

Alyce M. McKenzie and Owen Hanley Lynch. *Humor Us!: Preaching and the Power of the Comic Spirit*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2023. 239 pages. \$28.00.

When a preacher steps up to the pulpit, the last thing they want to see is yawning listeners, frequently checking their watches or cellphones for how long the sermon will last. Humor has often been viewed as a quick remedy for preachers to solve boredom and make their sermons more engaging. In their book *Humor Us!*, however, Alyce McKenzie and Owen Lynch, teachers in preaching and communication, respectively, recognize the power in humor that goes beyond mere entertainment. They argue that humor is a “universal and essential part of human social life” that can be used to “heal or hurt” (1). Furthermore, humor is a “gift of God, part of what it means to be made in the image of God” (2). Therefore, McKenzie and Lynch team up to help preachers reflect on and utilize the power of humor more faithfully and effectively by exploring various fields such as history, psychology, communication theory, and homiletics.

The book has thirteen chapters in three parts. In Part One, “The Gift of the Comic Spirit,” McKenzie and Lynch discuss the theological aspect of humor—that it is the very nature of God who “displays the divine habit of reversing our expectations and upending the status quo” (19). God invites us to laugh at the discrepancy between what we hope for and what we observe, especially the incongruity between worldly values and those of the reign of God. The authors argue that since human beings are created in the image of God, they inherently possess the capacity to appreciate amusement, incongruity, and learn to laugh more as they grow mature. Since humor is a gift from God, the authors encourage preachers to recognize it as such and unlock its full potential for their preaching.

In Part Two, “The Sermon and the Comic Spirit,” McKenzie and Lynch provide an interdisciplinary understanding of humor in sermons, as discussed in communication theory, psychology, and literature. Used in the proper context, humor can enhance one’s physical, mental, and emotional health, promoting creativity, new perspectives, and social relationships (51). The authors also address communicational theories of why we use humor: superiority, relief, and incongruity. Humor is often utilized to emphasize the inadequacy of others, especially those in power; release stress and anxiety; and enjoy the playfulness in dissonance (83). Since tragedy and comedy have been the primary frames in understanding life, narrative, and literature, McKenzie and Lynch encourage preachers to develop a comic spirit that allows them to end sermons with comedy rather than tragedy. Readers will especially enjoy chapter eight, “Foes and Fans,” where the authors humorously and playfully describe how philosophers and theologians have approached humor from Ancient Greece to the Reformation.

In Part Three, “The Preacher and the Comic Spirit,” the authors address the inspiration for comic vision through the models of jester, fool, and sage—those who have used humor to speak the truth, challenge the power, and offer a new vision in court, religion, and public. In chapter nine, “The Preacher as Comic Spirit,” McKenzie and Lynch describe the disposition of preachers with a comic spirit as those who embrace humility, ambiguity, joy, and community. Although everyone may not naturally be a good humorist, the authors offer a way for preachers to develop a “knack for noticing humor” by paying attention to their “inner lives (inscape); their congregational, community, and cultural contexts (landscape); and the biblical text(s) they are in dialogue with for their sermons (textscape)” (166). In the last chapter, the authors offer practical tips for preachers to craft their original comedy by exploring how jokes work and analyzing the structure of humorous storytelling.

While humor has often been appreciated and discussed in other academic disciplines, it has been relatively neglected as a noteworthy topic in the homiletical circle. Through their in-depth research, therefore, McKenzie and Lynch pave the way for homileticians to reflect on humor not only as a practical matter to improve one's preaching, but also as an essential question of the identity and call of the preacher who catches and proclaims the comic vision of God, especially in the midst of tragedy and suffering in the world. Some readers may wish the authors engaged more with black preaching as a critical topic to reflect on how African American preachers have already adopted the interplay between tragedy and comedy for their preaching and have boldly proclaimed God who enables them to laugh with God at the folly of powers and principalities.

Nevertheless, readers will appreciate the authors' wit in their creative engagement with the thoughts of philosophers, theologians, and preachers regarding the role of humor in Christian faith, hermeneutics, and preaching. Additionally, they will also admire the authors' humility, as they humorously share stories about their own mistakes in their preaching, teaching, and life.

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