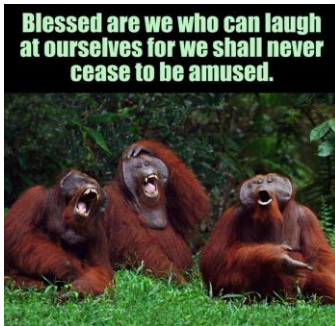


## THE SCIENCE OF HUMOR



### Scripture:

### Psalm 126

<sup>1</sup>When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. <sup>2</sup>Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then it was said among the nations, "The LORD has done great things for them." <sup>3</sup>The LORD has done great things for us, and we rejoiced.

<sup>4</sup>Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like the watercourses in the Negeb. <sup>5</sup>May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy. <sup>6</sup>Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.

### John 12:1-8

<sup>1</sup>Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. <sup>2</sup>There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. <sup>3</sup>Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. <sup>4</sup>But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, <sup>5</sup>"Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" <sup>6</sup>(He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) <sup>7</sup>Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. <sup>8</sup>You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

### This is the Word of the Lord! Thanks be to God!



### HUMOR

A Jewish man asks his Rabbi for counseling. "My son has become a Christian. What should I do, Rabbi?"

The rabbi responds: "I don't know. My son also became a Christian."

"Really, Rabbi? Your son became a Christian?"

"Yes," the rabbi replies with sad resignation.

"Well, what did you do?"

"I prayed to G-d."

"And did G-d answer?"

"Yes, G-d answered!"

"Well, what did G-d say?"

"G-d said he didn't know what to do either. The same thing happened with his son!"

The famous preacher/teacher and social reformer, Henry Ward Beecher said, "Mirth is God's medicine. Everyone should bathe in it daily."

And Mark Twain also had a lot to say about the science and theology of laughter and humor. He said, "The human race has only one really effective weapon, and that is laughter."

In his autobiography, Twain commented on God's creation. Pondering animals like hippos and aardvarks and ostriches, he said, "Humor must be one of the chief attributes of God. Animals that are distinctly humorous in form are God's jokes."

This reminds me of Ogden Nash's poem, *The Fly*: God in his wisdom made the fly, and then forgot to tell us why.

Mr. Twain also saw the healing power in humor. He said, "What is it that strikes a spark of humor from a man? It is the effort to throw off, to fight back the burden of grief that is laid on each one of us. In youth we don't feel it, but as we grow to manhood we find the burden on our shoulders. Humor? It is nature's effort to harmonize conditions. The further the

pendulum swings out over woe the further it is bound to swing back over mirth.”

Tvair believed laughter was contagious, too. He said, “Laughter which cannot be suppressed is catching. Sooner or later it washes away our defenses.”

## I LOVE TO LAUGH

That is the theme for one of my favorite songs in the movie, *Mary Poppins*. Do you remember the song “I Love to Laugh”? The words explain why laughter is healthy. (A video clip of that scene in the movie was shown to the congregation.)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YI9vzmLxgE4>

Humor and the things that make us laugh are age related and culturally influenced. The ability to belly laugh begins around four months of age. By the age of four a child laughs an average of three-hundred times a day.

However, by the time you are forty years old we only laugh ten times a day or less. That’s a problem! You have heard that “He who laughs last laughs longest,” or some say, “He who laughs last laughs best.” But science shows that “He who laughs the most lasts the longest.” Bob Hope and George Burns are good examples. They both lived to one-hundred. Groucho Marx once said, “I intend to live forever, or die trying.” He died trying at eighty-seven. He still beat the average age of death for men which is seventy-eight.

The newspaper, *USA Today* published an article titled ‘A Laugh a Day Keeps Death Further Away.’ They quoted a medical researcher from Norway, who said,

**“Humor works like a shock absorber in a car. And when you go over bumps, like cancer, on your road of life, you appreciate having a good shock absorber.”**

Studies in Japan found that your immune system is boosted to a point where you may live another seven years longer with a good dose of laughter each day, like a vitamin.

Humor isn’t the same to every person. You have to find your own preference. Some people like puns... (like Dr. Don Marshall), others prefer slapstick physical comedy like on America’s Funniest Home Videos.

## MR. BEAN

Maybe it is due to my Scottish DNA, but I enjoy British comedy such as the Monty Python comedy group and Rowan Atkinson, who plays the hilarious “Mr. Bean.”

Mr. Bean is so popular there have been studies that have looked at Mr. Bean comedy and the brain. In one study researchers examined the way the brain was processing humor as the research subjects watched Mr. Bean sketches. They tracked how the brain lights up during laughing. There’s a region in the brain called the anterior cingulate where we deal with conflict. Those areas light up when you laugh, too. Laughter research also helped neuroscientists find the pleasure centers in the brain.

My favorite Mr. Bean sketch is religious, of course. It takes place in a big store at Christmastime. Nothing is sacred to Mr. Bean it seems. Let’s watch. (A video of Mr. Bean was shown to the congregation.) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Yft4OK9WS0>

## HUMOR PROGRAMS

Like the Body, Mind, and Spirit science that inspired hospitals to develop programs, there are now humor programs in hospitals due to the clear benefits for improving health caused by laughter.

These programs were inspired by the best-selling book by Norman Cousins, *Anatomy of an Illness*. It describes his use of laughter (instead of medicine) to relieve his pain resulting from a degenerative disease of the spine. He credits hours of daily laughter for curing him.

Cousins was the editor of the *Saturday Review* when he became ill. After studying and writing about his experience, he became known as “the father of laughter therapy.” Cousins believed that we can all take some responsibility for our own recovery from illness and combat disease through adding a large dose of humor to our lives,

Cognitive neuroscientist Scott Weems agrees with him in his book, *HA!: The Science of When We Laugh and Why*. Weems discovered that the same chemicals that give us pleasure during laughter are the same ones activated by drugs and chocolate. He also found that laughter is actually a relief response for conflicted or confused feelings. Laughter improves your coping response to trauma and enhances cardiovascular health because laughing is a form of internal jogging. It improves immune-system response and it even makes you smarter.

Studies have shown that simply by watching Robin Williams’ standup comedy videos, your brain

function improves. Laughing enhances your ability to do problem solving tasks because humor is a mind exercise.

### **THE FUNNIEST JOKE IN THE WORLD**

Another scientific study searched for the funniest joke in the world based on how many of their study subjects laughed when they heard it. Here it is.

Two hunters are out in the woods when one of them collapses.

He's not breathing and his eyes are glazed, so his friend calls 911. "My friend is dead! What should I do?"

The operator replies, "Calm down, sir. I can help. First make sure that he's dead." There's a silence, then a loud blast.

Back on the phone, the guy says, "Ok, now what?"

### **LAUGHTER**

Laughter is a social bonder and more contagious than a yawn.

If someone close by us laughs, we are far more likely to laugh, too, which is why they put laugh track sounds on television comedies.

One of the more unique studies I found was on laughter and rats.

Researcher, Jeffrey Burgdorf, actually tickles rats for a living. I'm not kidding; he gets paid to tickle rats. But it's very important research because if you understand what makes a rat laugh and what gives joy to a rat, it helps scientists understand the same processes in humans. I guess deep down inside, we are all rats.

Other laughter studies show that women laugh with each other far more often than men. Females enjoy humor twenty-five percent more than men. Being a giggly girl is a healthy way to be.

There are just so many benefits to seeking out humor and sharing it with others. Humor definitely makes our lives healthier.

Dr. Paul McGhee said, "Your sense of humor is one of the most powerful tools you have to make certain that your daily mood and emotional state support good health."

Laughter is a powerful antidote to stress, pain, and conflict. It is impossible to be angry and laugh authentically at the same time.

Nothing works faster or more dependably to bring your mind and body back into a healthy balance than a good laugh. Humor lightens your burdens, inspires hope, connects you to others, and keeps you grounded and alert.

**Laughter makes you feel good.  
And the good feeling that you get when  
you laugh remains with you even  
after the laughter subsides.  
Humor helps you keep a positive,  
optimistic outlook through difficult  
situations, disappointments and loss.**

### **LEARN TO LAUGH**

A humorous perspective creates psychological distance, which can help you avoid feeling overwhelmed. Charlie Chaplin knew this when he said, "Life is a tragedy when seen in close-up, but a comedy in long-shot." And he added, "To truly laugh, you must be able to take your pain and play with it."

Even if you did not grow up in a household where laughter was a common sound, you can learn to laugh at any stage of life. Begin by setting aside special times in your day to seek out humor and laughter.

Here are some ways to start:

- Smile. Smiling is the beginning of laughter. Practice smiling. Watch the movie Elf. Buddy the Elf will show you how.
- Count your blessings. Literally make a list. Negative thoughts create a barrier to laughter.
- Spend time with fun, playful people, like children. Bring humor into conversations. Ask people, "What's the funniest thing that happened to you today?" Share your embarrassing moments.

Work at developing your sense of humor. Take yourself less seriously.

Some events are clearly sad and not occasions for laughter. But most heavy burdens can be lightened through humor.

- Surround yourself with reminders to lighten up. Keep a toy on your desk or in your car. Choose a computer screensaver that makes you laugh. Get new glasses. They help you see the humor in the world!
- Use humor to overcome challenges and enhance your life.

### **BIBLICAL LAUGHTER**

Laughter is a gift from God and there are many places in the Bible where laughing is mentioned or implied in the story. Yesterday in Melissa Jones' memorial service, I quoted one of the laughter references in the Book of Ecclesiastes. "For everything there is a season and a time for every purpose under heaven... A time to weep, and a time to

laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance.” (Ecclesiastes 4:1, 4)

My favorite story of Biblical laughter is in Genesis 21:5-7 where Sarah, at the age of eighty-nine, finds herself pregnant with Abraham’s son. Sarah explains in the Bible why she initially laughed when Abraham told her of God’s promise to have a child. She said, “God has given me cause to laugh, and all who hear of it will laugh with me. Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.” She appreciated that the joke was on her, so Sarah named the baby Isaac, which means “laughter.”

The simple truth is, as the Book of Proverbs reminds us, “A joyful heart is good medicine.” (Proverbs 17:22)

Proverbs 15:13 reads, “A glad heart makes a cheerful face.”

Psalm 2:4 “He who sits in the heavens laughs.”

Psalm 126:2 “Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy.”

And even in the Book of Job it reads, “He will fill your mouth with laughter, and your lips with shouting.” (Job 8:21)

### **JESUS PROBABLY LAUGHED OFTEN**

Jesus was peaceful and happy most of his days on earth, and I believe he probably laughed often. There are many moments in the New Testament when we can imagine Jesus laughing. Like when he said, “Let the little children come to me.” He must have laughed when they all jumped and scrambled up onto his lap.

Or when Peter tried to walk on water to Jesus and he fell in.

Or when the boy offered a tiny piece of fish and a little bread to Jesus to help him feed the five-thousand.

Don’t you think Jesus probably laughed when his mother asked him to turn water into wine?

How about the passage for today, when Mary poured the precious oil on his head and feet and washed them with her hair?

There is such a thing as nervous laughter. I bet there was some nervous laughter in the room coming from the other disciples when Judas Iscariot complained to Jesus at that moment. It must have been very intense and confusing to them.

Father James Martin is a Jesuit priest and theologian who recently published a book, “*Between Heaven and Mirth: Why Joy, Humor, and Laughter are at the Heart of the Spiritual Life.*” In it he explains how humor is an essential part of faith. He too believes that Jesus laughed and made jokes during his life on earth.

He says, “Humor helps people remember their humility and their humanity.” Martin encourages people to laugh in prayer and share their joy with God the way they would with a friend, or any other important person in their lives.”

Here is Father Martin’s favorite joke: “A man bought a car and called a priest, a minister and a rabbi to bless it.

The priest sprinkled holy water, the minister had everyone hold hands and sing.

But the rabbi? He cut a half-inch off the tailpipe.”

Jesus showed us how to appreciate someone, like Mary, who lavishes him with special attention. God is waiting to lavish you with love everyday. Pray, connect with God’s love, laugh, and count your blessings.

You never know when you might get hit by a bus!  
Amen

### **Benediction:**

**I will close with a favorite Shel Silverstein poem about how common problems and laughter bond us together.**

**The Little Boy and the Old Man**  
**Said the little boy, "Sometimes I drop my spoon."**  
**Said the old man, "I do that too."**  
**The little boy whispered, "I wet my pants."**  
**"I do that too," laughed the little old man.**  
**Said the little boy, "I often cry."**  
**The old man nodded, "So do I."**  
**"But worst of all," said the boy, "it seems grown-ups don't pay attention to me."**  
**And he felt the warmth of a wrinkled old hand. "I know what you mean," said the little old man.**

**And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you now and forever more. Amen**



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