

## FOOD FOR THOUGHT—Jesus and Humor

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Many of us have probably wondered why the Bible doesn't say much about a sense of humor. I think we've wondered about this (I know I have) because we are aware of how often having a sense of humor helps us get through the day, relieves tension, and keeps us less prideful (if we joke with ourselves about ourselves). There is a reason why even (or

especially) at a funeral or the informal gatherings afterward, we not only speak of the loved one's good traits but also recall funny stories and memories involving the loved one. It is because in humor and laughter we find healing and connection.

The good news is...Jesus does have a sense of humor. It's a subtle one, especially because we can't hear his tone of voice as we read his words. But it is pretty clear that it is there.

My first real clue that he did indeed have a sense of humor was noticing the nicknames given the disciples--not cruel nicknames, but affectionate ones to make one smile and take themselves not too seriously. Jesus nicknamed James and John the "Sons of Thunder," and almost certainly because they had wanted to call down fire from heaven on the Samaritan village that considered them *persona non grata*. And I can just see Jesus shaking their shoulders to wake them up in the morning saying with a smile, "Come on, Sons of Thunder, time to get up and start a new day!" Thomas is given the nickname "Twin" (Didymus is Aramaic for "twin"), and early church tradition said that he looked a lot like Jesus. I can hear and see Jesus smiling and using this fond nickname: "Come on, Twin. Time to hit the road!" Simon is given the nickname "Rock" even though his passionate nature at times makes him seem anything but a solid and unmovable rock. Interestingly, these nicknames turn out to be true in the long run. James is the first disciple to die for Jesus's sake, and John is the last living disciple, so they are like the bookends of the disciples—the first and the last—something that is in a way worthy of being compared to the roll of thunder. Peter, though impulsive at times and not a rock when he denied Jesus, does eventually become a strong, steady, and brave leader in the young church. Thomas, the twin, is, early tradition says, the disciple who took the gospel farthest—out of the known "civilized" world of the Greco-Roman empire, all the way, it appears, to India. And there he both won converts and was martyred. So, in carrying the words of life so very far and being like Jesus in his martyrdom, he really did end up resembling Jesus not just by his looks, but by his life.

I think being aware that Jesus has a sense of humor can also help us better understand the uncomfortable (for us) passages in which Jesus sounds as if he is being rude to the Canaanite woman pleading for the deliverance of her daughter and to his mother at the wedding in Cana. I think these are very likely instances of mild, witty exchanges. In the exchange with his mother, we can tell, interestingly, that Mary doesn't take Jesus's answer as a definite no. (We can tell this because after talking to Jesus, she tells the servants to do whatever he says.) Also, he does

perform the miracle of turning the water into wine, though he does so not to save the wedding, the passage says, but to build up the faith of his disciples at the beginning of his ministry. It is also noteworthy that other than the disciples and his mother, the only people who know about the miracle are the servants (who saw that what they picked up and carried was indeed water at first and then saw that it had become wine by the time they reached the wedding's wine-taster). So, when I think of Mary saying to Jesus, *They've run out of wine [wink wink]*, I can hear and see Jesus replying in subtle and quiet humor, *Hmm...why are you telling me this?...does that have something to do with us? [wink wink]*, showing that he recognizes Mary's remark as an indirect request.

Regarding the Canaanite woman, it is important to note that Jesus doesn't have a problem with performing miracles for non-Jews. He has already made the Jews angry enough to kill him by mentioning the fact that in the days of Elijah, it was a Sidonian widow for whom God performed the miracle of the multiplied grain and oil and by reminding them that the one person Elisha healed of leprosy was an Assyrian. In Jesus's exchange with the Canaanite woman, we miss a lot because we can't hear the tone of voice. (It also helps us to know that while Jews considered dogs unclean, Canaanites were fond of them and kept them as pets—dogs and puppies held a positive connotation for the woman herself. Jesus is using an image from her world.) I can hear him say with a smile in his voice, *Well, you know...we're not supposed to give the children's food to the pet dogs...* and the brave and witty woman rising to the challenge by replying, *Well.... that's true... but the puppies under the table do get to eat the bits that fall on the floor, you know....* Why did Jesus choose to engage in this exchange before performing the miracle? There's no knowing for sure. Perhaps to make a point to his listening disciples? Perhaps to make them recognize her faith, the faith of a female gentile? Perhaps simply because he was aware of the woman's intelligence and courage and saw that the exchange would somehow fit her? Perhaps because he knew that her determination to rise to his challenge would strengthen her? I don't know why he did it—perhaps so that one day we'd hear about this woman of wit and courage and tenacity. Whatever his reason, sparring wit does seem to be involved. It is also good to know that the word we translate as "woman," which Jesus uses both to address this Syrophenician / Canaanite woman and to address his mother at the Cana wedding, is in its original language a term of endearment; it basically means something more like "my dear" or "my dear lady" instead of "woman." There is much more to talk or think about in both exchanges, but I wanted to point out that in both cases, it is likely that the Lord is gently engaging in wit.

Jesus's wit is very clearly seen in his public teaching. He didn't use slapstick (nor, of course, raunchy humor), but he often used wit, irony and good humor. Again, I think we often fail to notice this because we can't hear his tone of voice. Try to insert or imagine that tone of voice when Peter has just asked how many times must he forgive per person per day—seven times? And we hear Jesus say No, Peter, not seven times, *seventy times seven!* He is saying this probably with the same tone of voice we might use if we were making a comparison to show something impossible and said, "I'm not talking about seeing if you can get 13 people in Volkswagen or even 30 people in a Volkswagen! I'm talking about trying to fit *300 people* in a Volkswagen!" I hear and see Jesus with a smile and a teasing-ish voice saying—"No, Peter, not

7 times a day, more like **490 times** a day!" The subjects which Jesus talked about were deadly serious—spiritual life, spiritual death, salvation, pride, humility. But he often used humor to help the crowds understand and remember what he said. (And humor is excellent learning glue; we remember what's funny.) Think of his voice and gestures when he said, "It would be like the blind leading the blind!" Think of him using the comparison of straining at a gnat but swallowing a camel. It would be like the tone of voice we would use if we said, *That would be like saying, 'Oh no, gnat, there's no room in the tent for you—we'd be exceeding the fire marshal's limit!' and then we cheerfully the camel to come right in*). Think of his voice as he talks about the example of fastidiously tithing mint and rue but forgetting about justice and the love of God. These are all instances of witty irony and comparisons that make the point both clear and memorable. I can see Jesus smiling and smacking his palm to his forehead as he uses such illustrations.

Finally, I want to tell you that there is a much better article about Jesus's Sense of Humor. I had considered just telling you that not long ago, I'd read a really good article about the Humor of Jesus and that I'd decided to just send you a copy of his article rather than write a Food for Thought for this month. However, I was not sure whether that could be considered some sort of copyright issue even if I included his name and made it clear that the article was by him. So...I ended up writing my article after all.

But I highly encourage you to read Father Tim's piece as well. It appears on his Word Press blog (I think that's the right way to say it).

You should be able to use this link to find it: <https://frtim.wordpress.com/2013/05/30/the-often-overlooked-humor-of-jesus/> Or you can simply google *The Often Overlooked Humor of Jesus*. If you get to the article and see the author listed as *Father Tim* and posted in May of 2013, you've found the right article.

Laughter is a great gift. May the Lord bless you through it!

--Sally (with thanks to Michael Card, Father Tim, and several others).