

Seriously funny Bible study

We miss out on something if we fail to see the humor

He intended to pass them by," I read. Hysterical laughter rises from the basement of the urban Denver bar where we meet for the weekly Bible study of the emerging church of which I'm pastor/developer. We're studying the walking on water text in the Gospel of Mark (6:47-50) and find this little particularity enormously humorous.

"What in the world?" John asks.

"I know, right? 'He intended to pass them by?' Walking on water is a bit of a conspicuous thing to do if you're trying to not be noticed, isn't it?" Kyle answers.

To which Jessica adds, "Maybe Jesus was trying to not be noticed so he could sneak up behind them and say, 'Gotcha!'"

This is kind of how it tends to go in Bible study—delving into both the drama and comedy in the biblical text. We occasionally laugh so hard that when we walk back upstairs people ask, "What's going on down there?" When we answer "Bible study" they look at us as if we are lying or crazy or both.

I was talking to Dan Erlander recently. (The retired ELCA pastor is author of two popular paperbacks for youth, *Baptized We Live* and *Manna and Mercy*.) He admitted he's not sure why people aren't laughing out loud more often during the readings in worship. "Usually it's only me and, you know, people stare," he said.

Perhaps people stare because we tend to think that to honor something is to be very serious about it. And while there are times when that is certainly true, when it comes to the Bible we miss out on something if we fail to see at least a bit of its humor.

Ultimately the Bible tells us who we are and who God is. And who we are is many things: beloved, sinful, noble, prideful, funny, serious. And, just like life, the Bible is filled with it all: beauty, wisdom, sensuality, betrayal, love, violence, broiled fish and humor.

The Bible is funny. But it's not a gag type of funny like Lucille Ball. The humor we experience in the Bible is more of a meeting of the tragic and the absurd. It's a can't-stop-laughing-at-a-funeral-because-the-honest-weight-of-our-mortality-is-too-much type of funny. It's the slightly self-effacing type of funny we get to when we're willing to see how absurd we are. The Bible offers us an "ouch" type of funny, an honest funny.

When we allow the Bible to live into us, we begin to see how in our own way we, too, like Mary Magdalene, might mistake Jesus for the gardener

(John 20:15)—a *faux pas* that I'm fairly certain her friends never let her live down. We, too, like Nicodemus, take literally things that we should not and end up asking stupid questions like *How can we re-enter our mother's womb to*

be born again (John 3:4)? We, like Jonah, become tantrum-throwing drama queens who say to God *I would rather die than see you forgive and bless my enemies* (Jonah 4:1). This stuff is funny—heartbreaking and raw, but funny.

We laugh in recognition because we see ourselves the same way—as mistaken as Mary or Nicodemus or Jonah. We are, after all, disciples: no less slapstick than Peter, hacking off some guy's ear with his sword.

We, too, like the disciples, fail to "get it" so often that if our contemporary stories were written as scripture and then read for 2,000 more years, future generations would be laughing at us too. Why? Because our stories in their beautiful broken humanity would be as funny and mistaken and beloved as we are. Guaranteed. □

*Bolz-Weber is pastor of House for All Sinners and Saints, Denver (www.houseforall.org). She wrote *Salvation on the Small Screen? 24 Hours of Christian Television* (Seabury Books, 2008) and blogs at www.sarcasticlutheran.com.*



Ultimately the Bible tells us who we are and who God is. ...

And, just like life, the Bible is filled with it all: beauty, wisdom, sensuality, betrayal, love, violence, broiled fish and humor.

www.bookoffaith.org

... is where you can learn more about the Book of Faith, including *Leading in Faith*, an online and DVD library to help Book of Faith leaders with study methods and with strategies for beginning small groups. Webinars also will be offered.