How comedy changed my view of the Bible

Ted Swartz

So when did comedy and biblical study start to come together? To me the Bible was, for much of my life, a daunting book: confusing and inspiring, sacred and inaccessible. I knew it should be on my list of books I'd want to have if I were stranded on a desert island, but it seemed distant and irrelevant too much of the time.

I was in my second year at Eastern Mennonite Seminary, 1991. My wife, Sue, and I had moved with our boys to Harrisonburg, Virginia, supported by our congregation in Pennsylvania—Plains Mennonite—to become a pastor—and I was struggling. I had fallen in love with theater while taking classes with Barbra Graber at Eastern Mennonite University and Tom Arthur at James Madison University, discovered a brilliant comedy acting partner in Lee Eshleman, and was wondering about a call that seemed to be shifting away from a traditional pastorate to . . . what?

Dramas that start with the human story and attempt to insert a God moment often miss the mark, comically and artistically. Turning the equation around, taking the God story and inserting the human, makes all the difference.

I had gone to the dean of the seminary, George Brunk III, and asked if I could take acting and performance classes at JMU, and would he give me seminary credit for it? When I look back, it seems an audacious request, but George in his wisdom allowed that to happen. I think he knew I was going to have trouble finishing seminary otherwise, especially with Hebrew and systematic theology looming.

Dorothy Jean Weaver teaches New Testament at EMS; our textbook is Jack Dean Kingsbury's *Matthew as Story*. I remember distinctly Dorothy Jean suggesting that we read the text assigned as a play with plot, characters, good guys, bad guys, conflict, and confrontation. She has caught my attention.

Our text is Matthew 16.

The disciples had forgotten to bring any bread when they crossed the lake. Jesus then warned them, "Watch out! Guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees." The disciples talked this over and said to each other, "He must be saying this because we didn't bring along any bread."

Jesus knew what they were thinking and said: "You surely don't have much faith! Why are you talking about not having any bread? Don't you understand? Have you forgotten about the five thousand people and all those baskets of leftovers from just five loaves of bread? And what about the four thousand people and all those baskets of leftovers from only seven loaves of bread? Don't you know by now that I am not talking to you about bread? Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees!"

Finally the disciples understood that Jesus wasn't talking about the yeast used to make bread but about the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

What I found very funny was the image of a confused group of disciples huddled together at one end of the boat—(never mind the nautical impracticalities)—with Jesus at the other, waiting, perched serenely on the gunwale. He's thrown out yet another pithy, enigmatic saying—Why does he keep doing that?!

I imagine the disciples thinking: "So . . . So, beware of the yeast of the Pharisees . . . Yeast . . . what about it? . . . You make bread with yeast, right . . . Right, but not *just* yeast . . . What, beware of the baking powder of the Pharisees? . . . No, no . . . He's used the culinary motif before . . . It's the ingredients that are important, that's why the yeast . . . No, no I think it's just the bread . . . The bread? . . . Did you bring bread? No, I thought you were going to bring the bread . . . Not me . . . We just left twelve baskets on the shore and YOU didn't bring any bread! . . . So what are we going with? . . . The bread . . . We're going with the bread . . . OK . . . You tell him."

And then they turn to Jesus and say—"It's because we didn't bring any, bread isn't it?"

And then I see Jesus holding his head in his hands and muttering "Oh, God"—in the truest sense—"these buffoons are the foundation of a new kingdom?"

It was out of that image that I wrote a monologue that was expanded in 1994–95 with Lee Eshleman into *Fish-Eyes; Stories You Thought You Knew, Through the Eyes of the First Disciples*. We were pretty sure our audience would be the church—our target was folks who needed a fresh look at a story they had perhaps become too familiar with. As we toured the show and four others based on biblical story, we found more and more people didn't have a familiarity with the story, and it was the humor, the comedy, that drew them in.

Many of the dramas written for churches over the last thirty or forty years struggle (in my opinion) to make an impact, because they start with the human story and attempt to insert a God moment. It's a traditional approach to church drama, and it often misses the mark, comically or artistically or both. Simply turning the equation around, taking the God story and inserting the human, makes all the difference for me. The secret for me is to take a story/event that is held sacred. When I insert the profane, the foolish, the humanity, oddly enough it usually doesn't diminish the sacredness; it enhances it.

When an audience watches characters struggle to discern just what is happening to them, there is a sympathetic response—and when the characters discover a truth, the audience discovers with them.

It's because we have an intrinsic understanding of the human story: we laugh because we are surprised or we recognize ourselves in the foibles and misunderstandings of the characters on stage. The comedy in a biblical story, then, comes when we see ourselves in Mary, nine months pregnant and grumpy with swollen ankles—"If you want the marriage to work, it's gonna be three things—'Yes, Mary.' 'Right away Mary.' 'Anything you say, Mary!'—Say it!" Or Jonah throwing his resignation on God's desk, saying, "I want to know why. I want to know why I had to be thrown overboard, gobbled up, and then thrown up on the beach, so I could run around Ninevah dripping with whale vomit."

A scene, many times, starts with a visual image: A grumpy Paul struggling to pack for a trip. He can't find his favorite shirt.

Abram doing a spit-take, when the angel tells him as a sign of the new covenant, the foreskin is to taken . . . off.[1] Jeremiah holding his ragged shorts, the ones God told him to wear but not ever wash—and then hide them in a crack in a rock. Peter and Andrew not quite hearing what Jesus is telling them from the shoreline . . . Cashew nuts on the other side?! Andrew explaining to Peter the last supper needs to have a seating arrangement, over Peter's insistence that "when you sit in a line, there's no one to talk to across from you."

And from that visual image, or a fragment of a line, the scene is built. It is crucial for me to follow the comedic vein as far as it goes, resisting the impulse to become didactic. When you succumb to the temptation to make sure people get the point, the humor gods will kill your sketch. They are not amused.

It would be silly for me to think everyone who watches a play I've written or performed is pleased or can find the humor. While I don't subscribe to the attitude that theater needs to irritate, annoy, or offend everyone at some level, I do feel it needs to push its audience.

A friend explained to Lee and me years ago that the humor in *Fish-Eyes* was foremost self-deprecating humor. Peter and Andrew are often the last ones in the room to "get it." The audience is smarter; they warm to the characters. When an audience watches characters stumble and struggle to discern just what is happening to them, there is a sympathetic response—and when the characters discover a truth, when there is an Aha! moment on stage, the audience discovers with them.

I have been asked many times about reactions to the shows I and my co-writers have written around biblical story. That question presupposes that we have met with resistance. While we have on occasion found that resistance, most responses have been positive. With a more conservative Christian audience, people are often more biblically literate, and they catch details and nuance that others might miss. They feel smart and perhaps as a result are more open to this nontraditional approach to biblical interpretation. In a less conservative or more secular setting, people appreciate the artful approach to the humor.

I think a sharp sense of humor is a great sign of an imaginative mind, a seeking mind, a mind that reaches to mystery. Comedy

celebrates life, involves chance discoveries and accidental encounters, and grapples with the unpredictable, even as it ultimately offers the hope of renewal. It is the human story—and the biblical story—told from the bottom up.

A recent letter from Barbra Graber included a list of quotations about humor. Two favorites: "Common sense and a sense of humor are the same thing, moving at different speeds. A sense of humor is just common sense dancing" (William James); and "The art of the clown is more profound than we think: it is neither tragic not comic. It is a comic mirror of tragedy and the tragic mirror of comedy" (Andre Suares).

Many etymologists, those who study the origins of words, agree that the word *humor* has the same root as humility and humanity, all derived from the word *humus,* meaning "of the earth." Humor is part of what keeps us then connected to the earth, to creation; it's what keeps us rooted. I love the idea that humor and comedy have their formation in the soil, the dirt, the loam (I love the word *loam*). They have the ability to bring the mighty down to earth, to humble us all, yet they can build the human story and consequently the biblical story from the earth—from the bottom up.

The word *humor* has the same root as humility and humanity, all derived from the word *humus,* meaning "of the earth." Humor is part of what keeps us then connected to the earth, to creation; it's what keeps us rooted.

When I approach a biblical text in order to write a sketch (please, not a skit), or a play, I almost always come to the text at something close to face value. If it's a creation story, I'm not usually in the business of debating the theology of a young earth theory vs. a theory of evolution. I'm not interested, at that moment, in whether the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand is to be taken literally. The exegesis, if you will, is in the imaginative spaces between the words. In many ways, my writings follow the tradition of the Hebrew midrash; they are stories that comment on the scriptures. My favorite definition of midrash is "white fire"—the space amid the "black fire" of words on the page.

Because of a background in writing and performing comedy, my first instinct in writing a piece is to find the comedy: what's funny? So my relationship to the Bible has changed dramatically.

(That's not a pun, is it?) Because humor is part of what makes us human, it is always lurking below the surface of every human interaction, every situation in life. So then the story of God's journey with humanity has to have humor in it. We only need to open our imaginations to the possibilities.

This journey has changed my relationship with the Bible forever. The Bible feels both less sacred and more sacred to me now. Less sacred, because the fallible humanity of us all is comedically woven throughout, so the Bible is no longer an inaccessible icon to be held apart from us mere mortals. More sacred, because the comedy I see there connects me to a people of history and a people of faith. Because they were human, they stumbled and fell, misunderstood, and perhaps even passed gas at inappropriate times.

Note

[1] A spit-take is a comedic technique in which someone spits a beverage out of his or her mouth when he or she reacts to a statement.

About the author

Ted Swartz is a writer and actor living in Harrisonburg, Virginia. The author or co-author of nearly twenty unique plays, Ted graduated from Eastern Mennonite University in 1989 and Eastern Mennonite Seminary in 1992. From there he began a ministry that took him, not to a pulpit in a congregation, but to stages in front of more than a quarter-million people across the U.S. and into Canada, Kenya, Japan, and beyond. Along with writing and acting, his loves include his wife, three sons, two daughters-in-law, and baseball.