

*There's no getting out of it,  
God wants us all in the Heavenly Host!*

Chorus

*Plink and plank on golden harp-strings,  
Tune your harp to your heart's delight;  
Plink and plank, and dip just right;  
Don't turn 'round; Heaven's in plain sight!*

The hymn seems to make people laugh as they dance. I hope I've done Lesbia and the Shakers proud. I used to worry that I was just plain frivolous in my quest for silly hymns. "How dare you write something like that: a slap in the face to all the solemn and profound sacred music ever composed!" Fortunately, I can go back to my childhood memories of being a Sunbeam, and remember the pure joy in singing our theme song. I can also imagine all the souls in heaven singing hymns like this, joyfully, unrestrained, and smiling.

*Dave Hurlbert serves on the editorial board of God's Friends. As a member of St. Gregory's, he edits the parish newsletter, the Nyssa News, and helps coordinate coffee hour each Sunday. His profession is copywriting for advertising and marketing agencies.*

## I AM THY MERRY ALTAR (AND OTHER BROAD HINTS FROM GOD)

*By M. R. Ritley*

*"When Hungarians cry, you know they're having a good time.  
But when they start to laugh, look out! It means that things are really bad."*

— Old Hungarian saying

Actually, I'm not sure if that's really an old Hungarian saying or not. It might simply be another one of Aunt Szofi's axioms. Whatever, I learned the truth of it very early. People in my neighborhood—men and women alike—adored a good cry. It was a sociable thing, a downright luxury, like Uncle Zoli wanting to sing "Gloomy Sunday" whenever he'd had a little too much wine, or the old ladies in the neighborhood loving a good funeral, as long as it wasn't anyone too close to them. Even a real tearjerker of a movie would do in a pinch.

But laughter? Ah, that was what you summoned up when you couldn't afford tears because they were too dangerous.

I don't mean that we didn't laugh at other times, too. But given the number of problems, crises, and sheer calamities that seemed to make up life in the immigrant neighborhood I grew up in, what I really remember the most is the amount of time my family spent laughing. And there, I suppose, is where I learned my first great lesson about humor: it is the ultimate defense against the worst that life can do, the heart's headstrong and divinely mad assertion that tragedy cannot be allowed to have the final word.

I know sensible people who would call this whistling in the dark or mere denial. It does, however, beat the hell out of the grim solemnity that often masquerades as realism. Whatever else, Aunt Szofi had this one right: it works, which is why it persists in peasant humor. What was that great old Ashleigh Brilliant postcard? "I've given up searching for the truth. What I need now is a good fantasy." Well, there are moments when, if we are to survive, we have to set the grim facts aside and settle for a belly laugh.

I saw this in an Episcopal priest I knew, dying of AIDS and lying in the hospital on Palm Sunday, with what appeared to be just a few hours to live. He looked up at the rector of his parish and beckoned him close, almost too weak to speak. Prepared for a dramatic deathbed moment, the rector leaned forward, only to hear the whispered words: "It's okay. I know better than to die in Holy Week. If I did, you'd kill me." He lived for several more years.

The story was told to me by another dear friend, a parish priest whom I loved and admired. When he himself died last Good Friday, there was a thread of laughter under my tears: he would have loved the joke. His parish would have its biggest attendance of the year on the Sunday after his death!

*Humor plays a huge role in every aspect of my life, so why should my spirituality be any different? I tend to think of the things we laugh at—or rather, the things we laugh with—as avenues to help us connect with others' experiences, and thus helping us sense the universal in our own experiences. Also, humor is often noticing the unexpected, the break in the pattern—and this makes me think it's a very effective way for God to communicate with us."*

— Mary Kidwell

***Defeated by Laughter***

Most of us know in our bones that humor is a lifesaver at some of the worst moments of our lives. But most of us are also suspicious of and embarrassed by our spontaneous flashes of humor. We do, after all, use the expression “overcome with laughter,” as if giving in to the giggles were a defeat. Yes, well, laughter may be the defeat of *something*, but as often as it has made my name a hissing and a byword in polite company, I owe too much to the gift of humor to be anything but grateful, even when its appearance is decidedly inconvenient.

When I think of solemn funerals, for instance, my mind immediately leaps to the exquisite agony of mirth that shook the entire funeral party when something went wrong with the winch lowering my friend Rich’s casket into the grave, so that as the head of the coffin sank, the foot rose majestically until it was standing straight up in the air, the wreath of roses twined around it at a drunken angle. No one dared laugh, but one look at the faces at the graveside told the story: the handkerchiefs lifted to cover the mourners’ faces were in fact being stuffed into their mouths to keep them from whooping aloud. Afterwards, Rich’s brother said to me, “If I didn’t believe in an afterlife before, I’d have to now. Nobody but Rich could have dreamed that one up. He always tried to break me up in church when we were kids.” How very *alive* Rich’s spirit seemed at that moment!

In case you are still skeptical about the rightness of humor in the face of indigestible fact, let me point out that it has a long history in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim (at least Sufi) history. Read the dialogue over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18:20–33), as Abraham haggles with God as if he were making a hot deal in used camels. Better yet, read Jesus’ parables with attention. His hearers undoubtedly had a good chuckle over the unjust judge who was finally browbeaten into giving an honest verdict because a determined old woman was nagging him to death (Luke 18:1–8), or the slick-as-snake-oil steward who knows all about calling in markers (Luke 16:1–9). Over and over again, Jesus stands accepted wisdom on its head, subverts the narrow piety of conventional religion, and in the process breaks open the prison walls.

Subversion, in fact, is one of the most divine roles that humor plays, poking holes in our sacred balloons and liberating us into the freedom of laughter. This is something that most minorities learn thoroughly: it delivers us from the sense of helplessness in the face of irrational power. It helps us see that we are not as hopeless or as helpless as we are told we are, and that those who are trying to hold the upper hand over us are far more ridiculous than they imagine.

As a gay woman who came out some 40 years ago, I learned this lesson well. Camp humor may have begun as a defense, a way of removing the sting of feeling helpless and despised, but it can become a powerful source of self-definition, a weapon against the very people who hate or scorn us. The gay-as-your-Aunt-Nellie acolyte in a high church parish receives your compliment on his new surplice with a breezy, “Darling, this isn’t a surplice—it’s a statement.”

Straight folks—even some gay ones—may hear camp humor with distaste, but its over-the-top quality has kept some of us healthy in the face of hatred, and being able to laugh is halfway to being able to love. And our love makes us who we are.

***God’s Frozen People***

Nowhere can God’s sense of humor be more visible than in church. There is an antic spirit that lurks at the heart of solemn church occasions, at least a good many that I have been part of. In my acolyte days, just when a solemn high mass was unfolding smoothly around the altar, I would stumble, drop-kicking the sanctus bells across the sanctuary. Liturgically speaking, “Oops!” is not a terrific option. You quickly learn that the only thing possible is to continue with extra grace and deliberation. With luck, at least some of the congregation will think it was intentional, since they find most church customs inexplicable anyway.

I learned this quite early on, at a Christmas Eve service in Los Angeles when the bishop was presiding. Communion had been served, the altar cleared, and the choir was humming “Silent Night” softly in the background, while the congregation’s hand-candles were glowing in the magical near-darkness. Unfortunately, an unwary worshiper leaned his candle too close to his neighbor’s hair, which began to singe. Just as the bishop raised his hand magisterially to bestow his blessing on us, shrieks erupted from the back of the church.

I am told that all of us in the sanctuary simply froze in a dignified poses, benign little smiles on our faces. The bishop paused gracefully, hand uplifted, his expression saying, “Ah, yes, that delightful old Anglican custom of rolling a flaming parishioner down the aisle.” An usher smothered the sparks, and the bishop simply continued making the sign of the cross without missing a beat.



*Monks, by Jonathan Burstein, 2002. Oil on canvas.*

I am not exaggerating. Most of us have seen something agonizingly funny at the precise moment when we know we shouldn't laugh: an unwary priest walks slowly up the trailing stole of the person in front of him in the procession, a frustrated presider wrestles grimly with an unexpectedly tough communion loaf, a neighborhood cat suddenly peeks out from under the altar cloth and starts batting at its fringe. Personally, I have always suspected that the only one laughing uninhibitedly at those moments is God, who doesn't have to impress anyone by being solemn. Or more likely, God has a mad hope that somehow we can be got to, that our facades can be cracked, that our armor will shiver and fall crashing to the floor, while we roll around in merriment, unable to stifle our guffaws. God's frozen people may actually melt into human beings one day.

God can hope, of course. And in the meantime, God endows the human spirit with an irresistible penchant to snicker at the "wrong" times. What most of us have learned to deplore about our irrepressible laughter is not, in fact, a flaw, but a gift, right up there with altruism, love, and intuition.

That is what I have begun to understand, however late in the game. Humor is a calling, if you like—or perhaps, humor calls us, and God gives us the grace to answer.

I no longer struggle to suppress my humor on religious occasions. If something funny occurs to me during a sermon, I say it. I will admit that funny things occur to me with deplorable regularity. It is the risk you run when you have spent a lifetime trying to make your heart vulnerable to anything as painful and as glorious as God's world: along with the depth of feeling comes the depth of what I have learned to call the laughter of God.

During St. Gregory's Easter vigil, when a dozen or so people bestow spontaneous blessings on the celebrating congregation, I invariably use the blessing closest to my heart: "May the God of all fools and lovers fill your life with the laughter of God."

Yes, I will tell stories about Hashad the Fool and make outrageous one-liners in Sunday sermons. I have no reason to think that God will be offended, and I know this full well: if you can make people laugh, you can reach their hearts and make them hear.

I had the privilege of meeting Desmond Tutu twice; what I will always recall most indelibly are his eyes, brimful of good humor, overflowing with life. A man who had seen so much suffering and whose eyes positively twinkled with laughter? "I know how it is," he said. "You think, 'All I can do is pray, and I am hating this like hell, but all right, God, I'll pray even if I feel like a fool.' And because you do this foolish thing, someone comes out of prison, even torture, without bitterness."

Desmond Tutu, Mahatma Gandhi, Teresa of Avila: all people who have lived out God's compassion in the world, and all of whom knew how to laugh. I don't know if God made me a saint-in-training, but I do know this: God made me *funny*. As a gift, I'll take it!

### ***I Am Thy Merry Altar***

All this brings me to one of life's most delicious jokes, which I think has delighted both God and me. It is my name, which of course God did not give me; my parents did. Not knowing who I would grow up to be, they failed to name me M. R. when I was baptized, and saddled me with the almost embarrassingly biblical name of Mary Martha Ritley (M. R. is simply the initials of my first and last names).

But it gets better. Not long ago, in one of my free-form excursions on the Internet, I came across a website that created anagrams. Just for the hell of it, I typed in *Mary Martha Ritley*. And what anagram came back? Sheer gorgeous Godly humor: *I Am Thy Merry Altar*.

Dear God, I love it! I laughed until I had to lean my head on the keyboard, accidentally inserting a string of about 500 r's in the search field, which flummoxed the anagram engine so thoroughly that I had to reboot.

What a name for a priest, I thought. What a perfect way of saying what God has been chuckling about for years. Yes, I am God's merry altar, a place in which the sacrament of laughter has been celebrated at holy moments and ungodly hours; a life in which I have tried to lift up the laughter of God for people to see, to break open the bread of humor to nourish the heart. Like Sarah, "God has made me laugh." And I do. And I will. Or rather, we will laugh together.

I am thy merry altar, God, and you are the laughter that is celebrated on it.

*The Rev. Dr. M. R. Ritley is a writer, teacher, storyteller, Episcopal priest, and the author of many published works, including experimental textbooks in history and the social sciences, gay spirituality, and creativity. Her own journey has included being a chaplain to the mentally ill, a counselor to dropout youth, and an itinerant teacher of Sufi spirituality. She served at St. Gregory's for more than ten years and is currently associated with Good Shepherd Episcopal Church, Berkeley.*



*Smiles, by Jonathan Burstein, 2003. Oil on canvas.*

There is an antic spirit that lurks at the heart of solemn church occasions, at least a good many that I have been part of. In my acolyte days, just when a solemn high mass was unfolding smoothly around the altar, I would stumble, drop-kicking the sanctus bells across the sanctuary. Liturgically speaking, "Oops!" is not a terrific option.

*One of my mantras is:  
“Jesus warn’t no prissy boy.”  
It appeals to my off-the-wall  
sense of humor, and it  
reminds me both that he  
likes off-the-wall people like  
me and that I don’t have to  
be “nice” for him.  
— Lynn Park*

## **JESUS, THAT’S NOT FUNNY!** *Continued from page 7*

[C]omedy pushes hardest at its boundaries... where such terror is most audaciously evoked. And perhaps at those boundaries comedy is most powerful, because it doesn’t pretend that the risks are small or that the terror is a silly mistake ... [because] comedy intimates finally that the uncontrollable environment can be the source of deliverance as much as of damnation....

“Deliverance as much as damnation”: how’s that for an ambiguity to make a fundamentalist scream? And no, the risks aren’t small; look at the ones Jesus took.

I]f it damns us ... in dramatic terms, [it is] because we choose the distinctive hell of placing our own wills at the centre of things.... Comedy is thus deeply inimical to fascism—though it is also deeply inimical to most kinds of planned reform....

Again we return to Jesus: a popular, storytelling teacher caught between the primordial fascism of the Roman Empire and the planned reform of the rabbinic Pharisees.

### ***Literalism’s Unkindest Cut***

Religious fundamentalists, like Williams’s fascists, mistrust irreverence. Humor can’t resist it. Under the banner of literalism, fundamentalists want to make absolutely certain that people ask the right questions and want each question to have one and only one correct answer. But the knowledge of God grows by allusion and metaphor, not literal certainties, just as our language grows. And knowledge of God—like language itself—may contain such wildness of meaning that even the clearest assertion, with a tiny shift of tone, can imply its own contradiction. So when humor resists a one-to-one, word-to-meaning correspondence, it is imitating life. And when humor reigns, literalism always feels mocked.

Life is full of traps for literalism. One emerges in a Buddhist story dramatizing the teaching that “doctrine is only a finger pointing at the moon.” I confess that the first time I heard this, I found it appalling, because respectful interreligious literalism had snagged me. I had a near-perfect “That’s not funny” experience because I was treating the story with reverence.

A teacher pointed his finger at the moon and asked his student, “What did I just do?” The enlightened answer the teacher hoped to hear, of course, was, “You’ve pointed your finger at the moon.” Had the student given the “right” answer, the teacher could have asked, “But is it the moon?” and both would have enjoyed getting it right.

What the student did, however, was take the teacher’s pointing pose, imitating gesture for gesture everything the teacher had done. Literally. So the brilliant (or exasperated?) teacher picked up a sword and whacked off the student’s finger.

I first heard this story as a neutral (humorless) narrative of radical teaching, and my first thought was that the teacher, whom we were apparently supposed to admire, was unimaginably cruel. And I wondered whether the student had bled to death.

Once I quit wondering how a good teacher could do such harm to his student, I could begin to watch the story work. I considered that Buddhists with missing index fingers are rare. Eventually I noticed the student’s brilliant move beyond language. Then I began to wonder at teachers who know exactly what they want to hear. And I’ve empathized with teachers seeking desperate means to get students or other listeners beyond their canny efforts to second-guess the right answer.

Why did I insist on being such a pious literalist in someone else’s tradition? What stopped me from hearing this as an outrageous, over-the-top teaching story? Just like the teacher, I fell into the trap of doctrine. So this frightening old Buddhist lesson offers enlightenment and joy—if we’ll take it for what it is: an absurd, sympathetic story about a teacher who, trying to free his student from literalism, reveals himself as the one more caught in doctrinal tyranny. I got stuck on the event and the imagined cruelty of the teacher, but both blocks were my own creation. Piety and literalism are bent arthritic fingers pointing at the moon and not even pointing straight. Perhaps they are unconscious strategies to protect us from the disorientation of actual learning.

The teacher we’re actually listening to isn’t someone with a sword in his hand—that sword-bearer is just a finger pointing at the moon. The teacher is the storyteller. Now when I hear that story, my fingers tingle with life and with gratitude that the storyteller lets me see how far short of the moon I am. I’m glad for my fingers but also do hear that they can point to the moon, not reach it.

### ***Jesus’ Finger, Jesus’ Sword***

In the Gospels, Jesus the teacher, like the Buddhist storyteller, defies expectations again and again. Sometimes he’s even the butt of his own jokes—as when he curses a fig tree for not bearing fruit. His disciples have to tell him (their teacher, who told them, “You know how to read the seasons”) that it’s not the season for figs. But more often his actions and parables in the Gospels are calculated



*Munificent, by Jonathan Burstein, 2002. Oil and acrylic on board. The title of this piece puns on the name of San Francisco's public transit system, Muni.*

to produce wide-eyed gasps and nervous laughter—or even, if we'll go the whole way with him, startled, amazed, delighted laughter.

“If your eye offend you, pluck it out!” This saying of Jesus’ is the cryptic source of a very wise joke: “Never trust a two-eyed fundamentalist.” Literalists see plenty to take offense at, but this particular saying, they assure us, is metaphorical. In the joke, however, humor’s keen nose has caught the rotting whiff of Literalist Authority proclaiming just which parts of our texts are literal and *which are not*. Humor can’t pass up those embarrassing moments when literalism applies its principles and values selectively. Humorless inconsistency is the work of a comedic straight man, and humor will playfully deliver the punch line, stripping away the dishonesty.

“If your eye offend you, pluck it out!” No matter how much scholarly criticism we bring to bear, we seem intent on explaining why Jesus actually would want to put out the eye and why that’s best for all concerned. Even metaphorically it feels wrong: so we’re to put our eye out only figuratively? I think Jesus is pointing to something quite different from either the usual literal or metaphorical interpretations.

Sooner or later, aren’t we all offended by something we see? Whose eyes are never drawn to voyeurism, lurid curiosity, or satisfied witness of the sufferings of others? So what are we supposed to do with our offense: close our wicked eyes?

Metaphor tries to spiritualize the irony of the saying: “Jesus is just using a harsh image to warn us that we should cut ourselves off from all offensive seeing.” Is Jesus so inept a preacher as to provide this gut-wrenching image just so we can explain it away? Isn’t the saying rhetorically and pedagogically better as an ironic warning against our foolish efforts to insulate ourselves, to retreat into a bubble of dishonest piety from the inevitable offense of life?

If we imagine Jesus delivering the words with a wicked grin, suddenly they stop the mind. Perhaps we recall that our teacher Jesus also taught, “Judge not.” Maybe we remember that he lamented so many taking offense in him. Could he be suggesting that pretensions of spiritual purity are what’s really offensive? Can we live gratefully without the anxious struggle to be spiritual? Could we see just let our eyes see life as they fall on it? Maybe what we are literally to “pluck out” is our impatient eagerness to take offense.

With so many hints that Jesus’ humor and daring playfulness shapes his stories and actions, I began to imagine the actor Roberto Benigni delivering various lines in the Gospels in the manically joyful way he plays the condemned Jew in the film *Life Is Beautiful*. He faces the fascist powers in a death camp and, by playing the clowning idiot, saves his son’s life. Humor doesn’t mean that nothing’s at stake. Imagining Benigni in the role of Jesus brought to life in a new way Jesus’ feasts with sinners and his “cleansing” of the Temple. I loved the idea of watching Benigni/Jesus overturn the tables of money and set the animals loose. Even with life-and-death stakes, Jesus needn’t be an angry pedant. We can read him as a real teacher, taking us places with laughter where we’d otherwise be afraid to go.

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***The Teachable Moment Hangs by a Thread***

Here's an old story about St. Hugh of Lincoln, a great English saint (whom we need to imagine speaking with a French accent, because he grew up in France).



*Nuts, by Jonathan Burstein, 2002. Oil on canvas.*

As penance for Henry II's complicity in the murder of Archbishop Thomas à Becket, the Pope ordered the king to build and endow a new Carthusian monastery. To see that the job was done right, a monk named Hugh was sent from La Grande Chartreuse to be abbot. Hugh was known for his austerity, integrity, intelligence, and total lack of interest in rank or advancement. He took the assignment in England because his own abbot had orders from Rome and insisted.

When King Henry met Hugh, he was relieved to learn that the latter had a droll, iconoclastic wit. Henry saw immediately that Hugh wouldn't flatter him, and they struck up a friendship, which, along with Hugh's wit, misled the king into thinking he was dealing with a worldly pragmatist like himself.

Henry got a nasty surprise when he proudly escorted the monk to the pledged site of the new monastery. Hugh didn't seem as pleased with progress as the king had hoped. What he saw was royal soldiers dragging peasants from their huts so royal demolition workers could level everything. Back at court, Hugh explained to the king (in front of all the nobles) that building a monastery on land the king had legally and forcibly "reclaimed" from those squatting peasants was no penance at all. Then Hugh announced that he would select a suitable piece of royal land for the new, better village the king would build for the displaced peasants.

Enraged, the king told Hugh he would do no such thing. Hugh replied quietly that if the king didn't comply, he'd stop the monastery construction and return to La Grande Chartreuse, dispatching a messenger to Rome with news of how the king had tried to lay his penance on the backs of the poor. Then he turned his back on the king and walked out of court.

"Don't think you can leave here like that," Henry shouted. "I'm ordering you out of my presence. You are banished from court."

Henry was in a state. He couldn't give in to this monk, but he feared anything that could lead to another debacle with Rome. Briefly he tried a waiting game, but Hugh had trumped him, so the king grandly announced that he was rescinding the banishment and ordering Hugh to appear.

The nobles liked Hugh and knew they could trust him—a luxury in the dangerous intrigue of court life. They particularly liked it that Hugh could make the king laugh. So they were ready to stand and greet him at his return.

When Hugh was announced, Henry didn't even look up. He sat on his throne, intently mending a hunting glove. Anxiously the nobles watched Hugh walk the length of the great room through deathly silence. No one dared even offer him an acknowledgment. Hugh walked straight up to the king and stood there. Henry continued to stitch the glove. Finally Hugh turned so that all could hear and in his clear, strong, preaching voice said, "I see that in my absence Your Majesty has returned to family trade of the Bastard of Falaise?"

William the Conqueror, Henry's ancestor, was known in France as William the Bastard, because *his* father, the Duke of Normandy, had sired his famous offspring on a common glove maker whom he never married. By paying exaggerated attention to work his huntsman should have done for him, Henry meant to put Hugh in his place. But Hugh countered with that harsh French word for the king's lineage.

How would the king respond to this insult? Had Hugh forgotten that the king's anger could turn deadly? Tension deepened as the silence wore on. Then in an explosion of energy, Henry threw aside the glove, leaped to his feet, and to everyone's relief (probably including his own) threw his arms around Hugh and shouted, "I've missed you, Hugh. Are you ready to oversee the

building of your monastery and the new village?" A generation later, people still told the story and recalled how no one at court could stop laughing.

### ***Humor and the Teacher***

Hugh showed the courage of a great teacher. Like Jesus at the temple and with his subversive feasts, he was risking his life to do it. Henry's other friend and priest, Thomas Becket, had made the king laugh too—and when Becket had stood up to him, Henry had him killed.

Clearly, Hugh saw teaching as the work he'd been sent to do—teaching a self-indulgent, spoiled king and his nobles to practice justice and compassion for the poor, teaching the king to keep his word, guiding a monarch from vanity to genuine honor.

And Hugh the teacher brings us to the real question—which is not whether there's humor in the Bible. The Bible is a teaching book written by and about teachers. How could anyone ever have imagined it was devoid of humor? Have you ever known a really great teacher with no sense of humor, no ability to laugh at her/himself, no willingness to use humor to take people where serious discourse wouldn't take them? When we think of the teachers we have loved, their particular sense of humor comes to mind quickly. Some great teachers are known for gentle, self-deprecating humor. Some use it to puncture pomposity and cant, some to shake loose their students' thinking.

Hugh's dangerous joke reminded the king, the court, and all of us hearing it eight hundred years later of our ordinary, shared humanity. It made solidarity with other people where pride and personal interest were denying them that solidarity. The only thing riskier than telling such a joke might be turning away from humor. So the real question is: with so much at stake—life, death, salvation itself—is there any salvation without laughter?

*Donald Schell is rector at St. Gregory's Church and the author of (with Maria Schell) My Father, My Daughter: Pilgrims on the Road to Santiago. His essay "Rending the Veil" (about his experience coordinating the design and construction of St. Gregory's, which won the AIA award for Best Religious Building of the Year in 1996) was published in Searching for Sacred Space, Essays on Architecture and Liturgical Design in the Episcopal Church. Donald is also an Aikido black belt and teacher.*

FORGIVE, O LORD,  
THE LITTLE JOKES  
I PLAY ON THEE,  
AND I'LL FORGIVE  
THE GREAT BIG  
ONE YOU PLAYED  
ON ME.

— Robert Frost  
(with thanks to  
John Golenski)

**GREGORY OF NYSSA**, a fourth-century bishop, theologian, and patron of St. Gregory's Church, saw life as unending progress towards discovering God at work among humanity, and sin as refusal to keep growing in this discovery. In this journal, which takes its name from his writings, we aim to further Gregory's vision by featuring two kinds of work:

⊕ essays on liturgy and church practice, focusing on fresh and ancient approaches to corporate worship that honor human experience as an opening to God;

⊕ writing and art by people who are searching for truth in their lives.

We are committed to the sharing of authentic personal experience as opposed to ideas or opinions. We welcome the voices of Christians, people of other faiths, and people of no particular faith.

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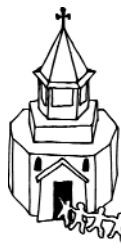
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**T**his is true perfection: not to avoid a wicked life because we fear punishment, like slaves; not to do good because we expect repayment, as if cashing in on the virtuous life by enforcing some business deal. On the contrary, disregarding all those good things which we do hope for and which God has promised us, we regard falling from God's friendship as the only thing dreadful, and we consider becoming God's friend the only thing truly worthwhile.

GREGORY OF NYSSA



*"Did I miss something?"*



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