

Jesus Laughed

Re-imagining Jesus as the life of the party

Michele Rae Rizoli

“At its best, laughter is subversive enough to enable the truth to be told.”

—Dr. Richard Fraser

Several years ago, a friend introduced me to a beautiful project titled *Jesus Laughing and Loving*.¹ It is an online art exhibition of images of Jesus bringing joy to the world. In one of them, Jesus is roller skating, in another Jesus is juggling in front of an amused crowd, and in another Jesus’s companions

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are sitting at a table, laughing at a joke. The people who envisioned this art project noted that most images of Jesus in Western art have shown him suffering, dead, or in solemn, austere settings. (I’d also mention they mostly portray Jesus as a white man, but that is a discussion for another space.) *Jesus Laughing and Loving* is a whimsical collection by diverse artists from around the

world that opened my perspective to other ways of thinking about our God who becomes fully human.

The images we carry of Jesus are not only visual. We might also imagine *how* Jesus is saying something when we listen to him through Scripture. Was he being compassionate? Was he angry? Could he be sarcastic? Was he preaching or teaching? Was he joking or teasing? What tone do we hear when his stories are directed at “sinners”? What tone do we hear when his words are directed at us? What was his voice or personality like? What kind of friend was he?

¹ *Jesus Laughing and Loving* (Beecroft, New South Wales: Major Issues and Theology Foundation, 2012), <https://www.miat.org.au/jesus-laughing-exhibition.php>.

The preachy Jesus

I grew up with some version of what I call “preachy Jesus.” Sure, there were pictures of him quietly rescuing lost sheep, patiently knocking at my heart’s door, or gazing into the distance while gently patting well-behaved children on the head. Yet somehow, every time he opened his mouth, in my head I heard pronouncements instead of amusing stories, directives instead of invitations, boring words instead of intriguing ones. And he was always verily, verily serious! My own imagination leans toward the humorous in life, so it was difficult to connect with this serious-all-the-time image of Jesus.

Jesus as jokester

Along the way, I was introduced to biblical storytelling using methods of learning and telling Scripture by heart.² A whole new world of possibilities opened up, freeing me from the written text and giving me hermeneutical

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tools beyond the words. This approach to Scripture recovers the ancient oral nature of the Bible, placing it in the realm of narrative and drawing on resources like imagination, context, geography, and embodiment. When preparing a text, one might think about things such as where people are in relation to one another in a scene, the looks on their faces, or the other people present in the room.

Today I hear and imagine Jesus quite differently. His tone is more often filled with humorous truth-telling and amused laughter. His relationships are marked by gentle compassion, true

friendship, deep listening, and gregarious engagement. In my mind, he often has a twinkle in his eye.

Like the time he rescues Zacchaeus from the bullying crowd and tells him, “I’m going to *your* house today!” (Luke 19).

Or when, after the resurrection, he appears to his frightened friends with a simple “Hi, guys!” (Well, according to Luke 24:36–46, he actually

2 See Network of Biblical Storytellers International, <https://www.nbsint.org/>.

says “Shalom” and then asks for something to eat, but I’m contextualizing.) Imagine the nervous laughter in that scene!

Or when he engages the Samaritan woman in some well-side banter (the water cooler of their day), only to flip the conversation into serious matters about true worship and fulfilling lives (John 4).

Or when he impresses Nathaniel with the cool trick of knowing what he was thinking minutes before and with a teasing comment about Nathaniel being the truest Israelite (John 1:43–51).

This shift to a Jesus who laughs and jokes is not just a trick of the mind. If we look closely, there are indications right in the biblical narrative that Jesus was more than “preachy.” Consider that Jesus drew crowds of dedicated followers. The miraculous healings notwithstanding, surely to some degree that kind of popularity would require a magnetic per-



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sonality and some good stories to keep people’s attention. Matthew’s Gospel even implies that all Jesus did was speak in parables all the time (13:34).

According to the writers of the Gospels, Jesus also drew a lot of criticism for the company he kept and the amounts of drink and food he consumed (Luke 7:34). It seems he knew that some of the best conversations happen when we are gathered with other people informally. People who will never come to a lecture

or a worship service will engage issues around a good meal in a non-threatening environment, where laughter is embraced and encouraged. Think about Nicodemus and an evening chat with Jesus in John 3. Imagine that Scripture only captures one small moment of a longer friendly interaction. Maybe they had been up there for a while, talking about all sorts of things that were leading up to the born-again puns Jesus was playing with. Was there laughter in their exchange?

Jesus as *festiero*

When I was in seminary, our professor of New Testament, Dr. Leif Vaage, told us an amusing anecdote about a paper he wrote in Spanish, where he had stated that Jesus was *festiero*. The paper had apparently generated some controversy when he tried to translate it into English and ended up calling Jesus a “party animal.” That idea of Jesus as a party animal set

my mind whirling. To be fair, *festiero* is a hard word to translate. Anyone who knows a little Spanish (or in my case, Portuguese) will recognize that the adjective comes from the word for “party” or “feast,” *fiesta*. *Festiero* is a positive word to describe someone who enjoys going to parties. We all know them, those people who make all the difference in the success of any gathering.

My upbringing in a Latin-American culture (Brazil) certainly gives a positive bias toward Jesus being a *festiero*. In that context, social gatherings are open-ended and can just as easily erupt into dancing as into heated philosophical discussions. The North American idea of party animal is

more about the indulgences of partying and sides more with the Pharisees’ negative connotation of excess. Maybe that is one reason I took so long to consider Jesus as the life of the party.

Jesus’s first recorded miracle, according to John 2, is to extend the life of a beleaguered wedding celebration by conjuring gallons of fine wine to keep the party going. In reading that story, I was always a bit troubled by his apparent

curtness with Mary as she tells him about the wine predicament. But if we can imagine that Jesus was there with his friends, possibly on the dance floor, and if we add laughter to his exchange with his mother—“What’s that to me, woman?”—it paints a lighter and more humorous picture of their interaction. They are party co-conspirators rather than opponents, as Mary becomes the catalyst for his public ministry.

The human, earthy Jesus

One of the last things Jesus did was to gather with his friends for a meal, to celebrate the Passover feast. Maybe when he washed their feet, it was not a solemn moment but a jovial hosting gesture toward his friends, with a bit of laughter thrown in to ease the tension of an awkward moment. Maybe it gained seriousness only in retrospect.

To imagine Jesus as the life of the party, as a teller of jokes and riddles, as an earthy storyteller surrounded by friends, is to imagine him in all his humanity. To accept the invitation to see this dimension of God-become-flesh is to enliven our experience of reading the Gospels and possibly to help us find new depths and spiritual connections with those narratives

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and with the Divine. The foreword of *Jesus Laughing and Loving* asks: “Why do we want to deprive Jesus of laughter?”

Why, indeed?

About the author

Michele Rae Rizoli serves as one of the pastors at the Toronto United Mennonite Church. She is enriched by the practice of biblical storytelling and sees humor as a way to connect with people of all generations.