

*Matthew was not kind to the Pharisees of his time . . . but . . .*

Way back in the 1970's *Time* magazine said eighty percent of American comics were Jewish. I'm aware of other ethnic humorists – the Irish (like Jackie Gleason) are prominent among them and a long time ago German comics held their own on the vaudeville stage. But it's the Jewish comedians who have drawn my attention and affection and laughs over many decades. I think of the Marx Brothers, Jack Benny, Milton Berle, the inimitable Sid Caesar (I wept so often over his skits). Recently, during our evacuation to my son's house in San Francisco, he played an HBO disk on which Carl Reiner, Mel Brooks and several other Jewish humorists held a round table, remembering the funny things they used to do – which, given the circumstances of the Fire and my own health problems, brought outright laughter to our evening.

All humor has a common trait. It's like the joke begins on one plane of experience and leads you on until it hits you with a word or syllable or situation that lends itself absurdly to a double meaning. The intersect projects you onto another plane triggering a spontaneous laugh or at least a smile!

For instance: *A somewhat slow thinking fellow is sitting in a bar when a salesman comes in. The salesman sees an easy pick in the slow-witted fellow and says, "I'll bet you a dollar I can point out four doors in this room." The slow fellow looks around and sees only three, so takes on the bet. So the salesman begins, "Well there is the front door, there is the back door, there is the cellar door, and there is the cuspidor." Thrown off by the switch, the slow-witted fellow pays off. That joke has its sequel. The slow-witted fellow tries to pull that same joke on a new customer. The only problem is, he has no sense of humor. What he says (the punch line) is, "There is the front door, there is the back door, there is the cellar door, and there is the spittoon." No fourth door. Dumb!*

Jewish comics seem born with that knack of turning a line, a pivotal word or remark that makes us laugh – and people think Jews acquired such humor from centuries of persecution when there was this urge to upset normal ways of thinking, to maintain their identity by way of satire. I mean watch the Marx Brothers again, often making of *themselves* a joke as in Jack Benny's extreme of keeping all his money (with all the alarms and a guard besides!) in his cellar vault.

Given limited space, here's one: *After a performance a cantor, trying to impress his audience announces his voice was insured with Lloyds of London for one million dollars. A voice in the back of the room says, "So what did you do with the money?" Or a Frenchman, a German and a Jewish fellow walk into a bar. The Frenchman says, "I must have wine." The German says, "I must have beer." The Jewish fellow says, "I'm tired and thirsty; I must have diabetes."*

And finally: *A Jewish father was troubled by the way his son turned out. "Rabbi, I brought him up in the faith, expensive bar mitzvah, cost a fortune to educate him. And now he tells me he has decided to become a Christian." The rabbi stroked his beard and said, "Funny you should come to me. I, too, brought up my son as a boy of faith, sent*

*him to a university, cost me plenty and then one day he comes and tells me he wants to be a Christian.” “What did you do?” asked the man. “I turned to God for the answer.” “What did he say?” He said, “Funny that you should come to me . . .” To me, there is something about Jewish humor that is so . . .? Lovable!*