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Smilin' Mighty Jesus

By Dodd Sims, M.D.

Every ER I have worked in maintains a list of humorous things patients say in describing their medical condition. For example, the woman convinced that her forgetful husband has “old-timers’ disease” (Alzheimer’s). And the man coughing up “film” (phlegm). Or the woman with heavy menstrual bleeding who explains that she has “fireballs of the eucharist” (fibroids, or benign tumors, of the uterus).

And then there is the worried mother whose feverish child almost died last year. The mother fears this might be another bout of “smilin’ mighty Jesus” (spinal meningitis).

Now, there is nothing wrong with humor. It is, in fact, a great way to relieve stress. At 9 o’clock on a Saturday night in a crowded ER, with a two-hour wait to see the doctor and the ambulances still pulling in, you need something to laugh about. I’ve been part of this healthcare banter my whole career, sharing funny anecdotes, repeating the same stories, drawing the same laughs.

But when I step back and reflect on these experiences, I am bothered. Why do we doctors so reflexively mock others, especially people who are less educated, less sophisticated? That is, “less sophisticated” in our own eyes. Why is it so much easier to ridicule the other than it is to see how ridiculous our own language, or customs, or even values can be? I’m particularly troubled because I can see now, with the benefit of several decades of hindsight, that this arrogance – yes, I call it arrogance – is baked into our medical training.

And it’s not just medical training. I see the same phenomenon at work in so many aspects of our lives. Indeed, I spot it in our religious formation. We, of course, pray the right way. Our reading of Scripture is the correct reading. Our beliefs are reasonable. Our faith is a saving faith. But those “other folks,” I’m not so sure.

I grew up in the small-town South. Religion was everywhere. In a town of five thousand souls, there were thirty, perhaps forty, churches. And while you never visited other churches, except for the occasional wedding or funeral, you were pretty certain what they were doing in there. As kids, we took great delight in finding wine bottles in the trash can behind the Catholic priest’s house. Protestants didn’t drink, but you know how those Catholics are!

On hot, humid Sunday nights, walking down the street with my grandmother to the First Baptist Church of DeRidder, Louisiana, for evening services, you passed the Pentecostals. Their door was open, and if you lingered you could hear the shouting. You could see the crowd swaying with arms stretched out, as if they were trying to touch Heaven. This just wasn’t what Baptists like my grandmother did. And it certainly was not what my Presbyterian parents did. We were not like those people.

A few years ago, an Ethiopian doctor invited me to visit his church on a Sunday morning. I easily found the building, which had once been a synagogue. It was harder to find a parking place. There was standing room only at this Pentecostal church where everyone spoke Amharic, one of the main languages of Ethiopia. The usher who greeted me offered a headset so I could hear the simultaneous English interpretation.

The service was already well underway. The guitars were wailing, the crowd was singing, following the lyrics displayed on the oversized monitors. As the energy grew, the music got louder, the beat faster. Everyone was on their feet, swaying, pointing upwards. A few agitated souls made their way forward.

In front of the whole congregation, they were jumping and waving their arms frantically, yelling out in single syllables, faster and louder until they fell backwards into the arms of attendants. They were gently laid on the floor with a velvet pillow under their heads. Motionless for perhaps ten minutes, one by one they regained consciousness and quietly returned to their seats.

As the service slowly came to an end, we filed out of the sanctuary. I finally found my friend. It was suddenly almost quiet. People were polite. They visited with each other briefly, said their goodbyes and returned to what, I suspect, were their very normal lives. I, too, said goodbye to my colleague and drove home, trying to understand what had just happened.

It is easy to smile at the irony of Ethiopian Pentecostals worshipping in a former synagogue, easy to smirk at the frenzied movements and the carefully orchestrated swooning.

I had only been an observer. I hadn't jumped up and down. I hadn't reached up to Heaven. And I certainly had not been seized by the Spirit. And yet, something had happened to me. I can't explain it exactly. Something did change in me that morning.

That morning I realized we Christians all pray to the same God, ask the same Jesus for help and guidance, and feel the same Holy Spirit move in our lives. No matter how we express it – with a prayer book in our hands or our hands waving to touch the sky, we love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our mind. The same God of all.

And that brings me back to those stress-filled moments in the ER. Now when that anxious mother brings her feverish child to the ER, I understand what she really means by “smilin’ mighty Jesus.” It was Jesus who saved her child last year. It is a mighty Jesus who is smiling on that child even now and forever more.