**Should We Really Be Laughing At Other People?**

In addition to being a great president, Abraham Lincoln was a great teller of jokes. Through the darkest days of the Civil War, he somehow managed to keep making wisecracks. When a woman once asked him how he could maintain his sense of humor under the circumstances, he responded, "Ma'am, if I wasn't laughing, I'd be crying.

When the Worship Team decided to do a joke service again this year, we selected this particular Sunday partly because its close to April 1, April Fool's Day, but also because it's the final Sunday devoted to our April theme of Resilience. And I think the link between laughter and resilience, captured so well by the Lincoln quote above, is obvious. In fact, the importance of laughter for resilience is so obvious that if I were to stand up here and talk about it for twenty minutes, you'd be bored to tears. So I'm going to talk about something completely different. Instead of talking about the importance of laughter for resilience, I'm going to talk about the importance of resilience for laughter.

Unfortunately, the backdrop for my remarks is not very funny. What I'm referring to is the deadly attacks in Paris that were directed against Charlie Hebdo, the French satirical newspaper known for lampooning everyone in any kind of position of authority, including, on several occasions, the Prophet Mohammed. And since I started thinking about this sermon, another fatal attack took place in Denmark that likewise targeted a cartoonist with a history of satirizing Mohammed. Some folks, obviously, can't take a joke.

The condemnation leveled against these attacks was almost universal, and rightly so. There is simply no justification for responding to words and pictures, no matter how offensive, with physical violence. Nonetheless, now that the initial shock and horror of the attacks has begun to wear off, we are left facing a question: Granting that the attacks in Paris and Copenhagen were inexcusably, horrifically wrong, does this mean the targeted satirists were in the right? Otherwise stated, is it really OK to make fun of other people's most cherished beliefs and values?

Reflecting on this question led my mind down a few different paths. The first took me back to the time when I was about ten years old, when I first saw what I still consider to be the perhaps funniest movie ever made, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. Those of you who have seen this film will remember the scene where King Arthur and his knights, in search of the mythical Holy Grail, find themselves standing

before a cave said to be the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea. Although the cave may well house the Grail, their guide—a local magician named Tim—warns them it is guarded by a most fearsome beast. Scanning the nearly-empty pit before the cave, Arthur asks him, "What, you mean behind the rabbit?" When Tim protests that, no, the rabbit *is* the horrible creature, Sir Robbin laughs and scornfully volunteers to dispatch the bunny. As Robbin walks down into the pit, jauntily swinging his sword about him, the rabbit makes a flying leap across the screen—in low budget, 1970's special effects—and sinks its teeth into Sir Robbin's neck, instantly decapitating the brave knight. Looking on in stunned horror, King Arthur can only utter: "Jesus Christ!"

When I watched this scene as a ten year-old, it threw me into a huge moral dilemma. Having grown up going to a Presbyterian church every weekend, I was extremely God-fearing. Literally. I was scared of God. I knew that God was constantly looking into my mind and judging, not only my actions, but every thought that went through my head. And if you know anything about the thoughts that go through a ten year-old boy's head, you'll understand why I was worried. And now comes along this movie. I knew that taking the Lord's name in vain is a sin, so the killer rabbit scene just had to be blasphemous. On the other hand, the scene was so funny that, not only did I fall out of my chair laughing when I first watched it, but for days on end I couldn't think about it without again falling out of my chair laughing. Did this mean I was hopelessly degenerate, sure to be condemned to the fires of hell for my ungodly sense of humor?

This question really did trouble me for some time. Finally, however, I made my peace with it in this way: If God really is the maker of heaven and earth, I reasoned, then he is probably tough enough to take a joke. In fact, if God created everything in the world and called it "good," then surely one of the things he found to be good must be laughter. God, in other words, must have a sense of humor. And so, I concluded, as God watched the killer bunny rabbit scene over my shoulder, he must have thought it was pretty funny, too. God must be strong enough—resilient enough—that he can watch people make a joke at his expense, or his son's expense, and laugh just as loud as everyone else.

I still believe this, whatever form I may believe God to take these days. [Did you catch the UU waffling there?] Anyway, I do still believe this, that God has a sense of humor. So if you were to ask me what I think about satirical images of the Prophet Mohammed, my suspicion would be that Mohammed is similarly strong enough to take a joke. After all, this guy lived way out in the middle of the Arabian desert, he had some visions and founded a religion, and now fourteen hundred years later this religion is

not only still going strong, but it claims a fifth of the world's population. So I hardly think that Mohammed is so troubled by feelings of personal inadequacy that he's going to let a few Europeans drawing crude pictures of him get under his skin. And yet, I am *not* the one you should ask about this. Islam is not my religion. Mohammed is not near and dear to my heart. And it is clear that many, many Muslims do find caricatures of the Prophet Mohammed to be deeply offensive, especially when these caricatures are drawn by non-Muslims who are deliberately seeking to provoke and insult.

So what should we do? Tell Muslims they need to learn how to take a joke, since their prophet probably already knows how to? Start publishing more cartoons of Mohammed, so that Muslims around the will get more practice at laughing at their own religion? I don't think that would help the situation much. In fact, I think we should be doing precisely the opposite. In all actuality, there is probably very little that we, as westerners, can do to change Muslim society. But one thing we can do is to refrain from telling Muslim jokes. We can refrain from caricaturing and satirizing Islam's most sacred symbols and personalities, and we can refrain from praising other westerners who do.

I realize that, in the wake of the European attacks, and in the wake of the march in Paris where close to a million people took to the streets to stand up for the freedom of expression, my argument may not sound very courageous. It may strike some as downright offensive, as if I were asserting that the Hebdo staffers got what they deserved. That is *not* what I am arguing. That type of brutal violence is absolutely intolerable, and we all must stand up against it. And we should probably all stand up for the legal right of everyone to express their views, even when those views may be despicable to many. But to support someone's freedom of expression is not to promise you will never criticize the views they express. In fact, I believe we have a moral duty to use our own freedom of expression to speak out against those whose views and statements and manners of expression we find to be unacceptable. And I would assert that, at this point in world history, it is unacceptable for those of us in the West to satirize Muslim culture and beliefs.

Why do I say this about Muslim culture, when just minutes ago we were up here telling jokes about Baptists, Buddhists, Catholics, Hindus, atheists, and even UU's? To address this question, let's shift gears for a moment and consider another area of cultural tension that is a bit more familiar to us, that between white and black America. For the past several decades, there have been a string of black comedians, from Richard Pryor to Eddie Murphy and on through Chris Rock who have built their careers largely around telling jokes about the black community—jokes that are often extremely raw, but also

extremely funny, as both black and white audiences have agreed. I think it goes without saying that if a white comedian were to tell most of these same jokes, it would strike listeners as appalling, not funny. You'll sometimes hear white comedian wannabe's complaining about this, asking, "Why can he tell these jokes when I'm not allowed to?" Well, one reason is because Chris Rock is funny, and you're not. But the other reason is that we have a legacy in this country that stretches back for over four hundred years which involves white people brutally and systematically exploiting black people, all while asserting that black people fail to possess a dignity and humanity equal to that of whites.

There is no doubt that conditions in the United States have changed in many ways over the past half century, mostly for the better. Nevertheless, this legacy of systematized racism still casts a long shadow over our history and our culture. Consequently, when a white person tells a joke that derogates black people, it is impossible for the American listener not to hear a contempt in this joke that really would have been there for many centuries, even if the contemporary white comedian feels no such contempt and is just looking for a good-natured laugh. When Chris Rock tells this same joke, on the other hand, there is not this same suspicion of contempt, since the comedian is part of the community he is poking fun at. On the contrary, listeners hear in Rock's joke a healthy ability to laugh at himself and his community—a positive use of that symbiosis between laughter and resilience. Yet, comedians like Rock are expressing even more than this. By telling racially self-effacing jokes to mixed audiences, black comedians are making a *declaration* of resilience, a declaration of strength. Rock is saying, "We were down once, but now we are strong enough that we can take a joke made at our expense. If fact, I can stand up here and tell you those jokes, myself, and I'm going to be OK, and the black people sitting next to you in the audience are going to be OK. In fact, we're all going to laugh our tushies off together." Except that Rock wouldn't use the word "tushies."

If the arc of the moral universe continues to bend the way it has been bending for the past fifty years, then a time will come when I will be able to stand up here and tell you black jokes the same way a group of us was just up here telling Buddhist and Baptist jokes. Perhaps our society is edging up on that point already. But I would say that we are not quite there yet, and in any case, this is one areas where it's better to err on the side of sensitivity rather than provocativeness. The same is probably true of Jewish jokes. Yes, we have Jewish comedians like Jerry Seinfeld and Jon Stewart who love to play on Jewish stereotypes in hilarious, self-deprecating fashion. But we also had centuries of very earnest, and cruel, anti-Semitic stereotyping that ultimately led up to the Holocaust, and that cast an awfully long shadow

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over western society, and so all but the gentlest of Jewish jokes should probably still be left to those within that community.

And jokes about Islam and the Prophet Mohammed? For those of us in the West: No. Not at this time. Out of bonds. We can debate about the extent to which the West has oppressed the Muslim world, or whether Islamic society—once a bastion of learning—fell behind Europe over the past several centuries due to its own internal failings. But whatever the case, it is an unavoidable fact that for the past several hundred years, the Christian West has enjoyed a position of dominance over the Islamic world, and the West has used this power to exploit the Middle East for its own purposes, first by extending its colonial reach throughout the region, and more recently by propping up dictators who oppress their own peoples so that the West can secure cheap oil. Given this legacy of imbalanced power and exploitation, when a westerner tells a Muslim joke today, it is simply impossible for any listener, Muslim or non-Muslim, to hear this joke as anything but contemptuous, scornful, or even hateful of Islam, especially when 98% of such jokes that do get told portray Muslims as terrorists. So recent history simply does not allow to us to view a westerner as telling a light-hearted, playful Muslim joke.

So what can we do at this point? Perhaps not much. As westerners, our power to bring about changes within Muslim society is limited. We can be supportive of comedians like Bassam Youssef, known as "the Jon Stewart of the Middle East," who poke fun at their own cultures, oftentimes at considerable personal risk. We can hope that other such comedians come along and help their fellow Muslims build up some of that resilience that comes from laughing at oneself. We can hope that conditions change enough within Muslim society that one day we are talking about the successful and celebrated "Chris Rock of the Middle East." In the meantime, however, we can at least refrain from pouring fuel on the fire by refusing to tell or to condone western jokes about Islam and the Prophet Mohammed that can only be seen as inflammatory.

Perhaps that's boring. Perhaps that's PC. Perhaps that seems like an unfitting, or even cowardly, tribute to the victims of the Paris and Copenhagen attacks. But I believe it is what we are called to do at this point in history. Sometimes we are called to do a boring nothing, rather than a bold but ultimately counter-productive something. And in the meantime, we will still have plenty to keep us busy. At some point, someone's going to have to start writing some more UU jokes. Let's start today…