

NAME

Listening through the laughs MP3.mp3

DATE

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DURATION

25m 46s

2 SPEAKERS

Speaker1

Speaker2

START OF TRANSCRIPT

[00:00:00] Speaker1

The following is a message from Wellsprings Congregation.

[00:00:17] Speaker2

So I have what you might call a firmly held set of beliefs and perspectives about music and movies and television shows, which means I am at perpetual risk of doing this. For those in the room, maybe online, a little quiz, what do you think I am saying with these two emojis? No one wants to go first, that's OK. No one wants to be wrong. I don't want to yuck someone else's Yum. Oh, can we get it, OK? And because I tend to have these strongly held opinions and perspectives about pop culture, about a lot of things that show up online, this is something I recognize I have to be very, very careful about. And I say that today to share an intention with you. I'm going to tell you something in just a moment about something that just popped up in my head. And the intention is not at all to yuck a yum of yours. All right. That's not even in the ballpark of the field of my intention here. Some of you know, the song, I think it's also by Nancy Griffith, but the really famous version is done by Bette Midler. Right? There we go. A young face right there. God is watching us from a distance. Many people love that song, and I have no desire to yuck it today. I don't particularly like the song, but I'm not going after it. What I noticed this past week in the middle of my own personal doomscrolling, which many of us do, and it was one story after another, after another, after another of human folly and failure and things not working out as we would have wished.

[00:02:30] Speaker2

And I couldn't quite in the moment, bring myself out of that spiral. The song came to mind, except in my head, it was not God is watching us from a distance. It was God is mocking us from a distance. And again, I'm not trying to make fun of the song, but it's what I felt in that moment with the kind of not yay. But oh. Just a sense of how challenging it can be right now to be alive. God is mocking us from a distance kind of plays into, in some ways, the Yiddish proverb that gives us the title of this current message series we plan. God laughs. There is I think, in these four words, a kind of worldview that is distinctly Jewish. It is a Yiddish proverb. Yiddish, which many of us know, but I don't want to assume that all of us do. Was the language of Ashkenazi, German, northern European Jews, many of them at least, and this is the people that I hail from. Yiddish, which has survived. Or did survive the Holocaust, although only barely. And by the way, an aunt of mine is the former associate editor, excuse me, associate director of the National Yiddish Book Center in Northampton, Massachusetts, which has a tremendous online display.

[00:04:18] Speaker2

Whether Yiddish is in culture and language something familiar to you or just something, now maybe you notice you're curious about it. You can go online and check out the National Yiddish Book Center and learn a whole bunch about the the culture, the humor of Yiddish speaking Judaism. This kind of aphorism. Kind of sense of a world weariness. We plan God laughs. Not, I think intentionally was that quote developed a kind of point to God's cruelty. But coming out of the centuries, the millennium of Jewish experience in which historically many things did not turn out well. We plan God laughs, be careful. Be careful of the plans we make because they may not happen. And in this message series saying that's not the end of the story plan intentionally. And also, let us all be aware that so many of us are right now that our plans may not turn out, they may backfire, in fact. And still, that does not leave us entirely vulnerable because in this series, we're also talking about the reality of covenant, the promises we make to and with each other, which are not primarily about outcomes. They represent about showing up with and for each other, even in the midst of when our plans fall through. I think the first place that I ever read that little four word sentence we plan God laughs was in this. I grew up with this book, perhaps some of the rest of you did as well to the big book of Jewish humor.

[00:06:05] Speaker2

I think it's still in print and I think it's been in print for the better part of half a century. It's where I read for the first time. I can't remember the author's name, but a book, a little book of humor and spiritual insight called Zen Judaism, which said if there is no self, then whose arthritis is this? And again, that's just one small little bit of Jewish humor. Now, I don't think there is anything called essential Jewish humor. I don't like boiling things down to an essentialism. It's reductive, and it misses the diversity of who we are as human beings. And there are some common regular themes that show up in Jewish humor, which is very common as we find in a lot of marginalized communities, which a lot of things that happened were beyond their hopes and their plans. And so you will very often see in Jewish humor. The kind of snarkiness sarcasm. Complaint, to be honest. There's another Yiddish proverb that goes, if God lived on Earth, people would break all of God's windows. There's this sense that we don't quite know what's going to happen. And again, from the underside, from people who historically have not had a lot of power, not had a lot of recourse for when plans go south and challenging, painful things happen, it kind of makes sense, right? Humor is a coping mechanism. That's the way and try and deal with the world that's so often really, really painful.

[00:07:54] Speaker2

And the truth is, there's another perspective on this quote that as we've been working into this message series so far, I really started to work with as almost a spiritual practice. We plan. God laughs, not intentionally sarcastically, not to yuck our human gums. But that underneath the sarcasm. A kind of rueful humor. Maybe, not, literally. But maybe what's meant here? Is that God is laughing nervously for us? Oh, don't don't plan too much, don't expect too much. So you don't know how it's going to turn out. Maybe that's a nervous laughter, given how tenuous our plans are in this life, not literal, but still in a deep emotional, psychological and spiritual way. Very, very truthful. In fact, there is a neuroscientist, a fellow named V.S. Ramachandran, who researches, from a neuroscientific perspective, scientific perspective, things like nervous laughter. And this is what his research has showed him. We have nervous laughter because we want to make ourselves think that what horrible things we have encountered or horrible things we have caused, that these aren't really as horrible as it appears. That maybe we do something with this nervous laughter, which for many of us is just unconscious, something we want and need to believe as a kind of release and resilience and resource. And so I want to share with you something I have never shared in the nearly now almost entire quarter century that I've been a preacher.

[00:09:55] Speaker2

It's not my mom died. You've been listening me preach for a while, it is essentially something I will touch on. It is in many ways the signature, one of the signature moments of my life, my mom dying Thanksgiving Day 1992 of not just a missed diagnosis, but a misdiagnosis, something that didn't have to kill her. I'm not going to go through the whole story, but I was the one at our apartment in New York City that made the call to 9-1-1. I was frantic, I was panicked. I was overwhelmed. There's a lot I can't remember about that night because it was so overwhelming, but I remember this well. I was trying to describe through sheer and utter terror what was happening. With my mom, when I was on the line with the dispatcher, I let out a chuckle. And I'm not going to spell it all the rest of these words, but you know what they mean. I look back on that for a long time. I did and said, WTF was that? Actually, a lot of shame around that. Until I started to recognize how common it is. How common nervous laughter is. When we're facing a pain or a chaos or some suffering that we may not think we have resources to be able to handle, because who expects at 22 years of age or any year of age their beloved parents or one of them to drop dead on Thanksgiving Day? I no longer hold any shame around that chuckle, inadvertent.

[00:11:36] Speaker2

It was my nervous system trying to deal with something I had no clue how to deal with. That's actually how I generally see sarcasm these days. Trying to deal as a resource for stress. It's also one of the reasons that I have been seeing, as many of us have been seeing a tremendous amount of sarcasm online these days. It's actually one of the reasons I have pulled back, one of the reasons I've pulled back from my own social media usage because while I believe sarcasm, especially when it's a shared joke, when it's an in-joke can be really powerful in bonding. It also can be profoundly cruel. It also can be deeply avoidant. It is, I believe, an overused skill and one that is not very skillful very often. No less than the brilliant vulnerability and courage, researcher Brené Brown posted this not too long ago. I won't read the end of it, but I'll just read the beginning sarcasm from the late Greek sarcasm. I'm going to go with that pronunciation. A little bit of self-deprecating humor. Remember, I grew up Jewish, meaning listen to this to tear flesh. Yes, you read that right? To tear flesh and then burn ass. Is sarcasm funny? A be unclear and unkind. See hurtful d confusing and potentially painful for children who have not mastered second order mental state reasoning. E All of the above, depending on context.

[00:13:18] Speaker2

And if it's masking, pain, anger or resentment, sarcasm holds and does an awful lot of work for us. And you can read the rest of the quote yourself. You can look it up online on Facebook. I'm sure she posted at other places and social media as well, too. She's asking for examples for, I guess, a book that she's working on. Atlas of the Heart. So the answer is sarcasm skillful? No, the question answer. Sometime. And perhaps too much. Some of you might know who John and Julie Gottman are. They are relationship researchers and therapists. There's a place called the Gottman Institute that they found it that is full with all kinds of really helpful techniques and cues and tips, not just for those of us who are mental health professionals, but for all of us who are in relationships and wanting to deepen those relationships and to recognize that there's a lot of potholes we can fall into in our relationships and a lot of patterns and habits we can have in our relationships that don't serve the health of those relationships. And yes, frequent sarcasm is one. These are what the Gottman called the four horsemen of relational distress, criticism, contempt, defensiveness and stonewalling. And I won't go into all of them. And by the way, there are antidotes to these four horsemen that the godman also say, there's hope here. Sarcasm, you take a look at those two figures up there and top right.

[00:15:03] Speaker2

Contempt. Couples or families or friends who might find themselves at regular pain or at odds with each other. And find that they turn to a kind of mockery of each other. So often, if we scratch the surface of the contempt or any of the other four horsemen. We've seen overwhelm. And the truth is, we see it in much more than families and relationships these days, we see it in the whole of our world, so tired. So many of us are by the pain regularly recurring by the trauma. It is so much. It feels like too much. Like I said, it is one of the reasons I have pulled back from my own usage of social media recently, even when the sarcasm comes from a perspective and point of view that I agree with. I find that it is simply too easy for me to be sarcastic. As a way to unskillfully when it's done over and over and over again, unskillfully deal with the pain in the overwhelm of this world. And again, remember, this message series is not just about hold our plans lightly, even if intentionally. It's about how we might find ourselves able more skillfully, effectively and lovingly able to respond. To. Those moments when our pains fall through and our plans fall through and we find we are in pain. Recently and listening to a podcast heard an interview with a fellow named Robert Fox. He's a mental health practitioner.

[00:16:56] Speaker2

And even more, he is someone who has struggled most of the decades of his life since he has been a child with obsessive compulsive disorder. Repetition of unwanted intrusive thoughts and actions meant to help dispel or move away from those thoughts or get rid of or manage those thoughts. And yet so often in OCD, there's this sense of spinning our wheels over and over and over and over again repetition. Robert Fox grew up with thoughts like these, he said his family was a part of a spiritual community growing up and at 10 years old, he would have thoughts such as. I just went to the bathroom to pee. Did I pee on the floor? And he would spend hours worrying about that. Do I need to go back to the synagogue in which you grow up and go clean up after myself? And his parents would say if you want to, but it's not that big a deal, it's not a big deal. His older brother, however. Had one repeated. Response to his younger brother, Robert's OCD. Sarcasm. Mocking him. Making jokes. And Robert's parents didn't really intercede. He looks back now with a tremendous amount of love for his parents. He said they're probably listening to the podcast. He thinks their intentions were basically good. They didn't intercede because they maybe thought, you know what? Maybe this will help Robert deal with bullies out in the outside world is going to be much harsher than his older brother.

[00:18:43] Speaker2

Looking back, he wishes they would have interceded. He didn't need toughening up. See, because all that sarcasm and you got the sense, this is a person, this is a human being who has done their work. And doesn't carry that shame anymore and is also learning to release and to forgive. But for years, he carried great shame. About all these things that were wrong with him. That was met by his older brother, sarcasm. When I heard this podcast story, I immediately brought me back to someone who years ago in ways I was too young and not developed yet enough to recognize that this was an elder. An elder man who had done his work to grow as a human being. I remember him because not literally was he Robert Fox's older brother? But he was an older brother. Whose younger sibling had OCD? And he had no idea how to deal with it. And he recognized that when his younger brother would have a thought, like, where did the basketball go? Did I swallow that basketball, a thought that people with OCD can have when objects just disappear? What did I do wrong? This elder from some years ago in my life would say, yeah, you did swallow the basketball. He would meet his younger brother's pain with sarcasm. But as I said. He was a person who grew up to do deep soul work. And years later, when they were both adults, he went back to his younger brother and said this.

[00:20:49] Speaker2

I found what you were experiencing odd and scary. And I had no idea how to deal with you. And we made a lot of jokes in our household, and so that's what I did. And I am so sorry. This was a conversation of tears and reconciliation and healing. This elder who I was not mature enough back then to recognize the depth of work he had done. But now do. Was recognizing that when things unexpected happen. This is the promise we can fall back into. To simply be honest. To be able to say. I don't know how to respond to your pain effectively. But I am sorry you are experiencing it. So this, I think, is the spiritual practice. And sarcasm. Nervous laughter or any form of playing defense when we experience plans falling through or pain too great that we don't know how to deal with. Those things which are going to happen. Good luck, by the way, suppressing them. They're just going to happen in our minds. That is an occasion, an invitation. Not to judge ourselves. But perhaps just to pause. To restrain ourselves with gentleness inwardly. And listen. How are we being pushed to our limits of how we know? To cope. With what we don't know. How to say I'm sorry or I'm sorry, you're in pain. And I don't know how to help. That is a moment for pausing within ourselves.

[00:23:01] Speaker2

We're asking what in me? In my overwhelm, in you, in all of us. Might need some tenderness. And some gentleness. This is a covenant that we can keep and make with our own pain. With our own overwhelm. And with the pain of others. By first asking. What in me needs tenderness? So that I might in time. Be able to respond in a healing way. To the pain of others around me. And so I'd ask all of us this morning. What in us? Is asking for tenderness. Where might we have reached the limits of our ability to cope? And to me to that place. With a deep love and kindness. And an ocean of compassion. And to see then if we might give our hurt, what that hurt needs. How we can that engage again in the world? In a way that could be truly healing. What in you today, my friends, is asking for tenderness. Amen. And may you live in blessing. You can ask if you would pray with me. A simple prayer. More an opening than a prayer. An invitation to look inside to what may be closing by way of sarcasm, defensiveness. And to meet ourselves at the place of that closing without judgment. But with wisdom and kindness. All of these instantaneous reactions. They can all be the gateway in the path. To our growth and development as human beings. If we pause long enough to recognize. Where is the Ouch? And what is the Ouch asking for?

[00:25:33] Speaker1

Amen. If you enjoyed this message and would like to support the mission of Wellsprings. Go to our web site WellspringsUU.org, that's wellsprings the letters u u dot ORG.

END OF TRANSCRIPT



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