


A time to laugh and a time to speak

A homily on Ecclesiastes 3:1–8

Andrew Unger

In this most famous passage of Ecclesiastes, Solomon (or was it The Byrds?) tells us “there is a time for everything.” There is a time, he says, to weep, to search, to scatter stones, to dance even (although not for Mennonites apparently), and even a time to laugh.

Sometimes I wonder, though, if we as Mennonites have abandoned the laughter as eagerly as we seem to have left out the dancing. Given a



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certain lens, this passage in Ecclesiastes could be read as if Solomon is presenting dichotomies—situations that never cross paths—as if the time to weep and the time to laugh cannot ever coincide, as if times of speaking and staying silent are fixed rather than fluid. I think this reading of the passage is unfortunate, but common, especially when it comes to humor. We (I don’t just mean Mennonites here) tend to think of the time to weep and the time to laugh as very far apart. We often put humor in its own tightly constricted box in terms of context and content. People will say things

like “now is not the time” or “that isn’t funny” or “too soon.” And in these dark times we’re living in now? Well now, certainly, isn’t the time to laugh, some might say. Others argue that it is precisely in dark times that we need humor the most. These are arguments everyone has, but I think that we as Mennonites have too often placed humor in a particularly restrictive box.

In fact, those growing up in conservative Mennonite homes might wonder when exactly the “time to laugh” would ever come. If the Scriptures acknowledge that laughter has its place, why were our Mennonite ancestors (or mine, anyway) so strict on this matter? In her 1989 article

on humor in the *Mennonite Encyclopedia*, Mennonite Brethren writer Katie Funk Wiebe paints a pretty bleak picture of Mennonite humor. “Unseemingly light-hearted behavior,” she says, “was often summed up in the word ‘levity.’ In addition, the Mennonites were concerned that houses of prayer and worship not be turned into houses of entertainment and mirth through humorous allusions and stories.”¹ The restrictions were so severe, Wiebe says, that “true stories were preferred to fiction.”

And, of course, satire fares no better, according to Wiebe. “Satire as a comment on the human condition has not been used successfully in Mennonite periodicals,” she notes, “even if clearly labeled satire, indicating

that the point of view expressed is likely to be the opposite of what is expressed.” It got so bad that in the early 1980s, *The Gospel Herald* had to stop publishing cartoons and humor columns due to negative feedback from readers.

This restriction on humor has not been confined to our churches but has reached into our homes. In one of my own family history books, I read about a great aunt who believed laughter to be, quite literally, a temptation of the devil. In her home, laughter and light-heartedness were considered frivolous, and my great aunt was confused to see, one evening, her father and brothers laughing

together. It makes me sad to think of my great aunt, who wanted so much to be able to relax and laugh, thinking of these desires as sinful.

No doubt things have changed since Wiebe wrote her article or since my great aunt viewed laughter as a temptation of Satan. However, I do think that some Mennonites, whether in church or at home, still can be rather skittish when it comes to humor, and I wonder about the origin of this uneasiness. I think our history of living through dark times has shaped our view of humor. We tend to be very careful in delineating the line between the sacred and profane. But then I also wonder (and this is pure speculation) whether Mennonites of the past may have thought

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1 Katie Funk Wiebe, “Humor,” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, 1989, <https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Humor&oldid=143606>.

of humor as a weapon. I doubt this was ever articulated in these words, but I do wonder whether comedy was abandoned along with the sword. Perhaps there was an unconscious understanding that a commitment to humorlessness went hand-in-hand with a commitment to nonviolence.

Because it certainly is true that humor can be used as a weapon. In his critique of the evangelical Christian satire website Babylon Bee, Jonathan Hollingsworth notes that “Christian satire continues to miss the mark because it fails to do the work of good satire, which at its heart, fittingly enough, is a prophetic art. The Biblical prophets found their witness

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not in mocking the vulnerable, but in challenging the powerful.”² Here I think not only of the biblical prophets but also the way in which Jesus Christ, himself, used, if not satire, certainly allegory, in his critique of the powerful. I am also reminded of the great Jonathan Swift, an Anglican clergyman who used satire to point out flaws in the eighteenth-century Irish upper class. (He even has

a brilliantly biting satirical sermon about falling asleep during sermons, which is worth a read.) “Satire that punches down, rather than up,” Hollingsworth says, “is not only ignorant—it’s oppressive.” This analogy, that of punching, is a helpful one. When humor is used to attack the vulnerable, it certainly can be considered a form of violence; this is the weaponization of humor. If this is how humor was being used, perhaps Mennonites were correct to find it problematic. On the other hand, this view of humor seems to ignore its other roles, because humor can also be there when we need a time to embrace or to heal or to speak. In fact, humor that “punches up,” like that of Jonathan Swift, often speaks more powerfully than any literal commentary.

There is also a third direction the punches can be thrown. I call it “punching sideways.” This is where I would place self-deprecating humor. I think a lot of the humor on *The Daily Bonnet* would fall into that category. I’m writing about my own cultural and religious background and, in some cases, I’m quite literally writing about myself. Just recently someone

² Jonathan Hollingsworth, “The Babylon Bee, Transphobia, and Why Christian Satire Still Misses the Mark,” *Medium.com*, 2016, since removed by author.

on Twitter commented: “I’m beginning to think *The Daily Bonnet* is just like your journal.” I suppose that’s true—at least some of the time.

We need to be reminded that there is a “time to laugh” and that this time need not come so infrequently. Let’s also remember, though, that humor is about a lot more than just laughter. If we are using humor to punch up (or sideways)—if we’re using humor to embrace and heal and speak—maybe the box that we place it in need not be quite so constrictive.

About the author

Andrew Unger is best known as the author and founder of the satirical news website *The Daily Bonnet* and author of the new novel *Once Removed* (Turnstone Press, September 2020). Andrew is a writer, public speaker, and educator from southern Manitoba, whose work has also appeared in *Geez*, *Rhubarb*, *Ballast*, *Preservings*, *CBC.ca*, the *Winnipeg Free Press*, and *Friends Journal*, among many others. He is a graduate of the University of Manitoba and lives with his wife, Erin, in Steinbach. If you go back far enough, he is probably related to you.