

A Word for Sheepdogs

WHAT ABOUT HUMOR IN THE PULPIT? Bryan Wolfmüller votes yes. If you know him, you won't be surprised. He is a man with a joyful spirit — a man of sober compassion but also a light heart and a ready smile — all in service of the office he bears. In this helpful essay he shares what he gleaned by digesting a whole church year full of Luther's sermons. This is not just a catena of jokes — Luther's laugh lines, if you will — but a helpful reflection on the finesse and nuances of how a very serious preacher of God's Word proclaimed it with a light and joyous heart. After all, the narrative of God's saving work recorded in Scripture is not tragedy, but comedy — it ends not in calamity, but abiding joy.

The church forever lurches from one extreme to another, falling into opposing pitfalls of doctrine and practice with regularity. So also preachers when it comes to humor. Today we find some sermons sound very much like standup comedy while others contain only depressing solemn invectives. Pastor Wolfmüller shows us another way. Using the great Reformer as a guide, he advocates neither entertainment nor ascetic solemnity. Taking these examples to heart, you will find encouragement to stand in your pulpit as a good news man, one who knows that the last chapter of the story of salvation is one of eternal and lasting delight. You will be better prepared to hear the Savior's welcome: "Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master." (Matt 25:23)

- *H. L. Senkbeil*



Laughing with Luther

A Survey of the Jabs, Quips, and Funny
Illustrations in Martin Luther's House Postil
And a Few Thoughts on what this Teaches
us about Preaching

Pastor Bryan Wolfmueller

MARTIN LUTHER WAS FUNNY. His wit bounces off the page. Especially in his polemical writings, and perhaps most especially in his table talks, there is joviality. You can imagine walking by Luther's home or classroom and hearing the laughter let go from the people listening. The same would be true for anyone walking by the windows when Luther was preaching inside. Luther is funny, and he brings his humor and wit with him to the pulpit.

But Luther is not an entertainer. His preaching is not a comedy routine. He doesn't crack jokes to get laughs. In fact, it seems to me that Luther doesn't use humor at all. He is a preacher of the text, a preacher of Christ, and although he is a master of rhetoric, he is not interested in manipulating or winning over the audience through the use of rhetorical devices.

The humor of Luther is never strained or manufactured. It is as natural in his sermons as it would be in the dinner conversation, and all of it serves the lively and human speaking and hearing of God's word.

In this little essay I propose to pull out some of Luther's jabs, quips, and funny illustrations and stories, and meditate on them. I hope such an exercise will help other preachers as we consider the place of humor, personality, and joy in the pulpit. I'll offer a few conclusions to this effect.

I've been reading and recording Luther's sermons from the House Postils for the Luther Sermon Podcast.¹ The texts used in this essay are from a three-

¹Visit www.hope-aurora.org/MartinLutherSermons to listen to the recorded sermons.

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volume edition of the House Postils published by J. A. Schulze Publishing House, Columbus, Ohio, 1884, texts that are in the public domain.²

As I recorded the sermons I noted when Luther made me smile. There were sermons where there were no jokes at all, and then a sermon where there was a quip or jab or something funny in every paragraph. This points to a bigger trend in Luther's preaching: there is no pattern. Sometimes his sermons are very polemic, other times they are full of comfort and consolation. Luther will sometimes use the text to launch into a topical sermon, and other times walk through the text verse-by-verse like a Bible study. His sermons are always theological, and are always full of Christ and the teaching of the Scripture, but when the text is all law, Luther will give us a sermon that is almost all law. His length varied greatly, from 14 to 43 minutes (in my reading), and you can almost sense the change in mood, from season to season in the church year, and even from week to week. In what I've read, Luther would not bring current events into the sermons, but he would certainly bring the current theological controversies. In fact, most of his humor is at the expense of the Papists and Anabaptists. He taught his listeners to laugh at the foolishness of the false doctrine of his day, but even these applications to current controversies did not date his preaching.

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² Visit www.wolfmueller.co/luthers-sermons-read for links to various online editions of these sermons. House Postil will be abbreviated "HP" in this essay.

no rust on Luther's preaching. It is lively, and the humor is part of the vitality of a preaching that continues to serve the church and the gospel, and no doubt will do so until we sit around the table with Luther in the resurrection, and laugh together in the joy of the gospel.

Luther and Laughter, A Theological Approach

Before we sit in the pew and catch a few of Luther's jests, it is good to consider the humor of Luther theologically. Even the most surface reading of Luther's works reveals a lively wit. Here are a few famous examples.

Luther introduces the Small Catechism with the observations on the condition of the churches.

Mercy! Good God! what manifold misery I beheld! The common people, especially in the villages, have no knowledge whatever of Christian doctrine, and, alas! Many pastors are altogether incapable and incompetent to teach ... they live like dumb brutes and irrational hogs; and yet, now that the Gospel has come, they have nicely learned to abuse all liberty like experts. (SC Intro.1-3)

You could imagine less colorful ways to express the same sentiment, but this brings a smile to your face, especially if you are not one of the "dumb brutes and irrational hogs" Luther is talking about.

Luther begins perhaps his most famous writing, *The Bondage of the Will*, with this assessment of Erasmus' rhetoric and content:

Compared with it, your book struck me as so cheap and paltry that I felt profoundly sorry for you, defil-

ing as you were your very elegant and ingenious style with such trash, and quite disgusted at the utterly unworthy matter that was being conveyed in such rich ornaments of eloquence, like refuse or ordure being carried in gold and silver vases.³

Poop on a silver platter; that's funny. You can imagine the smile on Luther's face as he writes it, and the faces trying not to smile in the room where Erasmus is reading it.

It is difficult to imagine Luther writing with this humor and zest when he was still a monk. The severity of his monastic life is well known. He would beat himself often. He made regular trips to confession. He embraced the austerity required by the Augustinian Order with a severity surpassing his peers. He was on the rigorous path of self-purification, which set him against the Lord who wants to save us by His mercy and grace.

Here's a bit from the Table Talks where Luther talks about the despair of the monastery coming to an end with the comfort of the Gospel:

There's something great about the employment of the keys and of private absolution when the conscience can be put to rest. Consequently I'm unwilling to discard absolution. For under the papacy I was always a despairing monk, even when I made the greatest efforts. Finally I received comfort from a brother through this one Word. God himself has commanded us to hope. Our salvation is faith in God. Why shouldn't we trust in God, who bids and com-

mands us to hope? Through this Word he gave me life again."⁴

Joy comes with the gospel, together with hope, life, and confidence to live and to die. Jesus fights against our worry with the confidence of our heavenly Father's knowledge, care, and love (see Matt 6:32). While laughter can certainly be wicked and spiteful, the kind of godly light-heartedness that has our attention in this essay is the fruit of faith. The Word that gives us life also gives us hope, confidence, and joy. Luther's humor and joy come along with his discovery of the gospel. His humor is more than his personality. Luther's humor wells up and is supported by the joy and certainty of the gospel, God's undeserved smile.

Knowing that the Father in heaven smiles at us puts a smile on our own face, and lifts the heart out of gloom to joy and peace.

We are tempted in our day to treat seriousness as a virtue. The more serious and austere a man is, the more dedicated and important he must be. But seriousness is a secular virtue, not a Christian one.⁵ The Christian's heart and home are full of joy. If our picture of the Christian life lacks laughter it becomes the sterile picture of lonely suffering. King David teaches the church to pray be-

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⁴ LW 54.334.

⁵ Consider G. K. Chesterton, "Seriousness is not a virtue. It would be a heresy, but a much more sensible heresy, to say that seriousness is a vice. It is really a natural trend or lapse into taking one's self gravely, because it is the easiest thing to do. It is much easier to write a good Times leading article than a good joke in *Punch*. For solemnity flows out of men naturally; but laughter is a leap. It is easy to be heavy: hard to be light. Satan fell by the force of gravity." *Orthodoxy* (Doubleday, New York, New York, 1959), 125.

³ LW 33. 16.

The very thought of these truths brings a smile to our face. "Christ is raised! Christ is ascended!" We smile when we hear it, when we preach it, when we believe it.

fore bed, "You have put gladness in my heart more than the season that their grain and wine increased," (Ps 4:7), and then, when we wake, we remember, "Weeping may endure for the night, but joy comes in the morning," (Ps 30:5).

We are here not talking about flippancy. Flippancy thinks everything is funny because nothing matters, because nothing is sacred. The Christian laughs because we know that He who is holy has decided not to destroy us. We laugh because we live, and all the more because our life in Christ is full and eternal. We laugh because we are free, and because we see the profane things pretend to be holy, dead things pretend to be alive, childish things try to be serious, and all things try to rule over us who belong to the Lord. In this way our laughter is an echo of the Lord's in Psalm 2. There the Lord laughs at the audacity and pride of the rebellious worldly rulers. It is a laughing of derision; pride become silly because it can't see itself is silly.

We are Christ's brethren. This is our great joy and confidence. Luther preaches, "Alas, we fritter away this joy; we are merrier if someone gives us a hundred dollars than when the Son of God makes us heirs of His kingdom and everlasting heritage," (Second Easter Sermon, HP II.289). Our merriment and joy in Christ far surpasses that of the world.

The Christian, by faith, knows the end of the story. We know who wins. "When the fight is fierce and the warfare long, steals on the ear the distant triumph song, and hearts are brave again, and arms are strong." We know that the suffering of this life is not worthy to be compared to

the surpassing glory that will be revealed in us (Rom 8:18). The Christian, then, cannot despair. We confess that our Lord is alive, Victor over sin, death, and the devil, seated at the right hand of the Father, ruling and reigning all things for the sake of His beloved church, for us.

The very thought of these truths brings a smile to our face. "Christ is raised! Christ is ascended!" We smile when we hear it, when we preach it, when we believe it. With this smile of faith on our faces, then, let's listen to Luther joke around, and see if there is something for us.

Because there is nothing better than a joke explained (let the reader understand!), I've categorized Luther's jokes, or at least the things in the sermons that made me laugh, into a handful of categories: humorous illustrations (and proverbs), funny phrases, and jabs and mockery. Let's enjoy the listening, and consider how this might make us better preachers of the gospel.

Humorous Illustrations (and a Few Proverbs)

We begin here with a warning from Luther. There is a danger of preaching stories to entertain while missing the point of the text. Luther's stories and illustrations always serve the text and teach the doctrine. There are no amusing trifles.

Luther warns against this kind of preaching that is full of stories that does not bring forth the Scriptures and the wisdom of God. In his introductory meditation on the passion of Christ he notes,

If we were to relate to the people some idle tales and stories, they

would remember them at once; whereas now, thousands upon thousands hear repeatedly the preaching of the Gospel without retaining it, and without profiting by its instructions. They come back from church just as they went there. They hear the Word, but disregard it as something common and unimportant. (HP II.48)

Idle tales and purely entertaining stories are memorable and pleasing, but the preacher stands in the pulpit to preach God's word. The people come to church to hear God's word. The sermon is not a place for trifles. Neither, though, is it a place for boredom. Luther learns from the prophets and apostles that the Lord's Word is lively, vivid, captivating, even humorous, but always in service to the Lord's saving truth.

Luther preached best at Christmas. He especially loved the sermon the angels preached to the shepherds outside Bethlehem, "for unto you is born this day ... a Savior." Luther drives home the "for you" of the angels' sermons. "My dear friend, if you will say it is not for me, to whom then does it belong? Did [Jesus] come for the sake of geese, ducks or cows?" Ha! Jesus became a man to save man. "Had He wished to help another creature, He would have become that creature. Had He not become man for the sake of us poor, sinful, lost men, He would not be called our Savior." (HP I.101)

"Ducks" are always funny. Luther doesn't say, "Did [Jesus] come for the sake of animals?" He preached in the concrete. "Earthy," "farm-y," and funny. Luther's lines like this are usually very short. His illustrations

are a sentence or two; they certainly are not the centerpiece of the sermon, but they capture our attention and activate our imagination.

In his first Christmas sermon, Luther tells a longer story about the devil slapping a man in church:

In the papacy they used to tell a story: The devil once came to church to mass, and when in the confession of the Christian faith, which they call the Patrem, they sang the words: "Et homo factum est" — the Son of God was made man — and the people did not kneel down but stood, he [the devil] struck one on the mouth, rebuked him and said: You ruffian, are you not ashamed that you stand here like a stock, and do not fall down for joy? If the Son of God had become our brother, like yours, we would not know what to do for joy. (First Christmas, HP I.84-85)

It is an absurd picture, the devil in church slapping this clueless fellow who doesn't give the proper honor to the confession of Christ! And it makes the point. We laugh at the story, but we remember the next time we confess the creed that the devil might be standing next to us ready to buffet our pate.

This is the kind of story you remember. Luther's evaluation is nice. "I do not think that this [story] is true; for the devil is too decided in his enmity to us and the Lord Jesus; but this is true, that he who conceived this story had the right spirit, and well understood how great an honor was conferred upon us that the Son of God became man." (HP I.85)

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Preaching about Christ's defeat of the devil, Luther gives us this vivid illustration:

Another and mightier Lord is now in power, even Christ, who vanquished and chained the prince of this world. Be therefore not disturbed nor frightened if this dethroned potentate and god of this world scowls, and gnashes his teeth, and champs, and threatens like a fiend; he is as impotent in his rage as a dog that furiously barks and dashes his chains to the right and to the left, eagerly intent to thrust his fangs into the limbs of the passer-by, who easily avoids the rush by stepping to one side of the mad but fettered beast. Just so the devil barks and rages against the Christians, but he is chained and cannot injure them if they have faith in Christ and are constant in prayer. (HP II.364-365)

This is a masterful illustration. Consider the language. Luther speaks not of the "dog that wants to bite you," but the dog "eagerly intent to thrust his fangs into the limbs of the passer-by." He describes the devil as a "mad but fettered beast." The humor in the story is the contrast of the dog's rage to the simplicity of avoiding that rage. You can see it: the dog raging to destroy you, but coming suddenly, shockingly, with a jerk, to the end of his chain. The preaching brings us to laughing at the devil in the confidence of the Lord's word.

Luther would often flesh out the text by expanding the conversation. He extends the preaching of Jesus, or speaks of a conversation that might have happened. In his sermon on Trinity 5 Luther imagines how Peter might have reacted to Jesus' instruc-

tions to cast out into the deep and let down his net:

Peter might have given a curt reply and have said, "My good friend, do not teach me how to catch fish; I know it better than you can teach me. To preach and to fish are two different things. Your office is to preach, but mine to fish. I will not teach you to fish, neither should you undertake to teach me to catch fish — both would be in vain." We perhaps would have given an answer like this. For by nature we want to be wiser than God.

Luther puts us in the text. We are Peter the fisherman being given strange instructions by Jesus. Our inclination is to be offended at the word and instruction of Jesus. "I know better." As Luther drags out this imaginary conversation of Peter with Jesus we see ourselves saying the same thing. "Lord, we know better." But as Luther puts these words in our mouths we see the absurdity. But then we are back to the text, and Peter shows us the proper response. He does not dispute about expert fishermanship, but in simplicity he obeys the word of Jesus.

Examining the sermon, we note that Luther could have skipped the imaginary conversation altogether and gotten straight to the point, "By nature we want to be wiser than God." But the imaginary conversation between Peter and Jesus puts a smile on our face and draws us in.

On the sixth Sunday after Trinity, Luther is preaching about anger. He points to the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. The Pharisees had a way of justifying their anger and hatred toward their brothers while maintaining the

illusion of righteousness toward God. Luther gets to the absurdity with a question: "What kind of transaction would it be if you gave God an ox which is worth ten dollars and then turned about and killed your brother? That would be giving a farthing and stealing ten thousand pounds," (Trinity 6, HP III.142). The point is made with the absurdity, and laughing at the absurdity helps us absorb the sting of the law being preached to us. We are those who try to cover our sin with token good works.

Luther often preached about money and the dangers of avarice and greed. Here's a great paragraph where he talks about how faith makes worry seem silly.

Now if a man were sure that he could live and subsist on a few pieces of silver just as well as a rich man could live and subsist on ten thousand pieces, would he feel uneasy though he had but one piece, and would he esteem the other with his ten thousand richer than himself? And if the one with ten thousand boasted on account of them, could not the former mockingly tell him: Your rejoicing is in vain; though you have a great deal, yet you have no advantage over me, except that you have more to count; your ten thousand pieces of silver do not reach further than the one piece of mine. (Trinity 7, HP III.155)

We might want to spend all day counting our money, but Luther mocks it, and invites us to join his mockery. We smile and rejoice that we don't have the trouble of keeping track of piles of silver! We see again that the laughter is the laughter of faith, the joy of being free of worry, and of seeing the silliness of sin.

When preaching about faith and prayer, Luther uses a great picture of trying to pour wine into a glass held by a shaking hand.

A wavering heart which does not believe and is not sure of obtaining anything, will never obtain it. God cannot grant him anything, though He would like to do it. It is like a vessel which a man holds in his hand, but which he shakes so that no one can pour anything into it; though one would like to pour something into it, all will be wasted. Such is the case with a wavering heart. God loves to give all we need; but we stand before Him like poor beggars, holding forth our hats for Him to throw something into them, and yet not holding still for that purpose. The Lord our God does not want to pour away His gifts, or to scatter and lose them, as if you would hold a flagon or flask, asking others to pour wine into it, whilst you were moving it hither and thither. This would cause the host to be very much offended, especially if he intended not to charge you for the wine, but to make you a present of it. He would soon tell you to be gone, because he does not intend to pour the wine on the ground. (Trinity 14, HP III.248-249)

I wonder if Luther acted this out as he preached, shaking his hand around to demonstrate the ridiculousness of it all. Luther invites us to laugh at the ridiculous beggar with the shaking hands, and we realize that we are laughing at ourselves, our ridiculous lack of faith.

The next Sunday Luther preaches about the silliness of worry, "It would be a foolish thing for a small man to sit down in a corner all the days of

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his life and worry himself about growing to the size of a large man. Would not all the world ridicule him and consider him a fool? Thus also, the Savior says, the world acts by craving after money and goods.” (Trinity 15, HP III.268)

The point is made through absurdity. We can imagine and laugh at a little man sitting in the corner straining to grow, and then we realize that we are the little man. Luther has done it again. The accusing voice of the law strikes us in our own laughing. We are absurd, and the illustrations expose it. We uselessly worry, and by Luther’s preaching we are laughing at ourselves.

Luther loved to pepper his writing and his preaching with proverbs. Here’s a sample:

*...though Christ should have been born twenty times, it would have been in vain if we had known nothing about it. For what does it profit a man if he has a treasure in his house or cellar and knows nothing of it? It can give him neither pleasure nor joy. As the proverb says: *Ignoti nulla cupido*, a hidden treasure is a useless treasure, which we may walk over, as over the filth in the street, regardless of it. (Second Sermon for Christmas, HP I.89-90)*

*Such an unstable thing is the human heart that it soon tires of almost everything, easily forgetting former great pains and sufferings, and much less bearing in mind the benefactions which it received, as the proverb truly says: *nihil citius senescit quam gratia*. (Nothing becomes an old matter for us sooner than kindness.) (Fifth Sermon for Christmas, HP I.142)*

When the master and mistress are snoring, leaving everything to the domestics and depending entirely on them, things will go according to the proverb: Confidence rode away with the horse. (Trinity 8, HP III.164)

Children of light, on the other hand, that is, true Christians, are indolent, slothful and careless even in things which they know to be pleasing to God and beneficial to themselves. They find it very hard to do good; according to the old saying, “The wicked have to work very hard to get to hell.” (Trinity 8, HP III.183)

It will always end according to the proverb: The pitcher goes so often to the well, that it comes home broken at last. (Trinity 10, HP III.198)

Luther had a keen ear for language, for conversation, for the way people talked and the phrases they used. He knew the stories, proverbs, and sayings told in the homes and taverns. While some of these proverbs are funnier than others, there is something joyful in the familiarity of the “old sayings.” The moms in the pews would hear Luther repeat these sayings, and lean over to their children, “See, that’s what I told you yesterday!”

Luther’s preaching was, in this way, accessible. He was bringing the Lord’s word right down to the people’s ears, using the language they used. Luther certainly used the words of the Scriptures. He talked about theology, in fact, much more than we are used to in our preaching, but Luther offered the Scriptures and theology in familiar terms, in familiar proverbs, understandable sto-

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ries, and illustrations from everyday life. His sermons wore dirty shoes.

Funny Phrases

Much of Luther's humor is in his turn of phrase. He says things in a funny way. He surprises us with his words.

This section is a bit of show-and-tell. We'll let Luther's language pull a few smiles out of us.

In an Oculi sermon Luther got after the Pharisees who accuse Jesus of casting out devils by Beelzebub:

They speak scornfully of the devil, as if they were great saints, full of the Holy Ghost, and the devil, compared with them, were like a bumblebee. Paul, the mighty apostle, does not thus disdainfully speak of [the devil], but calls him a prince, the god of this world. But these big saints imagine that if they speak contemptuously of the devil they represent his casting out by Christ as an insignificant performance. (HP I, 379)

"Big saints!" It's a pretty simple turn of phrase, and that's why it makes us smile. We all know a few "big saints." We all know the temptation to be "big saints" ourselves.

Try this one:

We cannot eat money, nor gold and silver, neither stones and the like; we must have bread, the produce of the ground. (Laetare, HP I, 391)

We can imagine someone trying to eat a salad made out of dollar bills, and we realize that Luther is correct. Gold and silver can't keep us alive.

Sometimes you can smell the words.

...they are children of the devil. Since they reject the Word, they lose all hope of righteousness and life, but wallow, if I may be permitted the expression, in the filthy excrements of the devil. (Judica, HP I, 408)

Or this, the easy life of the pastors who have abandoned the work of being pastors, is life among the roses:

...the Pope, his cardinals, the bishops, and the whole host of enemies of the Gospel, live at ease in gardens of roses, without tribulation... (Exaudi, HP II, 403)

Luther loved to get after the pope. He mocked his posh life, his robes and palaces, but most of all his doctrine. The pope doesn't preach; he doesn't even talk, he senselessly squeals.

...if we know God aright we are secure, and will not heed the senseless squealing of the Pope, who boasts so haughtily of his church, and hands us over to the devil. (Exaudi, HP II, 414)

Luther's humor is often indignant. Luther compares the controversy about communion in both kinds with being treated like a rat. (It must have been common knowledge that mice and rats didn't drink.)

We are condemned and persecuted because we refuse to be made mice and rats, and are not satisfied to eat without drinking, or to take one part of the Sacrament only. (Trinity 2, HP III, 63-64)

Luther wrote and preached constantly about the Lord's Supper and the great gift it is. The greatness

His sermons wore dirty shoes.

consists not in the bread and wine, but in the word and gifts.

He has prepared a supper which is called great and glorious, not merely on account of the host, who is God Himself, and whose supper would be glorious though it consisted only of pea soup or dry bark; but also on account of the food itself... (Trinity 2, HP III, 65)

You don't have to wonder what Luther thought of pea soup.

Jesus takes care of us. Luther often preaches the Lord's promises to care for our earthly lives. "The world," Luther would preach, "has never seen a Christian starve." But the Lord does not promise to provide us with lavish provision.

The Savior provides His guests with a piece of bread and fish and a drink of water, and not with ten different kinds of dishes, and Malmsey and other costly wines, as the rich do who have great abundance. (Trinity 7, HP III, 157)

"Ten different kinds of dishes," "Malmsey and other costly wines," it's the specifics that make us smile.

The devil does not create, but distorts. Luther makes the point fantastically with these two images:

...wherever God builds a church the devil will build a saloon or tavern at the side of it; or, as the nursery story goes, when God formed a beautiful man out of the dust of the earth, the devil wanted to imitate Him, but his work proved to be frogs and snakes. (Trinity 8, HP III.160)

You don't just hear the preaching. You see it. The beautiful church next

to the tavern, the frog next to Adam, the contrast of God's creation and the devil's.

Jesus gives us the very memorable image of a wolf dressed in sheep's clothing. Luther takes it one step (or twenty steps) further.

If a wolf were covered with twenty sheep-skins, you would still detect him and not be deceived by him. (Trinity 8, HP III, 172)

That is a preposterous picture. This wolf would be buried under the sheepskin. Again we are smiling as we let Luther make the point that false doctrine is identifiable.

Luther was on a roll in his Trinity 8 sermon. There's another nice illustration at the end:

When these two fruits coincide, so that both doctrine and life are evil, you may be sure of having a sharp thorn and thistle, from which you can expect no grape, and no fig; and should you still endeavor to find them, you will not only be disappointed, but be well scratched besides. (Trinity 8, HP III, 174)

Luther writes his own proverb: "Reach for grapes in a thorn bush and you will gather scratches." Like the wolf buried under twenty sheepskins, Luther again takes the imagery of the text and goes a few more steps with it.

Here is a particularly stark way to describe the judges and civil magistrates:

[The civil magistrate] is a severe preacher, who has a coarse voice, sufficiently strong to take your head from your shoulders. (Trinity 10, HP III, 197)

Luther imagines the judge as a preacher with enough force in his words to decapitate you, and, in fact, the judge can order your head removed. The juxtaposition of the magistrate as a preacher arrests our ears, and reminds us how nice it is to hear the gentle preaching of a pastor who, no matter how hard he presses with the law, still leaves your head intact.

Finally, preaching against worry, Luther notes that while the birds don't worry, they do walk around looking for something to eat. The Scriptures forbid both worry and laziness.

A fowl even must labor by going after its food. God who has promised to feed it, will not throw feed into its nest. (Trinity 15, HP III, 273)

In all of these quips and funny phrases Luther is pressing the Lord's word into our ears and imagination. His preaching is colorful, lively, distinct and concrete. You can taste it and smell it. He paints as he preaches, and he does this very naturally. His flourishes are never for the sake of adornment. He preaches with intensity and engagement, with joy and reverence, putting forth objects and events that are familiar to teach the hearer of the kingdom of God.

Jabs and Mockery

Luther was a theological brawler. He jabbed and mocked his theological opponents. The pope was his favorite object of his ridicule, and the devil came in second. I was surprised that more often than not Luther was mocking the foolishness of sin.

False doctrine, worry, greed, lust, and idolatry do not deserve our attention or affection, but our ridicule.

This, perhaps, is the most important take-away from a consideration of Luther's use of humor. As we laugh at false teaching, as we mock worry and greed, as we spurn lust and idolatry, we are putting to death the flesh. This is a sanctified and sanctifying laughter, a bullying of the old Adam, a shaming of our own sin and temptations.

Luther bullies back the biggest bully of all. The devil himself is laughed to scorn, and sin and death are mocked with him.

Reason.

Luther's skepticism of reason is well known. While he recognized reason as a great gift of God, he also knows that reason always stretched beyond its divinely appointed vocation. Reason is meant to worship God and serve the Scriptures, but in this fallen world reason wants to be worshipped and lord itself over the text of the Scriptures. Reason is a slave acting like a king, and following reason makes a man a fool.

Hence those people who would measure God and His works by the standard of their reason are, beyond all endurance, provoking idiots. (Quinquagesima, HP I, 339)

The desire to be wise in the eyes of the world.

From the other direction, Luther can see how the Christian looks like a fool to the world. The mysteries of the faith cannot be comprehended by the mind of the flesh. We, like Paul, are consigned to be fools for the sake of Christ.

This is a sanctified and sanctifying laughter, a bullying of the old Adam, a shaming of our own sin and temptations.

Those who preach and believe this doctrine [of the Trinity] are considered by the world as lunatics. (First Sermon for Trinity Sunday, HP III, 3)

Self-righteousness.

Self-righteousness is the enemy of the righteousness of Christ. Our attempts to justify ourselves turn out as well as Adam and Eve's fig-leaves: we still stand before God in our guilt and shame, and we look ridiculous. Luther mocks these attempts at self-righteousness.

No one but the Holy Ghost can teach the world that unbelief is sin; He reproves all as sinners, no matter how some may attempt to cover up their faults by good works or to pass themselves off as pure under the tinsel of self-righteousness. (Cantate, HP II, 355)

The false humility of the pope.

Luther was never particularly impressed with the pope. When Jesus teaches humility by washing His disciples' feet, and commanding His disciples to do likewise, Luther contrasts this with the pope's claim to humility.

I believe that Christ, when He exhibited such humility in washing the feet of His disciples, had in mind the great corruption which, on account of selfishness and pride of the clergy, would creep into His Church in later years. This great evil began to manifest itself soon after; the bishops wrangled with each other about their relative superiority, and were so at variance with each other that finally Antichrist established himself at Rome, and arrogated such supremacy to himself that he not only ruled the Church, but also

kings and emperors, and made himself successor of St. Peter and vicar of Christ on earth. This I call a fine way of being humble and washing feet, after the example which our Lord has given us. Yes, great humility, forsooth! (Thursday before Easter, HP II, 32-33)

The false repentance of the pope.

Luther knew the great danger of false doctrine is the loss of the comfort of the forgiveness of sins. This is true of the pope's doctrine. Luther, in this quip, talks about the trouble of sin sneaking up and surprising the papists!

The enemies of the Gospel, the Pope and his crowd, are living examples; they are great and abominable sinners, but they know it not, nor do they ask for forgiveness in faith. If, now and then, a conviction of their sins breaks in upon them, they know not what to do, they despair. (First Easter Sermon, HP II, 278)

The thought that the apostles merited the kindness of Jesus.

Luther always attacks pride in his preaching. He knows we are constantly tempted to think that we make ourselves pleasing to God by our works and efforts. The Lord's mercy, though, slaps our pride in the face. In this preaching Luther asks how the disciples earned the great gift of being called the brothers of Jesus:

How did the Apostles merit such an honor? Did they perhaps earn this distinction when they shamefully deserted Him, when they denied Him and lost all confidence in His promise that He would live again and establish His kingdom?

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face.*

(Second Easter Sermon, HP II, 286)

The Humility of Wittenberg.

Luther's own hometown of Wittenberg was not above reproach. The humility of Wittenberg stands in profound contrast to the beauty and blessing of the gospel that she possesses. The Lord, indeed, lifts up the lowly.

[The] holy bishops and mighty princes ... have not the least idea that God will cast them away, and save only the little flock in the despised rat-hole of Wittenberg that have embraced the Gospel. (Trinity 2, HP III, 73)

Presumption of the Sacramentarians.

Luther's theological fights were on two fronts. On the one hand, he fought against Rome for the central doctrine of justification. On the other hand, he fought against the Sacramentarians for the truth and comfort of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Both the Romanists and the Sacramentarians departed from the truth of the Scriptures and presumed to teach God. Luther mocks this presumption.

The fanatical sacramentarians... ought to be ashamed of themselves. For such presuming to teach the Lord how to preach is like endeavoring to teach chickens to lay eggs or cows to calve. (Trinity 5, HP III, 125)

Our love to hear new doctrine and teachings.

One of the problems with fighting against errors is our sinful flesh's appetite for new doctrine. This is a shame, and Luther provides a particularly disgusting image for the result of this temptation.

Christ would say, "False prophets will not be wanting, but will surely come, and that in a beautiful and enticing guise, so that you will think that you never heard a more beautiful sermon in all your life; and the consequence will be that you will fall away like unripe and worm-eaten fruit when the wind sweeps over it." (Trinity 8, HP III, 162)

The church without the Word, and without preachers and true pastors.

Our life is in the Lord's word where the sick are given life. Luther compares the church without the word to a disaster of a hospital. You can see the picture, and laugh at the absurdity.

[Of the pope's neglect of preaching the word, Luther says,] The Church is like a hospital which is managed by an unfaithful indolent, and rude superintendent, and in which patients are shamefully neglected. (Trinity 13, HP III.246)

Our neglect of God's word and doctrine.

The Scriptures warn us over and over to beware of false doctrine and teachers, but we are lazy and indifferent. Luther wakes us up with a shocking picture.

When therefore the heart is careless and idle and does not give strict heed to the Word, the devil enters by the heresy of such teachers, like a snake into a man sleeping in the grass. Therefore we should diligently heed the faithful warning of Christ and not stand and stare with open mouth at everything new. (Trinity 8, HP III, 163-164)

As we consider Luther's humor, and as we smile at his preaching, we remember that we are called to preach with the same vigor, the same clarity, the same snap, with words that leap and illustrations that crunch and smell. We endeavor to push the truths of the Scripture into the imagination of our hearer.

He piles on two great images: the snake sneaking up on the sleeping man and the fool gaping at something new. We who are not troubled about any false teaching are the butt of this joke. Our own foolishness, our own laziness, our own lack of concern for the Lord's unchanging truth is trotted out on stage, and we are laughing and weeping at ourselves, and repenting of our shameful neglect of the Lord's truth.

The Joy of the Gospel, The Absurdity of Sin, and the Foolishness of Preaching

It pleases the Lord to save the world through the foolishness of the word preached, and it pleases the preacher of the word to be a fool for Christ (1 Cor 1:21, 4:10). Such was St. Paul, such was Luther, and such are we. We preach the gospel with joy, with the joy of knowing that Christ has overcome sin, death, and the devil. That is our sin, our death, and the devil that troubles us. Salvation is not an abstraction, it is as real and true as the tomb is empty and as the water of our baptism is wet.

As we consider Luther's humor, and as we smile at his preaching, we remember that we are called to preach with the same vigor, the same clarity, the same snap, with words that leap and illustrations that crunch and smell. We endeavor to push the truths of the Scripture into the imagination of our hearer.

Hearing Luther preach pushes the preacher to a lively use of language, a light touch on serious doctrine, and a careful listening to the stories of the people to whom we preach. Considering Luther's use of humor gives us contours and limits to our own use of humor. His example chal-

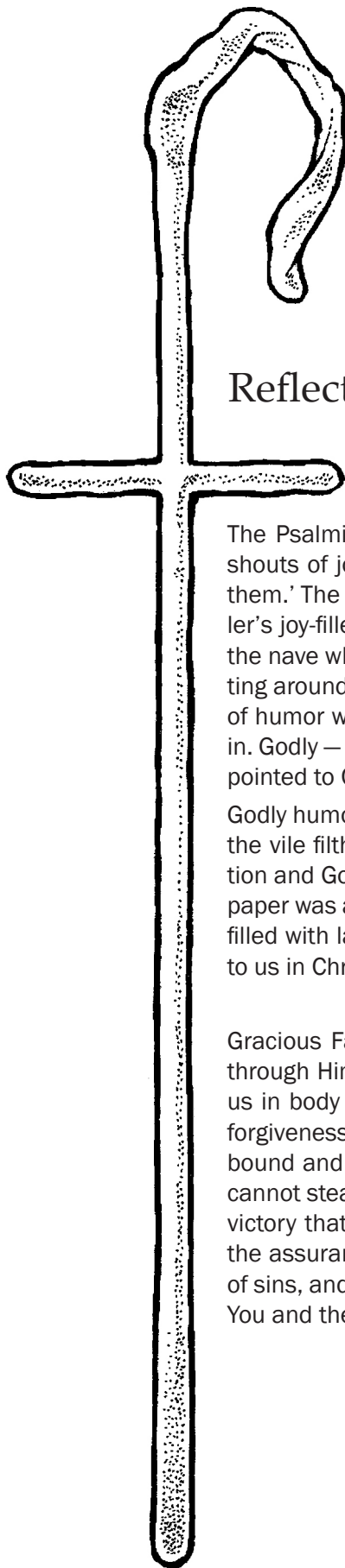
lenges us, draws us away from entertainment and flippancy towards the real human work and heavenly joy of the preaching of the gospel. It would be incredibly bold to presume to "preach like Luther," but hearing his stories and phrases, and listening to his language and rhetoric, has the wonderful potential to shape our own preaching for the better.

The pastor's labor is in the Lord's word. Preaching the forgiveness of sins is, for those in the office, a work, and we strive to make it a good work, to fit the Lord's word into the ears and hearts of His people. As we hear and rejoice in the good preaching of Dr. Luther, we are encouraged as we mount the pulpit to bring joy and vigor to the task, and we trust that the word, which belongs to God, will not fail to bear the good fruit of faith, love, and hope. And we rejoice that these fruits are also born and strengthened in us as well.

Most of all, as we preach the joy of the gospel and bring humor into our sermons, we join the prophets and apostles as they hold up for our mockery the emptiness and foolishness of sin. We join the Father and His Messiah as they sit on their holy hill, and abuse with their laughter those who would tear their bonds and lash out at their commandments. We laugh at ourselves, our pride, our vanity, our foolishness, our sin, and this laughter then works to fight against the twin sins of pride and despair. In this right and careful use of humor our flesh is buried, and the new man is raised with Christ in the joy of the resurrection. We are humbled, and we are filled with the hope and joy of a life that knows no end.

May God grant it for the sake of Christ. Amen. ☩

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Reflection

The Psalmist recalls, “Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then they said among the nations, ‘The Lord has done great things for them.’ The Lord has done great things for us; we are glad.” (Ps 126:2-3) Rev. Wolfmueler’s joy-filled survey uplifts the soul on every page as one’s imagination is drawn into the nave where Luther was preaching, or eavesdropping outside the lecture hall, or sitting around his dinner table at home reveling in the conversation after a meal. His use of humor was human and godly. Human – in that it was funny and drew the audience in. Godly – in that it smacked the devil in the face yet kept the commandments and still pointed to Christ.

Godly humor is ever harder to find as the imaginations of many have become defiled by the vile filth of the world, but in *Laughing with Luther* a portion of the Godly imagination and Godly humor is restored by the earthy, farm-y language Luther puts forth. This paper was a joy for me to and I pray it has been so for you. May God grant us all mouths filled with laughter and tongues that shout for joy for our fortunes have been restored to us in Christ.

✠

Gracious Father, You have given to us all good things in Your Son Jesus Christ, and through Him granted us victory over our enemies and joy unending. You have created us in body and soul to bring glory to You in a world that scorns Your gifts of life and forgiveness. Grant to us a firm confidence in the faith knowing that our enemies are bound and chained, and they can harm us none. Though they snarl and frighten they cannot steal away our hope in You. By Your Spirit’s power, uplift our souls in Your Son’s victory that we may ever laugh as temporal terrors assail us. Comfort us, we pray, in the assurance of the holy Christian Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, and the life everlasting; through Jesus Christ our Lord who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, ever One God, now and forever. Amen.

- *Matthew E. Wurm*