

The Laying on of Laughter (John 1.1-5)
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January 4, 2009

As I considered this meditation for a day when we have ordained two new deacons and commissioned our diaconate as a whole, I couldn't get a certain image out of my mind. To be honest, I almost wish I could. Because it's a strange image. It's a surreal image. It's a silly image. And, perhaps like a good joke, it requires a bit of set up. So let me set it up for you.

In Steve Martin's recent memoir, *Born Standing Up*, the comic reflects on the meaning of comedy, the art of performance, and the improvisation that is possible when all of a life's elements are taken into consideration. The memoir is touchingly written, and I read it for the simple reason that I was always a fan of Martin's offbeat humor. In fact, I still have some of his concert albums from the 1970s, the most recognizable of which is a broad patch of flat black bearing the fuzzy white silhouette of Martin in a white suit and rabbit ears. Its familiar title, "A Wild and Crazy Guy," was a catchphrase for me and more or less all of my friends in early grade school. But if I started the memoir because I was a fan of comedy, then I kept reading it as a practitioner of ministry. Because the more Martin reflected on his craft, the more he helped me to reflect on the art of ministry. Both comedy and ministry are performative, both are improvisational, both really should subvert expectations, and both, it seems to me, are deeply funny. Whether or not anyone gets the joke is another matter. Which I suppose is why I found Martin's memoir so appealing.

I mentioned that Steve Martin was an offbeat performer. According to his memoir, he came to his eclecticism naturally. His act began simply enough as a collection of his

passions. These loves included the old folk, jazz, and blues songs that he learned to play on his banjo, the card tricks and sleight of hand games that he mastered while working at a Disneyland magic shop, and the comedians that he watched on television and in small clubs, mimicking their physical precision and verbal delivery. It was a curious bag of interests, to be sure—banjo, magic, and comedy—but Steve put them all into an act he was developing while he studied philosophy on the side. Of course, it was the philosophy that was the magic tonic. As Steve used his newly acquired philosophical skill set to deconstruct the world around him, he also began to take apart the idea of comedy itself. After a great deal of thought, he reached the radical conclusion that comedy had become too reliant on punch lines. He wrote, “What if there were no punch lines?...What if I created tension and never released it? What if I headed for a climax, but all I delivered was an anticlimax? What would the audience do...?”¹ So Steve began performing an act without many recognizable jokes in it. He would do things that he thought were hilarious, yet he would do them with a completely straight face, hoping and trusting that the audience would catch up, either during the show or perhaps days after they’d seen it. He pretended to tune his banjo, he argued with the spotlight operator, and he performed magic tricks that didn’t work with a confident deadpan delivery. And audiences couldn’t tell if he was kidding or not. Because the truth is he was kidding. Seriously.

This confusion is actually the set up to the silly image I have in mind. And here I’ll read the story to you in Martin’s words. “At Vanderbilt University in Nashville, I played for approximately a hundred students in a classroom with a stage at one end. I did the

¹ Steve Martin, *Born Standing Up: A Comic’s Life* (New York: Scribner, 2008), 111.

show, and it went fine. However, when it was over, something odd happened. The audience didn't leave. The stage had no wings, no place for me to go, but I still had to pack up my props. I indicated that the show had ended, but they just sat there, even after I said flatly, 'It's over.' They thought this was all part of the act, and I couldn't convince them otherwise. Then I realized there were no exits from the stage and that the only way out was to go through the audience. So I kept talking. I passed among them, ad-libbing comments along the way. I walked out into the hallway, trying to finish the show, but they followed me there, too. A reluctant pied piper, I went outside onto the campus, and they stayed right behind me. I came across a drained swimming pool. I asked the audience to get into it—'Everybody into the pool!'—and they did. Then I said I was going to swim across the top of them, and the crowd knew exactly what to do: I was passed hand over hand as I did the crawl."²

Now the obvious connection to make would be that I thought of this story because it's a ridiculous inversion of the laying on of hands. As we have come to lay hands on our newest deacons as kinds of ministers, we might compare ourselves to the audience that once transported the comic across an empty pool. Or perhaps another interpretation would be that ministry is a kind of transaction that can never occur without the willingness of both the minister and those who are ministered to, a creative collaboration of giving and receiving that results in things unforgettably new. Or we might even warn of the perils of leadership that can befall any minister or deacon, the woeful responsibility that others may follow you when you wish they wouldn't and the comedy that they may not join in when you wish they would. But the truth of this story, as it occurs to me, is

² Ibid., 139-140.

both simpler and fuzzier than any of these interpretations. What strikes me about Steve Martin's anecdote is the way he is both a comedian and a person at the same time. In his description of trying to exit stage left when there is no stage left, I can hear both the tired performer who would like to end the show and the excitable comic who senses that a gag is still in the making. He is both on stage and off, he is acting and he is not acting, he is joking and serious, and when he leaves the audience follows him and his paradoxes out the door and into the world that doesn't know this is a comedy show and might not stop to ask. How funny they must have looked, the college kids and the comedian, tromping across campus looking for what they knew not. How funny we all must look, really.

Frederick Buechner wrote that our model for ministry, the rabbi Jesus, was actually quite funny and that the stories about him, the gospels, can themselves be read as comedies, though I can't help but wonder if they left out the punch lines by design. And far be it for me to compare one wild and crazy guy to another, but I find the stories of the rabbi even more haunting and hilarious than those of a dry swimming pool in Tennessee. For Jesus was always saying things with a straight face that sounded funny. They still sound funny. And those that would seek to follow him are understood to be either clueless or in on the joke, but to press that question much further might make us all uncomfortable. So I'll just revert to the appropriate Buechner passage here, wherein he invites us to consider the act that Jesus was putting on and the stuff of which it was made. "[Jesus]," Buechner says, "suggests rather than spells out. He evokes rather than explains. He catches by surprise. He doesn't let the homiletic seams show. He is sometimes cryptic, sometimes obscure, sometimes irreverent, always provocative. He tells stories...[and] I suspect that Jesus spoke many of his parables as a kind of sad and

holy joke and that that may be why he seemed reluctant to explain them because if you have to explain a joke, you might as well save your breath.”³ My point is that ministry is just exactly like that. And when we do it well it involves us all and it blurs the lines so seriously that it’s funny. Just like any performative act, there are skills that can be developed. The writing of a good sermon, say, which is a skill that some of us still try to hone weekly, pressing our keyboards to the grindstone with little to show for it. Or the serving of bread and wine and water, which requires more skill than you know if you haven’t tried it, with one bite after another offered in earnest to all comers. Or the penning of a note to a grieving person, far and away life’s most difficult task, struggling to say something when nothing really can be said. But try as we may and develop as we should, none of us gets out of the primary requirements of taking what is uniquely our own—our banjo, magic, and comedy—and finding the courage to use it creatively. We add our own sense, timing, and rhythm to that great joke without a punch line, which is the joke that the rabbi started when he walked past those fishers of old and they put down their nets and followed him. “Everybody out of the pool!” we might say.

Perhaps, then, in the year to come, we could consider what it means to join ourselves to a new movement of laughter. Not laughter as the world might laugh, cynically deriding our recent Christmas dreams of peace on earth and good will to all. Not laughter at ourselves in self-deprecating way, which is little more than the shallow masking of our own insecurities. But laughter at the pleasure of what we’re doing, whether that laughter is always audible or not. Sometimes, I think, the laughter is only on the inside as we

³ Frederick Buechner, *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1977), 62-63.

sally forth into the world bearing our crazy ideas and knowing that people are staring. Sometimes it's just the first trace of laughter as we giggle with surprise at the creativity we are still capable of. Sometimes it's even a full-fledged belly laugh, though I fear not often enough. But if we were to follow a hunch out the door, then we might just find that to be ministers in this world is to commit ourselves to a certain kind of comedy. It is an improvisational comedy made of the stuff of our lives. And the stuff of our lives, if we pay close attention to it, blurs the lines between divinity and humanity, sacred and profane, funny and serious.

Our scripture reading said, "In the beginning was the Word...[and] What has come into being in the Word was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the deepest night, and the night did not overcome it."⁴ The gospel writer understood that word in the teachings of Jesus, teachings that still sound like a joke without a punch line. Which is to say, they create a kind of tension in us and trust that we ourselves will know what to do with it.

This year may it be so with us.

⁴ John 1: 1, 3-5, Oxford Inclusive Version.