

Punch line: Sermonic joke telling is a precarious business

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [August 9, 2003](#) issue

One of the ways to divide the human race, I have concluded, is between those who can tell a good joke and those who cannot. Some people are joke-telling experts. They have jokes filed away in their memory and can pull them out at just the right moment and reel them off with perfect inflection and timing. It's a life skill.

During a recent visit to my hometown I met up with Paul, whom I've known since junior high school days. He worked as a barber while in high school and college, and along the way became a world-class joke teller. People used to go to Paul for haircuts just to hear his latest jokes. After we greeted each other he said, as usual, "Have you heard the one about . . ." It's his relationship methodology. Over the years Paul has made a lot of people laugh—which is not a bad legacy.

Most of us can't do it—can't remember the jokes and can't tell them. So we listen and enjoy. Those of us who are preachers learn, or need to learn, how to use humor as a communications tool, an important and delicate matter.

As David Heim suggests in his article on jokes, sermonic joke telling is a precarious business. There is a fine line between the outrageous, which makes people laugh, and the inappropriate, which makes people embarrassed. Ethnic humor is humorous depending totally on who is telling the joke. And, of course, there are few more humiliating experience than telling a joke that no one finds funny.

I don't tell many jokes in sermons. What humor is there results from whimsy and inadvertence. I'm regularly surprised when people chuckle or laugh at material I didn't realize would be humorous. It's wonderful when that happens, and I suspect it is produced by the speaker's self-deprecation and identification with the hearers, not by an attempt to be funny.

Would Jesus laugh? Did Jesus laugh? Did he and his friends banter and tell stories and laugh at life's occasional absurdity and surprising beauty? I like to think so. He

was too human not to, and I keep thinking I see humor in a lot he said. That man trying to squeeze his camel through the eye of a needle, I suspect, was a hilarious picture to Jesus' hearers. And when the disciples woke him in the middle of a storm as their little boat was being swamped and he said, "Why are you afraid?" it was a comic moment worthy of Woody Allen.

And I love the fact that my theological/ecclesiastical family, for all its historic ponderousness and tedium, highlights "enjoyment" in the venerable first question and answer in the Westminster Shorter Catechism: "What is the chief end of human beings? To glorify God and enjoy him forever."