

The grace of deep-bellied laughter

Does our theology have space for a Jesus who not only weeps but also laughs?

by [Yolanda Pierce](#) in the [January 2024](#) issue

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In *The Sacred Journey*, Frederick Buechner describes listening to George Buttrick, the renowned scholar, pastor, and preacher. Buttrick describes how Jesus is crowned king, again and again, in the hearts of believers, among “confession, and tears, and great laughter.” Buechner is captivated by this idea of “great laughter,” which he marks as the precipitating moment of his own spiritual conversion:

It was the phrase *great laughter* that did it, did whatever it was that I believe must have been hiddenly in the doing all the years of my journey up till then. It was not so much that a door opened as that I suddenly found that a door had been open all along which I had only just then stumbled upon.

Reading this always makes me wonder if many of us cannot feel the power of God in our lives because while we have confession and tears aplenty, our lives are often devoid of great laughter. Does our theology have space for a Jesus who weeps and also laughs? Where and how can we experience this great laughter in hard times? In a world that is fraught with division, war, and despair, where can it even be found?

I recently had lunch with three dynamic colleagues. It was an impromptu meal at the tail end of a conference. I desperately needed to head back home, where ungraded papers, unanswered emails, and unmet needs waited for me in abundance. In my mind, I argued, I did not have time for what would surely be a leisurely lunch, in light of all that I had left undone at work. With the two hours I would spend at lunch, I reasoned that I could finish a lecture or pay some bills or try to get more than one step ahead of my busy schedule. But the prompting of the Holy Spirit led me to a small table, at an even smaller restaurant, where great laughter was the main dish. The food was excellent, and the company was even better.

Our conversation over lunch didn't begin with joy or laughter. All four of us were reacting to the news of the deaths of two Black women college presidents, who died at their respective institutions within a week of each other (see news story, p. 22). Since reading the news of the passing of JoAnne A. Epps of Temple University and Orinthia T. Montague of Volunteer State Community College, my soul has been downcast. I saw these two women as role models who had achieved success at the highest levels of my profession. Their untimely deaths had me evaluating what it cost them, and what it is costing me, to lead and succeed in higher education. Many days, the cost of the work feels too high. Battling unrealistic expectations, racial

microaggressions, unfair performance standards, and a whole host of issues big and small leaves me wondering if I can ever succeed, and *thrive*, in the very spaces to which I feel called.

Our lunchtime conversation began on this somber note, my dining companions also mourning with me over this news. But over food and conversation and shared concerns, our grief became coupled with joy as we celebrated the small career successes, the unexpected antics of young children, and the blessings of yet another year of surviving in the most unlikely of places. This great laughter was a balm for my soul. Until I was on my way back home, with memories of this lunch still feeding my spirit, I didn't realize how much I needed laughter, how much I needed that deep-bellied experience of laughing out loud at the funny, at the absurd, and even at myself. That laughter gave me room to count my blessings even as I was counting the costs.

We need to laugh until we cry on a regular basis. We need to experience the fullness of God's grace, with great laughter and mirth. If Jesus experienced everything that was common to humanity, then surely he laughed with his family and friends. Surely he experienced the joy, the humor, and the absurdity inherent in life. And while Jesus was a man who was despised, rejected, and well acquainted with sorrow, he also reassures us that blessed are those who weep, for they will one day laugh (Luke 6:21b). This is a divine promise that even in hard times joy and laughter can be found.

On my way home from lunch, I truly understood the power of laughter. It reminds us that the joy of the Lord is available if we are open to the beauty of even the simplest gifts: a good lunch with friends, the unfettered laughter of a child, the quizzical looks and head tilts from a puppy. And we can remember and experience that joy, again and again, when we laugh out loud, finding humor in the ordinary and extraordinary.

As we paid the check and departed from lunch, our waiter remarked that it looked like we were having a great time. We continued our laughter and conversation well into the parking lot. I pray that joy and laughter are contagious and provide a healing balm to those experiencing the hard times of life. I pray that laughter will lift some of the weight of the burdens we carry. I pray that we are reminded that joy will come again.