Sermon The Healing Power of Laughter

I want to begin with an important health announcement that came through my email box this week. I thought it important to share. It’s a relief to know the truth after all those conflicting medical studies.

Here is the result of some recent studies on heart health:

1. Japanese eat very little fat and suffer fewer heart attacks than the British or Americans.
2. Mexicans (The French) eat a lot of fat and suffer fewer heart attacks than the British or Americans.
3. Africans drink very little red wine and suffer fewer heart attacks than the British or Americans.
4. Italians drink large amounts of red wine and suffer fewer heart attacks than the British or Americans.
5. Germans drink a lot of beer and eat lots of sausages and fats and suffer fewer heart attacks than the British or Americans.

CONCLUSION: Eat and drink what you like. Speaking English is apparently what kills you.

So, in the spirit of Mardi Gras, in the spirit of the human need for laughter and joy and play in life, we are celebrating today the power of laughter and joy and music for our lives and our health.

Have you heard about the practice of Laughter Yoga? I first learned of it from someone who takes a Laughter Yoga class at a Unitarian Universalist congregation in St. Louis. Laughter Yoga is a spiritual practice that cultivates laughter for it’s healing power. My understanding is that laughter yoga positions can be physical or verbal. Some of the positions include making silly faces at other people in the class, moving around in silly ways, or vocalizing in ways that invite laughter, such as repeating silly phrases until you cannot help but laugh. The practice has been found to create many benefits for practitioners. It invites not just smiles, or small chuckles, but in doing it with groups, it can invite the kind of full and deep laughter that starts in the gut and just rises out.

One of the best feelings is to be surrounded by friends or family, a community, and be sharing stories that make you laugh so hard, your whole body gets into it, sometimes nearly falling out of your seat as your sides begin to hurt and tears start running down your eyes. That is the kind of laughter that is powerful and healing. We had moments like that last night in the sanctuary during Cabaret. Anecdotally, we can attest to the power of that kind of laughter and the joy it brings. The kind of
friendship, trust and relationships you can build with people when you experience that kind of laughter together is powerful. But now, even medical studies are verifying the health benefits of laughter.

In our bodies, physical changes happen. When we laugh, we:

- Alleviate depression;
- Lower our blood pressure
- Promote relaxation
- Reduce stress
- Increase the oxygen level in our blood, giving us more energy
- Increase the endorphin activity in our body, resulting in a sense of well being
- And, laughter has been called social glue because it bonds us to the people we laugh with.

Maybe this is why Maya Angelou said she could never trust someone who never laughed. There is something very basic and embodied that happens with laughter. It gets us beyond relating intellectually but into relating on a more personal level. And when it is satire, or parody, it can speak truths more powerfully than somber words. And it can provide healing, hope and solidarity when we are able to sing and laugh about the hard truths of life.

Laughter may seem a trite topic for worship—a time when we gather to reflect on what is of most value, what is of most worth, what is most important in our lives. Yet, laughter is not separate from this. There is a danger in taking ourselves too seriously.

The English novelist and playwright J.B. Priestly reminds us, “There is in happiness an element of self-forgetfulness. You lose yourself in something outside yourself when you are happy; just as when you are desperately miserable you are intensely conscious of yourself, you are a solid little lump of ego weighing a ton.”

Taking the self too seriously can wrap us up too much in our own egos—our own certainty that we, and we alone know what is best. Laughter and joy are good medicine for this.

But laughter is also healing for the languishing spirit. I hesitated to talk about laughter this morning, because this was a very sad week for the state of Arizona. Some of you may have seen the news that Salvador Reza, an organizer with Puente, someone I work closely with, was arrested along with a young woman who also works at Puente as they entered the Arizona State Senate Building. They came to meet with one of the Senators, a scheduled meeting, and to file a permit for an upcoming event in April. The State Senate building is where these permits get filed. In short, they were there for official business.

However, shortly after they walked into the building, two plain clothes men confronted them and told them they were barred from the Capitol for disruptive behavior. When Sal Reza asked to see something in writing, they said they did not need to show him anything in writing and they threw him
against a wall, put cuffs on him and arrested him. Then when the woman questioned what was
happening they pulled her by the hair down onto the ground and dragged her off to a separate room
where they arrested her. Both were charged with criminal trespassing and held in custody at the 4th
Ave. jail for about 7 hours. One of the men arresting Salvador told him he was acting on the orders of
Senate President Russell Pearce.

This is the second time Sal has been arrested without cause. (Sure, he will get his million dollars or so
of county money --tax payer money--from the civil lawsuits, but that is not the point.) Now there is
word that Russell Pearce may have a list of people whom he has barred from the Capitol--people
whom he sees as political opponents, people who are participating in the democratic process, who are
using their first amendment rights peacefully, powerfully, yes, but non violently. From a politician who
talks so much about the importance of the rule of law, he apparently sees himself as above it.

What happened this week is something we have watched in other parts of the world. We saw it here
repeatedly in the civil rights movement, political activists being arrested, imprisoned and assaulted by
law enforcement attempting to intimidate and silence them. It was a very sad week in Arizona, a
tragic day--to see the rights of citizens, the protections of the constitution, the fundamental principals
of our democracy trammeled upon by the order of the Senate President.

– Call your legislators. – Let them know this is an outrage.

In this time of special struggle that we face, maybe laughter seems disconnected from reality, too
simple, even a mechanism of denial or avoidance. Yet, nothing could be farther from the truth.

Harry Emerson Fosdick writes “Happiness at its deepest and best is not the portion of a cushioned life
which never struggled,...bore hardships, or adventured in sacrifice for costly aims. A heart of joy is
never found in luxuriously coddled lives, but in men and women who achieve and dare, who have tried
their powers against antagonisms, who have met even sickness and bereavement and have tempered
respectively.]

In the face of the struggle against injustice, laughter, and sharing laughter strengthens our ability to
stay engaged. Sharing laughter with one another is a powerful social glue, and in the midst of forces
that are tearing apart the fabric of family and community--strengthening social bonds within
communities that seek love and justice is critical. Finding ways to celebrate, to laugh, to dance, to
share joy is key to our strength, our health and our power.

And so we come here to make meaning, to build community, to strengthen ourselves for the work we
have before us, to witness for equity, for the right to organize and participate in a democratic system,
stand up for equal human dignity, for human rights. And we do it through joy, through music,
through shaking hands and sharing hugs, through shedding tears--both of joy and of sorrow, by
praying for loved ones, and celebrating small victories. We do it by living and practicing love and joy, laughter and community--here, right here. Bless you for being a part of it.