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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 21)
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Lectionary Year B: Mark 9:38-50

Oh my, what do we do with our Gospel text this morning? Every time the tough stuff rolls around, it's typical for a preacher to think "Well, there are always at least two other readings from Scripture that I can use!" This conundrum makes me think, of all things, of a popular sketch drawing that you might've seen somewhere along the way in a Christian bookstore or knickknack shop. "And what is it?", you ask.

It's a portrait of the Laughing Jesus.

Don't get me wrong...even though the Gospels don't exactly present Jesus as a jolly jokester, we can be nearly one hundred percent certain that Jesus enjoyed a good chuckle now and then. Unfortunately, the Evangelists' efforts at "set[ing] down an orderly account" of Jesus' life left out the humor, presumably because getting the word out about Jesus was serious business. Think of it this way: There isn't a whole lot of room for humor in the records of the Supreme Court of the United States, nor is there any such room in an account of the life and death of God's only Son.

But, never fear...the Seventies roll around and just about everything seems like a good idea, especially if no one ever did it before! Enter the portrait of the Laughing Jesus -- a nicely

tanned, hippie-ish, bearded thirty-something who looks at home in both the Bible and a VW Microbus. I received one of these portraits as a gift many years ago -- from someone who thought (presumably) that I was a bit too serious and needed to lighten up a bit. The subtext of that gift would be something like, "See, even Jesus laughed things off once in a while!"

Like anything, the Laughing Jesus came out of a particular time in history and needs to be understood in its context. The Seventies were a time of spiritual awakening and, in some ways, an attempt at re-centering the self spiritually; I wouldn't doubt at all that those who "found religion" in the Seventies were, in some way, trying to make up for some of the wilder and crazier things they did back in the Sixties. Not entirely coincidentally, some of the idioms, images, and attitudes of their previous lives carried right on through. The Laughing Jesus came straight out of a fog of cannabis smoke and wafted ever so gently into evangelical Christianity.

In the 1970 film Kelly's Heroes, Donald Sutherland plays a tank commander aptly nicknamed "Oddball." Remember that Kelly's Heroes is set during the Second World War, but Oddball's vocabulary clearly borrows from the hippies who would've been circulating when the movie was made. Oddball gave us some of the movie's most memorable quotes, like "Don't hit me with those negative waves so early in the morning. Think that bridge will be there, and it'll be there." We all realize that virtually no one would've talked like that back in the 1940s, but again, considering the times, a

World War Two hippie seemed perfectly fitting within the movie's surreal atmosphere.

But both the Laughing Jesus and Oddball from Kelly's Heroes give us off-the-record portraits of history that bear a striking resemblance to each other. Their grounding in reality, however, might be a bit more questionable. When we say to ourselves "wouldn't it have been kind of cool if..." when we start drawing the portrait and continue from there, we can get ourselves into trouble. Artistic fancy isn't necessarily the same thing as faithfulness.

In this morning's Gospel text, no one is further from the Laughing Jesus and no one is fuller of "negative waves" than Jesus himself. Anyone who prescribes amputation and/or mutilation as a treatment for a person's sinful inclinations is, by today's standards, off one's rocker. How about yesterday's standards? Well, in Jesus' time, Jewish teaching maintained that if you didn't have all your "parts" -- if you were, for example, an amputee -- you weren't fit for priestly ministry, thus keeping you out of one of society's highest echelons.

This brings up an interesting situation, though. Jesus, in "encouraging" people to avoid sin and become whole, is advocating something that would've excluded them from the priestly class. That's actually kind of fitting knowing the regard that Jesus had for earthly religious authorities. Thus, if Jesus had a really dark sense of humor, he might've cracked himself up on that one!

And this also brings up some fundamental issues about Jesus'

character. Is he the happy-go-lucky, laughing hippie that the aforementioned sketch made him out to be? Maybe not. The Gospels witness to his anger and to his quickness to condemn, but that only leads us to consider the grounds of his abrasiveness all the more. Back up in the text a bit and you'll see why he said what he said. I quote: "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me..." (Mark 9:42a).

You see, those "stumbling blocks" get us back to the issue of the little ones -- the children, the smallest and most vulnerable of believers. We heard about children and of how Jesus lifted them up as examples in last Sunday's Gospel. Should we bar them from or neglect them in our midst, we ought to inflict grave injury to ourselves, including but probably not limited to amputation or self-mutilation.

Contrast this with Jesus' rejection of eye-for-an-eye justice in the Sermon on the Mount and things get even more interesting. The Sermon on the Mount explicitly forbids you to retaliate when someone harms you. Yet, should you harm someone else, you deserve the severest of all punishments short of death.

Of course, little can prove that Jesus didn't use hyperbole and exaggeration from time to time to get his point across. Allow me to give you a similar example, albeit from a different medium.

An old episode of M*A*S*H features Colonel Potter wrestling -- figuratively and literally -- with a soldier who's suffered a disfiguring injury to his face. Convinced that he will be forever

disfigured -- and hence undesirable to his girlfriend back home (among other things) -- he concludes that suicide is his only option. Mind you, Colonel Potter had been trying his best to convince the young man that plastic surgery could restore his appearance and that there was a future for him -- but all to no avail. The pivotal scene reveals an aghast Potter discovering the soldier trying to asphyxiate himself with an anaesthesia mask.

Fed up, Colonel Potter takes the anaesthesia, cranks it up all the way, holds the mask to his face and barks, "You want death? We got plenty of it around here! Suck it up, punk, come on!" Predictably, the young man resists, and Potter observes that he's "fighting to live instead of fighting to die." Whether or not this is a prudent suicide intervention is irrelevant; the lesson is still clear.

Did Colonel Potter really want that soldier to commit suicide? No. Similarly, does Jesus really want sinners to amputate their limbs and poke out their eyes? No again. Granted, I'm not a big fan of "softening" the harder passages of Scripture, as that somehow eviscerates them of their substance. But we have to live with these texts, too; our Constitution rejects cruel and unusual punishment of others and our doctors don't exactly recommend that we do it to ourselves!

As for our friend Laughing Jesus, he might get a kick out of all the interpretive wrangling I've done today. (Thanks, man!) But that kind of humor is so sly and subtle -- with a degree of slyness and subtlety that probably didn't register with the artist

who sketched the Laughing Jesus in the first place! Maybe the Second Commandment prohibition of graven images provides just the caution we need against imagined versions of our Lord and Savior. Sometimes those imagined versions are fine...other times they're not. What's most important is to remain faithful to the text, regardless of how much we might make Jesus laugh as we wrestle with it.

But that in itself is just one of the humbling experiences Jesus offers us. Anyone who lifts up the youngest and most vulnerable -- like children -- and knocks the rest of us off our thrones is someone who possesses not only a sly sense of humor, but also a subversive wisdom. This wisdom sides with the underdog. This humor gets a kick out of people who think they have it all together but don't. And no, that's not mean or cruel. It's necessary. Call it "tough love," if you will, but it's still God's love, and sometimes we need to pay attention to those whom God loves most -- the weak, the meek, the lowly, the lost, and the least.

Nothing to laugh at there!

Amen.