

“THEY LAUGHED AT HIM”

Mark 5:21-42

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Lori can attest that I have a fear of being laughed at. Even by her. When she smiles in my direction, I often ask, “Are you laughing at me?” To which she dutifully reassures, “I’m not laughing at you. I’m smiling at you, dear. I’m happy.” But I’ve long been fretful about being laughed at. Alas, there are more than a few things in my life I’ve not attempted because I feared if I did not do them well, I would become a laughingstock.

I must not be the only one. I discovered this week that the fear of being laughed at is a “thing.” It’s called *gelotophobia*. Now gelotophobia is not to be confused with gelatophobia which is, I think, the fear of eating ice cream or gelato. I’ve been out to lunch with Kelly a few times recently and I can tell you our other pastor does not have gelatophobia even as I’m pretty sure *this* pastor has gelotophobia, the fear of being laughed at. Maybe some of you have it, too. Here are a few of the markers. You might have gelotophobia if

- *when people laugh in your presence you get anxious they’re laughing at you;
- *when you see strangers around you laughing you assume their laughter is being directed at you even though they don’t know you and you don’t know them;
- *when you are dancing you feel uneasy because you’re convinced the people watching are at least inwardly laughing at you.

A few of you are looking like you’ve just been diagnosed!

As a likely gelotophobe, my alarms sounded this week when I read in our gospel passage the sentence that says of Jesus, “*They laughed at him.*” Maybe Jesus was better about it than I am but I was incensed on his behalf. Maybe he had gotten used to it. Maybe he had thicker skin than I do. But a lot of people laughed at Jesus.

When Nicodemus skulked by night to talk with Jesus and Jesus told him no one can see the kingdom of God unless he or she is born anew,¹ Nicodemus laughed at Jesus: *“How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born again?”*² Hahahahaha!

A lot of people laughed at Jesus. A lot of people still do.

When Jesus was being tossed back and forth between Pilate and Herod as they tried to figure out what to do with him after his arrest, Herod and his attendants, the scripture says, *“laughed at him, treated him with contempt, and mocked him.”*³

A lot of people laughed at Jesus. A lot of people still do.

At the crucifixion, the Roman soldiers were seen laughing and cackling as Jesus was nailed to the cross, taunting him, *“If you are King of the Jews, save yourself.”*⁴

A lot of people laughed at Jesus. A lot of people still do.

In our story today, Jairus, a leader in the synagogue, comes to Jesus to tell him his daughter is very sick and will he please come to his home to make her well? Jesus agrees, but on the way to where the little girl lay, a growing crowd of people gathers around him including a woman who has been suffering from hemorrhages for a dozen years. She desperately desires to be healed and believes Jesus can do it. She touches the hem of his garment and healing flows from Jesus and the woman is made well. As Jesus and the woman engage in follow-up conversation, messengers rush in from Jairus’ house to tell Jairus the heartbreaking news that his daughter has died. They tell him he might as well let Jesus go as his services no longer are needed. It’s too late.

Nonetheless, Jesus keeps going and arrives at the house where mourners and weepers are making a great commotion. Jesus inquires of them, *“Why the uproar? Why the foofaraw? The girl is not dead, but sleeping.”* Then, the scripture says in that dreaded sentence, *“They laughed at him.”*⁵

A lot of people laughed at Jesus. A lot of people still do.

¹ John 3:3

² John 3:4

³ Luke 23:11

⁴ Luke 23:36-37

⁵ Mark 5:21-43

Why did the people at Jairus' house laugh at Jesus? Mark doesn't tell us straight out but several possibilities suggest themselves:

1. They thought Jesus was making a joke, tone deaf and inappropriate as it would have been, and they laughed.
2. It's possible they had not heard about the power God had invested in Jesus and so their laughter was the laughter of ignorance.
3. Perhaps they did not appreciate the utility of metaphor so when Jesus said the girl was not dead but sleeping, they did not "get" that Jesus was not speaking literally. He was trying to convey the good news that even though Jairus' daughter had died, it will be *as if* she only was sleeping once he ministers to her. They laughed derisively as if Jesus was a lunatic because in their experience dead people don't wake up.
4. Maybe the people had heard reports that were circulating about the ministry of Jesus but didn't believe them and laughed disdainfully as those who think God and faith are beneath them do.

The last possibility makes the most sense to me because later in the story, after the little girl is healed and raised up, the text says she began to walk about and all of the people "*were overcome with amazement.*"⁶

There is a growing number of people today who consider God, Christ, and Christian faith as having neither meaning nor relevance for their lives. God and faith, they think in their intellectual sophistry, are relics of a bygone era for humanity now has come of age, and reason and rationality render God passé'. "Man is the measure of all things," to use the words of the Greek philosopher Protagoras. They laugh at Jesus and at those of us who believe the power of God is the greatest source of hope and healing for the world and for us.

They claim the world has moved beyond the capacity of God to redeem and renew. They say the teachings of Jesus are too unsophisticated given the polarization of our public life; the foolish and pervasive gun violence; the thinly-disguised prejudices inherent in travel bans; politics that no longer serve but unnerve, and the unlimited and unregulated influences of big money and big corporations on the government of our land.

They say the teachings of Jesus are too simple to deal with issues like the poverty that washes over much of the world; criminal justice and educational systems in our country that too often are ineffectual and unfair; uneven access to health care; climate change too often denied; nuclear

⁶ Mark 5:42

proliferation imperiling the planet; refugees and immigrants treated inhumanely and inhospitably; racism and sexism that demean both humanity and human beings. They ask through their sarcastic laughter, “*Where is your God?*”⁷

A lot of people laughed at Jesus. A lot of people still do.

What are some of the teachings of Jesus that make these people laugh and discount our Lord?

The apostle Peter asked Jesus how many times a Christian must forgive another and, wanting to be seen by Jesus as big-hearted and gallant, suggested “*Seven?*” But Jesus said, “*Not seven times but seventy times seven.*”⁸ Without limit. A lot of people laugh. In its generous moments, sometimes the world permits a second chance but usually not a third and definitely not a fourth. “You can’t run a world with rampant forgiveness,” the devil’s advocates say. “*An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.*”⁹ But that only leaves the world blind and toothless.

But when stories emerge of fragrant forgiveness and magnanimous mercy, the world takes notice even if its attention span is not long. Forgiveness renews, revises, and rewires relationships and makes possible what otherwise would be impossible. When Jesus said of his executioners from his cross, “*Father, forgive them,*”¹⁰ he opened the path for a new way of living and relating both for nations and individuals that continues to offer itself today.

Jesus also taught us to love our enemies,¹¹ to pray for those who persecute us,¹² and as far as it depends on us, to live peaceably with all.¹³

A lot of people laughed at Jesus. A lot of people still do.

They consider themselves urbane and worldly, sophisticated, and enlightened as they laugh and sneer at those teachings of Jesus, reminding people of faith that to live in the way of Jesus is not practicable and will not work in our times. When they really want to make their point, they harumph to us, “Don’t be so naive” or “Don’t be foolish” or “We have to live in the real world.”

I like to hold up to those folks a passage in the first chapter of 1 Corinthians in which St. Paul reminds that, “*God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things*

⁷ Psalm 42:3

⁸ Matthew 18:22

⁹ Matthew 5:38

¹⁰ Luke 23:34

¹¹ Matthew 5:43

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ Romans 12:18

*that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are...*¹⁴ People can laugh all they want at the parables and promises of the Lord like the mourners and weepers did when Jesus said the dead girl was only sleeping. But when Jesus said to her, *"Little girl, get up!"*¹⁵ she got up and - I love this - *"they were overcome with amazement."*

That's how it is with the power of God in Christ. It amazes. It makes things possible. It makes things happen. It provides a way where there appears to be no way. It is the power to heal, to bind up, to build and to plant,¹⁶ to reconcile and to renew.

To the woman Jesus had healed of her hemorrhages, he said, *"Your faith has made you well."*¹⁷ Many times through the gospels, Jesus says, *"Blessed are those who believe,"*¹⁸ and *"Blessed are those who do not take offense at me, who do not laugh at me,"*¹⁹ because, Jesus said, only unbelief that can stymie the work of the Lord.²⁰

Jesus the Christ always has the last laugh. It is the laugh of redemption, hope, justice, and joy. He calls us to be his disciples and to trust and walk in his ways unto the repair and salvation of the world.

There always will be those who laugh at Jesus and at us, Christ's followers. But let the church of Jesus Christ, undeterred, live its faith to its full effect confident that the healing, reconciling, and peacemaking Christ works through us in the world he will bring to full and glorious completion.

Amen.

¹⁴ 1 Corinthians 1:27-28

¹⁵ Mark 5:41

¹⁶ Jeremiah 1:10

¹⁷ Mark 5:34

¹⁸ John 20:29

¹⁹ Matthew 11:6

²⁰ Mark 6:6