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Want to get in touch with God? Laugh a little

by Bill Tammeus

A small c catholic

Ten-plus years ago I wrote a piece for *Celebration*, NCR's worship resource, in which I suggested in all seriousness that humor is holy.

At the time, I still was writing an alleged humor column for *The Kansas City Star* and perhaps I was trying to justify my continued employment.

But, in fact, in the intervening years -- after 9/11, wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, deadly earthquakes and tsunamis in Asia, a terrible economic recession and much more -- I've become convinced that humor may be the one thing we cannot do without, the one thing that puts us in harmony with God, who apparently thinks it's funny to design pigeons so their heads are attached to their butts (why else would they walk that way?).

What, after all, is humor? It's an unexpected break, a rupture in the routine, a road not taken because we had no idea the road was even there. It is, in the end, joyful surprise.

And what is the one persistent, enduring, indefatigable characteristic of God? Surprise.

For what was the creation itself if not a water-shooting boutonniere to the shocked face of the non-existent cosmos? And, supremely, what was Jesus' resurrection if not a way of calling forth from us in joyful astonishment the celebratory phrase "He lives!?"

It's sad that much humor in our culture is rooted in base, demeaning attitudes toward people. This is especially true of the sex-based entertainment on TV and in movies and pop music that, in the end, reduces our little-less-than-a-god species to titillating body parts.

Those of you who remember my Celebration piece -- and even memorized it to pass on its eternal wisdom to future generations -- know that in it I quoted the Lutheran theologian Robert W. Jenson on his insight that for both Jews and Christians God is the one who, in surprise moves, rescues people. For Jews, a definition of God is "whoever rescued us from Egypt." For Christians, God is "whoever rescued Jesus from the dead."

In both instances, we meet the God of surprises, the God of possibilities who, with ingenuity, stuns people when they have all but abandoned hope.

This recognition of God's ability -- and penchant -- to surprise us should make us humble, though it rarely seems to. Those of us who imagine that we have God all figured out, that we know what God thinks about war, hunger, homosexuality, peace, ritual and riches -- would do well to hold our opinions tentatively.

The God who brought (and continues to bring) the world into existence, who let the barren Sarah have children, who dried up a path through the sea for the fleeing Hebrews, who resurrected Jesus Christ -- this God of beautiful surprises surely is not done head-faking us, sleight-of-handing us, tortoise-over-hare astonishing us.

So can we please add some humor to our homilies, our worship, our ceremonies? Can we not behave as if laughter has no place at a marriage, a funeral, a baptism?

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OK, here's my favorite joke. Tell it at church next Sunday:

It's a slow day at the Pearly Gates, so St. Peter asks Jesus if he'd watch things while Peter takes a long lunch hour.

"No problem," Jesus says. "I've got nothing but time."

After a long wait, Jesus sees someone off on the horizon moving toward the gates. He watches and watches the man's slow movement. When the man gets close enough for Jesus to make out his face, Jesus looks hard, thinking he recognizes something.

When the man finally arrives, Jesus welcomes him and asks him about his life.

"In my life, I was a carpenter," he says.

Jesus stares, then asks, "Uh, what else?"

"I had a son. And this son was dead but then came to life."

Jesus looks the man in the eyes: "Dad? Dad is that you?" he asks.

And the old man replies: "Pinocchio?"

Like I said, surprise. It's a God thing.

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