

Stand up for Jesus: Susan Sparks, pastor and comedian

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [November 16, 2010](#) issue



*Susan Sparks is senior pastor at Madison Avenue Baptist Church in New York City. Before entering the ministry, she worked as a trial lawyer and also had a career as a stand-up comedian—a career that she has continued. She often performs with a Jewish rabbi and a Muslim cleric. She is the author of *Laugh Your Way to Grace: Reclaiming the Spiritual Power of Humor*.*

How did you come to combine ministry with work as a comedian?

My story is like a line in the film *Kung Fu Panda*: "Our destiny is found on the road we take to avoid it." I fought for so long against the call that I felt to the ministry. For

one thing, I didn't like church. I was raised in a tradition that left me feeling very disenfranchised, and I didn't go to church for 25 years.

Problem number two: I didn't see how I could possibly fit in the church. I was a woman who came out of a tradition that didn't ordain women and I was a comedian. The ministers I grew up with looked like Gandalf from *The Lord of the Rings*. But eventually I ran out of excuses.

How did you come back to Christianity?

I took a trip around the world, and I spent a long time with Buddhist monks in Nepal, Hindu families in India and Muslims and Jews in Israel. Every time I would start discovering a new religion or a new face of God, I was reminded of Jesus. I saw in a new light something that Jesus taught or said. I could see that Jesus' teachings bring peace and light, that they are meant to teach joy and compassion. I found my religion through others' paths.

How does humor work in congregations?

Humor is a pretty broad-based communication skill that works well with almost every congregation member you run into. Every once in a while you run into the person who thinks humor is blasphemous or that it is bringing God down to a level where God doesn't belong. But that is rare.

How does being a minister work in comedy clubs?

I did a show not long ago at Gotham, a comedy club in New York. I was doing my material about being a southerner in New York—about regional differences in shopping, food, clothing. People were laughing. Then I made the mistake of saying I was a minister. The room went silent. People folded their arms and looked at me like, "You've got to be kidding me."

The material I used after that was tried-and-true stuff, but the room had gone cold. That is an unfortunate comment on people's perception of organized religion. My problem is to figure out how to be authentic in a comedy club without being threatening to people. They've been so damaged or so broken by the church or by clergy that they cannot open up.

Are there topics you consider off limits?

I have a very strict rule: I can make fun of everything and anything that I am. I can go after lawyers, ministers, southerners, redheads and folks who love onion dip. There is so much material in Christianity and in Christians that I could write routines for 20 lifetimes. Why would I need to look anywhere else?

But the second I step out of that world and go after another person's race, ethnicity or religion, I'm on shaky ground. Then humor becomes not a bridge, but a barrier. A lot of the comedy out there now is about drawing barriers between people. In the show that I do with a rabbi and a Muslim, we try to build bridges and draw on our commonalities.

Can you give us a sample?

The last time we did the show, Bob, the rabbi, got up and introduced Azhar, and when Azhar came on stage Bob frisked him. This was in a synagogue—and people screamed with laughter. Azhar did a hilarious routine on being Muslim in America. Then he introduced Bob; Bob came back on stage and Azhar frisked him. They weren't making fun of each other, they were playing on stereotypes.

Humor can bond people really fast. In that audience, there were people with Easter hats, with yarmulkes and with burqas. Within 15 seconds, the whole crowd was laughing together.

Bob and Azhar talk about really basic things: their families, their kids, traveling. If there is ever a specific cultural or religious reference, they will quickly explain it and then move on. Azhar talks about his mom and how she always says, "You never call me." It's these very human moments, mixed with culture and religion, that make the message so powerful.

You've said that humor in preaching is more than telling a joke at the beginning of the sermon.

A joke at the beginning of the sermon helps, but humor is more about everyday life. A minister is a mirror and should be a model of the gospel. People look at how you treat people, how you treat yourself, how you interact with the world. Some people talk about humor as a tool in preaching, but the bigger field is pastoral care. How do you engage people who are going through a crisis or who are just lonely? How do joy and laughter inform that experience? Do you believe that you deserve joy? Is laughter a part of your life? Do you recharge through laughter? For most pastors, the

answer to those questions is no.

The issue of how to deal with a crisis is important for me because I am a breast cancer survivor. Four years ago, I got a scary diagnosis and went through treatment. I was stunned by how helpful laughter was for me in both physical and psychological healing. When you find a place to laugh in a place of pain, you take life back. You are able to say, "This is what I am experiencing, not what I am. Maybe this thing will defeat me, but it will never define me."

How do you use humor in preaching?

I recently gave a sermon on health care. I used the story of Bartimaeus, the blind beggar who yells out to Jesus that he wants his sight restored. I rewrote that story to have Bartimaeus call out for healing—but he lacks health insurance. Jesus' disciples give him a sign-up sheet for CIGNA. That twist—putting the Bible in a modern context—helps people to see that the story still speaks.

Do you meet resistance in the church to your way of combining comedy and ministry?

Some people think I'm trying to teach ministers how to be stand-up comedians for the sake of entertainment. They miss the point. I am talking about a lens for looking at the gospel.

Why do you think people feel threatened?

Power and humor are not friends. Humor breaks us open, reveals and brings in new perspectives. If we laugh in holy realms, it suggests that there might be some wiggle room in the dogma.

Do you see humor in scripture?

There are basically two types of humor in the Bible. There is humor so blatant that, if you miss it, you probably need counseling. The story of Abraham and Sarah is a good example of this: God tells Sarah that she is going to have a baby at age 90. She names the child Isaac, the Hebrew word for laughter. But my favorite story is about how God inflicts hemorrhoids on his enemies.

Then there is humor that is more subtle. The Gospels were written in the first century, and so it's easy to miss some of the humor. Our reading the Gospels is like

somebody 2,000 years from now opening a time capsule and finding Steve Martin's arrow-through-the-head stuff—they wouldn't get it. They might say, "Oh, what a warlike culture."

When Jesus says, "If somebody asks for your coat, give him your cloak as well," it's a real knee-slapper, because in first-century Palestine people only wore two pieces of clothing, a coat and a cloak. So Jesus is saying: if you are a debtor and you are being sued, give it all away so that you are standing in court naked. Then the person suing you is the one who is ashamed.