

## Sermon on Acts 13 for 4/12/26—Holy Humor Sunday

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Good morning! It's good to see you here on this first Sunday after Easter. For many churches, this is one of the lowest attendance Sundays of the year— perhaps because Easter is such a big event for the church, and the pews are packed, and then people feel they can skip a week or two. So like I said, it's good to see you here.

I wanted to tell you a story I heard about a ship that hit some rocks. The ship was sinking. The captain called the crew together and asked if anyone knew how to pray. A sailor stepped forward. "I do, sir." The captain responded, "Good. You pray, The rest of us are going to put on life jackets, because we're one short."

Speaking of prayer: a woman invited quite a few people over for dinner. She put a lot of effort into the preparations, but finally the guests had arrived and were gathered around the table. She turned to her six-year-old daughter and said, "Honey, would you like to say the blessing before we eat?"

The daughter replied, "I don't know what to say,"

"Oh, honey, just say what you hear Mommy say."

"OK," said the daughter. "Dear God, why did I invite all these people over for dinner?"

In the early centuries of the church, the Sunday after Easter was called Bright Sunday, or Holy Humor Sunday. It's celebrating the great joke that God played on Satan. At the crucifixion of Christ, the devil thought he'd won. And then God raised Jesus from the dead. St. Augustine called it "Risus Paschalis," for the "Easter Laugh." Both the Roman church and the Eastern churches celebrated this day with humor. People played tricks on each other, told jokes, sang and danced and even threw water on each other.

This tradition went on for centuries, and the new Protestant churches joined the party. Then in the the 17th century, Pope Clement X banned the celebration. Perhaps it wasn't religious enough. Over time, the practice fell out of favor. But in recent years, many churches have reinstated Holy Humor Sunday. I read about one church in North Carolina where everyone in attendance got a paper bag with a silly costume piece, a kazoo and a joke. They put on their costumes and read their jokes, and everyone had fun. There's a publication called the Joyful Noiseletter that promotes Holy Humor Sunday and collects stories of ways congregations have fun on this day. So, maybe next year at First Pres....

I'll mention it to Pastor Dan. He isn't here this Sunday, as he enjoys a well-deserved family vacation in Arizona. But it reminds me of a story I heard of a pastor who woke up one beautiful Sunday morning and wanted nothing so much as to go golfing. So he called the associate pastor, faked a coughing fit, and said he was too sick to make it to church. Please carry on without me, And then he threw his clubs in the trunk and drove to a town a safe distance away to hit the links. On his first drive, he got a hole in one! This was incredible! The pastor hit two more holes in one and had the best golf score of his life. He couldn't believe it. He prayed, "God, why did you let me have such an amazing game of golf? You know what I did this morning." And a voice from heaven replied, "Who can you tell?"

All this actually is related to our Scripture for the day. It's a long passage from the 15th chapter of the book of Acts, a story that begins in the newly formed church in Antioch, which was north up the coast of the Mediterranean Sea, where Paul and Barnabus had been preaching. The church was full of Gentiles who had received the good news and become believers in Christ.

Some men arrived from Jerusalem, most likely Pharisees who had converted to Christianity. These men told the fledgling believers that they had to be circumcised, which was a commitment to keep all of the laws of Moses. According to Rabbinical interpretation, there are 613 commandments in the Torah, which includes 365 prohibitions and 248 obligations, or positive commandments. So trying to keep them all would be a pretty heavy lift for young believers. Let's pick up the story there, at the beginning of Acts 15.

*But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." 2 And when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question. 3 So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, reporting the conversion of the Gentiles, and they gave great joy to all the brethren. 4 When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them. 5 But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up, and said, "It is necessary to circumcise them, and to charge them to keep the law of Moses."*

*6 The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. 7 And after there had been much debate, Peter rose and said to them, "Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. 8 And God who knows the heart bore witness to them, giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us; 9 and he made no distinction between us and them, but cleansed their hearts by faith. 10 Now therefore why do you make trial of God by putting a yoke upon the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? 11 But we believe that we shall be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."*

Notice that the council spent a lot of time discussing the issue and listening carefully to each speaker. That's a good model for civic discourse as well as church governance.

More to the point, Peter pointed out that nobody ever had actually succeeded in keeping all those laws and obligations—so why should these Gentile believers be expected to bear that yoke?

In the end, James quoted a passage from the prophets predicting that God would call Gentiles by name to be his people. Then he said,

*19 Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, 20 but should write to them to abstain from the pollutions of idols and from unchastity and from what is strangled and from blood. 21 For from early generations Moses has had in every city those who preach him, for he is read every sabbath in the synagogues."*

Here James was recommending a minimum requirement to help the fledgling believers steer clear of pagan practices that might have been in their background. Don't drink blood or eat animals that have been strangled so as to retain the blood, and avoid associating with idols and sexual impurity. So they wrote the letter and sent it with Judas Barsabbas and Silas, who were two representatives of the church in Jerusalem. I'll pick it up at verse 30.

*30 So when they were sent off, they went down to Antioch; and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. 31 And when they read it, they rejoiced at the exhortation. 32 And Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, exhorted the brethren with many words and strengthened them. 33 And after they had spent some time, they were sent off in peace by the brethren to those who had sent them. 35 But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also.*

This is the word of the Lord.

So it was a happy ending, and God's grace won out. But what does all this have to do with us today?

Quite a lot, actually. Because no matter how often people hear about salvation by faith, the old works salvation keeps creeping in there. It just seems we should be doing something to earn our own redemption. So the more legalistic churches create rules and regulations for the Christian life, and people grow up believing that God is sitting up in heaven with some big ledger, keeping track of what people do wrong, and whether it's balanced out by what they do right. It's a pretty grim sort of religion.

Which reminds me of another story. Apparently Groucho Marx once got off an elevator and ran into a clergyman. The pastor approached him, shook his hand and said, "I want to thank you for all the joy you've brought into the world." Groucho replied, "Thank you, Reverend. And I want to thank you for all the joy you've taken out of it."

Because trying to get brownie points with God isn't much fun. And it's definitely not what Jesus preached.

Sometimes we just can't help ourselves— earning favor with God is so deeply imbedded in our culture. "I must be living right—I got such beautiful weather for my picnic." Or "I'd better do something good, because I think I'm in trouble with the man upstairs." Some people are convinced that they could never go to heaven because of all the bad things they've done or their history of addiction or the fact that they've never prayed much.

But that brings us back to the Easter Laugh. Because Christ gave his life to free us from all the laws and rules and regulations that we couldn't keep anyway. When Jesus was raised from the dead, not only did he defeat Satan, but he opened up a life of freedom and joy for all who believe. And that's worth celebrating. Amen?