promoted the Torah or the Mishnah?

But Jesus pointed out that while the Pharisees were diligent at counting out the tithe of herbs and spices, they were overlooking other laws, like Micah 6:8, to act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with God. The Pharisees were not known for their humility! Jesus poked at that in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector ( Luke 18: 9-14), where Jesus quotes the Pharisee as saying "God, I thank you that I am not like bad people. I fast and I tithe!"

Jesus poked at people a lot. He had a wit about him that doesn't translate well! Last week I commented about the humor in the Old Testament stories. The New Testament is more into one-liners, zingers and puns. Again a lot gets translated away from us.

It's most likely that in Galilee, where Jesus was raised and where he began his ministry, Aramaic was the most common language of the people. Many would have been able to understand Hebrew from their religious training and to get along in the business language- Greek- as well. The earliest manuscripts of the New Testament Gospels - Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John - were written in Greek. Their writers might well have known Aramaic and/or Hebrew, and they may well have drawn upon oral and written sources in these languages, but when they put stylus to papyrus, they wrote in *Koine* (*common*) Greek. Jesus frequently found himself in conversations and debates with Jewish religious leaders. These dialogues probably happened in Hebrew, even among those for who Aramaic was a first language. For Jesus to be credible in a debate with the religious leaders, and for him to impress his audience as a learned teacher, in all likelihood he would have used Hebrew. So this "sermon" of "woes to" probably was spoken in Hebrew or in Aramaic. There is the possibility of an unmentioned translator, but generally Jesus, the disciples and the scribes and Pharisees were able to switch between languages as needed.

Jesus tells the Pharisees: "You, blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel" (Matt. 23:24). The imagery is a delight: How can one swallow a camel? The exaggeration is clearly for effect, meant to show that the religion of the Pharisees was focused on minuscule, petty rituals which they were careful to observe. Unfortunately, they had overlooked whole large-scale sins without ever realizing their importance. Jesus could just as easily have said: "You Pharisees are concerned with minor details but ignore the big, important principles of the Law." But the prophets had already given this message quite forcefully, but the lesson had not been taken.

So Jesus makes a funny- "strain out a gnat but swallow a camel." The pun- word play. It is a point completely lost in translation to the English language and even in the Greek text! A pun is about the hardest form of humor to translate. In Greek the word for gnat is *konopa*, while camel is *kamelon*. But in Aramaic and in the Hebrew it's more like this: "You blind guides! You strain out a *qamla* (with a Q) and swallow a *camla* (with a C). Can you tell the difference? The exact translations still are not agreed upon. I found many different sources making this point, while not agreeing on what the original words were!

In English the phrase pokes fun at the Pharisees' obsession with miniscule details of ritual while they were completely blind to the weightier matters of the law (Hos. 6:6, Matt. 23:23). In Aramaic we get this lesson, *plus* the clever play on words made the idea memorable. What happens with most clever sayings? They make the audience want to tell them again and again to people who weren't present. The pun probably spread rapidly. The lesson was passed along and remembered "for the record" that is, it made it into the gospel according to Matthew.

The problem is that there very often is no "word-for-word" translation that will convey the precise thought. In other instances, there is slang or jargon that is highly contextual in the original, and even the best of translators can't figure it out for a variety of reasons. One writer suggested that 2,000 years from now "scholars will read a dialogue in which someone exclaims, "Cool!" and think they were talking about refrigerators because they will not know the cultural context.

### On Humor

There's no harm in tasteful humorous jokes or riddles related to The Bible and spiritual matters. Human beings are apparently the only creatures God created on the earth with the ability to laugh and experience humor; perhaps this is even part of what being made in God's image is about.

Religious jokes, of course, like all jokes, should be told with the proper spirit and not with an intent to hurt anyone. It's pretty clear in Ephesians 5:3-4 what kind of humor should be avoided: "Though some tongues just love the taste of gossip, those who follow Jesus have better uses for language than that. Don't talk dirty or silly. That kind of talk doesn't fit our style. Thanksgiving is our dialect." (The Message)

Last week I shared the struggle Kwan had with English knock-knock jokes. I have another example of translation difficulties. Most people, when they learn a language as an adult or for professional purposes, don't learn the idioms or stories we learn in English as children.

I know many of you struggle with physicians who have thick accents, but consider the challenges they have in understanding us! We have the *whole* English language; they learned a more formal English than most of us use. One physician I worked with a lot at Borgess did quite well with medical vocabulary and he certainly wasn't the hardest one to understand.

But a certain joke was most enjoyable when he told it. I can't repeat the whole joke here, it violates Ephesians 5:4, but it started this way: "Mary had a little lamb, it's fleece was white as snow...." When Dr. K went to re-tell the joke we laughed way before he got to the punch-line. He started it this way: "Mary, she had a sheep..." Who doesn't know Mary had a little lamb?

Too often, we miss the blessing of joy that waits for us when we read

the Bible, simply because we aren't expecting it. So, even while you search the Word of God for comfort, instruction, and enlightenment, keep an eye out for the twist of wit or hint of humor. You may be surprised by a moment of holy joy. In a funk? Open your Bible and look for something to smile about!

### Some Examples of the Humor of Jesus

(in the gospel according to Matthew, from the New Living Bible):

One day as Jesus was walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers—Simon, also called Peter, and Andrew—... Jesus called out to them, “Come, follow me, and I will show you how to fish for people!” 4:18-19

“You are the light of the world—like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden. No one lights a lamp and then puts it under a basket” 5:14-15.

“When you give to someone in need, don't do as the hypocrites do—blowing trumpets in the synagogues and streets to call attention to their acts of charity! I tell you the truth, they have received all the reward they will ever get”. 6:2.

“And why worry about a speck in your friend's eye when you have a log in your own? How can you think of saying to your friend, ‘Let me help you get rid of that speck in your eye,’ when you can't see past the log in your own eye?” 7:3-4

“You can identify people by their fruit, that is, by the way they act. Can you pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? (Dr. Seuss?) A good tree produces good fruit, and a bad tree produces bad fruit. A good tree can't produce bad fruit, and a bad tree can't produce good fruit.” 7:16-18

“Anyone who hears my teaching and doesn't obey it is foolish, like a person who builds a house on sand. When the rains and floods come and the winds beat against that house, it will collapse with a mighty crash.” 7:26-27

“Healthy people don't need a doctor—sick people do.” 9:12-13

“If any household or town refuses to welcome you or listen to your message, shake its dust from your feet as you leave!” 10:14

“What is the price of two sparrows—one copper coin. But not a single sparrow can fall to the ground without your Father knowing it. And the very

hairs on your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are more valuable to God than a whole flock of sparrows." 10:29-31

"The disciples were in trouble far away from land, for a strong wind had risen, and they were fighting heavy waves. About three o'clock in the morning Jesus came toward them, walking on the water." 14:24-25

"Then the disciples came to him and asked, "Do you realize you offended the Pharisees by what you just said?" Jesus replied, "They are blind guides leading the blind, and if one blind person guides another, they will both fall into a ditch."

Then Peter said to Jesus, "Explain to us the parable that says people aren't defiled by what they eat." "Don't you understand yet?" Jesus asked. "Anything you eat passes through the stomach and then goes into the sewer. But the words you speak come from the heart—that's what defiles you. 15:13-18 (Maybe a bit of bathroom humor from Jesus?)

"Then Peter came to him and asked, "Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?" "No, not seven times," Jesus replied, "but seventy times seven!" 18:21-22

"Jesus said to his disciples, "It's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God!" 19:24  
And Matthew isn't nearly as funny as Luke!

#### Reasons for humor:

- Bible humor is never frivolous; it is usually used to make a point. Furthermore, humor is a story-telling device that makes a memorable impact on the listener or reader.
- Secondly, humor involves the listener; it demands an emotional response, which immerses us almost unwittingly in the story. Thirdly, it focuses our attention; it is much harder to turn our concentration away from a humorous story than one that is sad or tragic. If someone says he has a good joke to tell us, we will pause and pay attention no matter how busy we may be.
- Finally, the hearer of a humorous story is trapped, in the sense, once he laughs even though on reflection he may very well be the butt of the joke, he is forced to face up to the reality of the message that may be hidden in the humor.

It is sometimes easier to get a difficult concept across with humor because it is the rare person indeed who will refuse to laugh at a funny story.

Frank Colby, a scholar and professor in the late 1800s said: "Men will confess to treason, murder, arson, false teeth, or a wig (but)...How many of them will own up to a lack of humor?"

Last week I made a point that came through the humor of the story- that "some things stink and God can use even things that stink." So, like last week, there's point. What's the point?

Jesus had a point to make when he suggested that the religious people in his region were swallowing camels while they strained out gnats.

"Get life into perspective!" What's the big-picture that is being crowded out by the little details of your life? What's important? Jesus declared that justice, mercy and faithfulness were being overlooked in favor of the minutia.

The same point could be made in our lives. Nothing ruins relationships at home, in the church, or in our world, more than constant dwelling on things that are not related to justice, mercy and faithfulness. We need to recognize what's truly important and what is merely a small annoyance that should and must be overlooked.

I did a wedding yesterday and the advice of 1 Corinthians 13 continues to be the favorite for young couples: "Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged. It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out."

Don't think you are doing good because you follow rules. You do good by trying to live a life of "justice, mercy and faithfulness," so that **love** wins.

You may have read in today's bulletin about a church "book read." The book is entitled "Forgiving Ararat." I am encouraging all of you who like to read unique novels, to read it in the month of August. Then come discuss it on September 1 at an end-of-summer potluck. This fictional account of the inter-connectedness of peoples' lives takes place in heaven. It's about justice. One promoter of the reading program says this:

The word "justice" is used to mean fairness and equity for all. Now used by our society as the politically-correct synonym for revenge, retribution, payback, and vengeance-the very opposite of equity and fairness." (Nonjustice.org)

I'm pretty sure that Jesus knew about justice. He was in on the plan to balance God's justice system that got out of whack by our self-centeredness.

One of the Pharisees, an expert in religious law, tried to trap Jesus

with this question: “Teacher, which is the most important commandment in the law of Moses?” And he answered:

“The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing”.

Oh, no that’s a catchy song lyric, but it is like what Jesus said.

Jesus replied, “‘You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ The entire law, and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments.” (Matthew 22:34-40)

When you are out and about this week, living your normal life, look for a few things:

- What’s fun and joyful about God’s world?
- Am I keeping the main thing the main thing?
- What’s my take on justice? And-
- Is God smiling?

I hope so!

Amen

Sources:

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