

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
Luke 13:31-33  
Luke 10:30-35

First United Church of Christ  
Worship at Skinner Chapel, Carleton College  
Rev. Sandra K. Johnson & Rev. Carolyn Fure-Slocum

## **Stand-up Theology: The Meaning of Life through Jokes**

### **Introduction Carolyn**

Faith and learning are a lot alike: they are both part of the on-going search for meaning in our lives and in our world. They don't end after 4 years of college or after Sunday School and confirmation (despite what many think!). Coming to new and deeper understandings in both faith and learning often requires our settled views to be shaken up—uncomfortable learning, it's often called. In order to overturn our neatly constructed worlds, religious leaders throughout time have told stories, creating characters and images that help people see meaning in a different way. Jesus was a genius at this. He told parables--short stories which exploded the world views of the time, such as Julie and Sam just read for us.

Nowadays, it's often jokes, which if we take them "seriously" enough to think about them, can shake up our world views and offer us a new perspective. Sandy and I were intrigued this past spring when a new book came out, "Plato and a Platypus Walk into a Bar: Understanding Philosophy through Jokes." So with thanks to authors Thomas Cathcart and Daniel Klein, we thought we'd offer you "Stand-up Theology," reflecting on two of the big questions of life through jokes.

### **Is there a God? What is God like? Sandy**

Let's start at the top: Is there a God? You might imagine that there is an ongoing debate between those people who believe there is a good and those who don't. In fact, that debate is not possible because those two groups of people see the world in entirely different ways.

*A little old Christian lady comes out onto her front porch every morning and shouts, "Praise the Lord!"*

*And every morning, the atheist next door yells back, "There is no God!"*

*This goes on for weeks. "Praise the Lord!" yells the lady. "There is no God!" responds the neighbor.*

*As time goes by, the lady runs into financial difficulties and has trouble buying food. She goes out onto the porch and asks God for help with groceries, then says, "Praise the Lord!"*

*The next morning when she goes out onto the porch, there are the groceries she asked for. Of course, she shouts, "Praise the Lord!"*

*The atheist jumps out from behind a bush and says, "Ha! I bought those groceries. There is no God!"*

*The lady looks at him and smiles. She shouts, "Praise the Lord! Not only did you provide for me, Lord, you made Satan pay for the groceries!"*

Even people with some faith are inclined toward skepticism. After all, there are other explanations for the things that God gets credit for, like miracles:

*Old "Doc" Bloom, the local hardware store owner, who was known for his miraculous cures for arthritis, had a long line of "patients" waiting outside his door, when a little old lady, completely bent over, shuffled in slowly, leaning on her cane.*

*When her turn came, she went into the back room of the store and, amazingly, emerged within half an hour, walking completely erect with her head held high.*

*A woman waiting in the line said, "It's a miracle! You walked in bent in half and now you're walking erect. What did Doc do?"*

*She answered, "He gave me a longer cane."*

Well, that may or may not be your idea of a miracle. Even in the face of a miracle – or at least a miraculous occurrence – some folks keep asking questions:

*A man stumbles into a deep well and plummets a hundred feet before grasping a spindly root, stopping his fall. His grip grows weaker and weaker, and in his desperation he cries out, "Is there anybody up there?"*

*He looks up, and all he can see is a circle of sky. Suddenly, the clouds part and a beam of bright light shines down on him. A deep voice thunders, "I, the Lord, am here. Let go of the root, and I will save you."*

*The man thinks for a moment and then yells, "Is there anybody else up there?"*

Even religious leaders – pastors, ministers, rabbis – have questions about God, or perhaps we might say, reservations about the power and might of God:

*Four rabbis used to argue theology together, and three were always in accord against the fourth. One day, the odd rabbi out, after losing three to one again, decided to appeal to a higher authority.*

*"O God!" he cried. "I know in my heart that I am right and they are wrong! Please give me a sign to prove it to them!"*

*It was a beautiful sunny day. As soon as the rabbi finished his prayer, a storm cloud moved across the sky above the four rabbis. It rumbled once and dissolved. "A sign from God! See, I'm right, I knew it!" But the other three disagreed, pointing out that storm clouds often form on hot days.*

*So the rabbi prayed again. "O God, I need a bigger sign to show that I am right and they are wrong. So please, God, a bigger sign!" This*

*time four storm clouds appeared, rushed towards each other to form one big cloud, and a bolt of lightning slammed into a tree on a nearby hill.*

*“I told you I was right!” cried the rabbi, but his friends insisted that nothing had happened that could not be explained by natural causes.*

*The rabbi was getting ready to ask for a very, very big sign, but just as he said, “O God ...,” the sky turned pitch-black, the earth shook, and a deep, booming voice intoned, “HEEEEE’S RIIIIIGHT!”*

*The rabbi put his hands on his hips, turned to the other three, and said, “Well?”*

*“So,” shrugged one of the other rabbis, “now it’s three to two.”*

Well, our questions and doubts about God are not usually settled by majority vote (though we try to do that sometimes in the UCC!). And while humor is not one of the classical spiritual disciplines, if we listen with an ear for theology, the twists, turns, puns, and surprises of jokes can lead us to a better understanding of what we believe, what we don’t believe, and what we still wonder about.

### **Is there meaning in the world and for my life? Carolyn**

Whether there is meaning and purpose in life is another of the big questions that faith and learning explore. Many of us literally search high and low for answers to these questions.

*A seeker has heard that the wisest guru in all of India lives atop India’s highest mountain. So the seeker treks over hill and Delhi until he reaches the fabled mountain. It’s incredibly steep, and more than once he slips and falls. By the time he reaches the top, he is full of cuts and bruises, but there is the guru, sitting cross-legged in front of his cave.*

*“O, wise guru,” the seeker says, “I have come to you to ask what the secret of life is.”*

*“Ah, yes, the secret of life,” the guru says. “The secret of life is a teacup.”*

*“A teacup? I came all the way up here to find the meaning of life, and you tell me it’s a teacup!”*

*The guru shrugs. “So maybe it isn’t a teacup.”*

For the sake of moral clarity (or even for writing class papers!), we want the answers to be clear and concise. But instead, we often get a response such as this from one of the greatest 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophers, Marx, Groucho Marx: “These are my principles; if you don’t like them, I have others.” So, we look for teachers who can give us the “right” answers, only to find eventually that there are many perspectives and many right answers.

*Holmes and Watson are on a camping trip. In the middle of the night, Holmes wakes up and gives Dr. Watson a nudge. “Watson,” he says, “look up at the sky and tell me what you see.”*

*“I see millions of stars, Holmes,” says Watson.*

*“And what do you conclude from that, Watson?”*

*Watson thinks for a moment. “Well,” he says, “astronomically, it tells me that there are millions of galaxies and potentially billions of planets. Astrologically, I observe that Saturn is in Leo. Horologically, I deduce that the time is approximately a quarter past three. Meteorologically, I suspect that we will have a beautiful day tomorrow. Theologically, I see that God is all-powerful, and we are small and insignificant. Uh, what does it tell you, Holmes?”*

*“Watson, you idiot! Someone has stolen our tent!”*

So, is everything relative then? Can we make any choice, find any meaning in life, and have it be right?

*The lookout on a battleship spies a light ahead off the starboard bow. The captain tells him to signal the other vessel, “Advise you change course twenty degrees immediately!”*

*The answer comes back, “Advise you change course twenty degrees immediately!”*

*The captain is furious. He signals, “I am a captain. We are on a collision course. Alter your course twenty degrees now!”*

*The answer comes back, “I am a seaman second class, and I strongly urge you to alter your course twenty degrees.”*

*Now the captain is beside himself with rage. He signals, “I am a battleship!”*

*The answer comes back, “I am a lighthouse.”*

Indeed, some things are absolute and unchangeable, such as God’s love for us. But, we worry, how do we know if our answers are wrong?

*Pat: Mike, I’m calling you from the freeway on my new cell phone!*

*Mike: Be careful, Pat. They just said on the radio that there’s a nut driving the wrong way on the freeway.”*

*Pat: One nut? Hell, there are hundreds of them!*

Yes, some directions can be wrong, but if we pursue the questions with openness, honesty, and humility, (and watch the road signs!), we are unlikely to get it too badly wrong.

So, do we have a choice in what we are to do in life, or is it all predetermined? When asked if he believed in freewill, the wonderful storyteller and writer Isaac Bashevis Singer replied, tongue-in-cheek, “I have no choice.” But many contemporary Christians have come to a different understanding of human freewill and agency: like a good parent, God loves us and sets us free to make our own decisions. We don’t always, however, make the ethical decision.

*A young rabbi was an avid golfer. Even on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year, he snuck out by himself for a quick nine holes.*

*On the last hole he teed off, and a gust of wind carried his ball directly over the hole and dropped it in for a hole in one.*

*An angel who witnessed this miracle complained to God, “This guy is playing golf on Yom Kippur, and you cause him to get a hole in one? This is a punishment?” “Of course it is,” said the Lord, smiling. “Who can he tell?”*

Often there are natural consequences to our actions! But when times get rough, we still expect God to be there for us.

*A man is in desperate financial straits and prays to God to save him by letting him win the lottery.*

*Days go by, then weeks, and the man fails to win a single lottery. Finally, in misery, he cries out to God, “You tell us, ‘Knock and it shall be opened to you. Seek and you shall find.’ I’m going down the tubes here, and I still haven’t won the lottery!”*

*A voice from above answers, “You’ve got to meet me half way, buddy!” Buy a ticket!”*

God is there for us in all times and places, but we have to open our hearts to God’s presence in our lives.

So, as we search for the meaning and purpose of life, jokes and stories can shake us out of our staid world views, helping us find new and deeper understandings. Uncomfortable learning reminds us that there aren’t always clear, right answers to be had; that others may have very different perspectives; that there are a few absolutes—and some wrong answers; that we need to be open to listening to many different perspectives in order to shape and correct our own; and that God got here before us—we simply need to learn to open ourselves to God’s presence in our lives.

### **Conclusion: Sandy**

United Church of Christ historian and theologian Randi Walker has written that our church has a “*theological culture whose essential element is a willingness to entertain doubt...*” (The Evolution of a UCC Style, 2005, page 90)

In a cultural religious landscape where certainty is celebrated and doubt is “dissed,” it requires some courage to take a stand in favor of doubt. The slogan on our outdoor “God Is Still Speaking Banner” attests to our style of faith: “Never place a period where God has placed a comma.”

Of course that slogan comes from another accidental theologian, Gracie Allen. The wisdom of her words is not diminished by their humor. Which is why I love Randi Walker’s phrase so much: we “entertain doubt.” We let the words that entertain us and make us laugh lead us into deeper faith. That’s why stand-up theology can help us learn where we really stand.

Amen.