



## PROGRAM TRANSCRIPT

**Program #5123**  
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### WELCOME

**Daniel Pawlus:** Welcome to “30 Good Minutes!” We’re glad you’ve joined us for this half-hour of reflection on faith. I’m Daniel Pawlus.

**Lillian Daniel:** And I’m Lillian Daniel. Our guest today is the Rev. Susan Sparks. She has the distinction of being the only minister in America who began her career as a trial lawyer and, while she was in seminary, moonlighted as a stand-up comic. Susan is the pastor of Madison Avenue Baptist Church in New York City. She’s going to talk to us about the connection between learning to laugh and learning to forgive.

**Daniel Pawlus:** We also welcome back writer, Tom McGrath, with a few thoughts about what it means to let go of our resentments, so we can open our hearts to forgive.

**Lillian Daniel:** And we begin with the story of a woman whose simple daily ritual helps her to focus on the goodness of God. It’s a practice that has become an essential part of Denise Roy’s spiritual journey. Let’s watch.

### SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

**Denise Roy:** I go to my kitchen sink and there is a bowl that’s turned upside down. And I take the bowl and I hold it in my hands. I hold the bowl under the water and let it slowly fill the bowl. And as it’s filling I name my children, I name my husband, remember my friends. I give thanks for the fact that I live in a house. I remember all of my weaknesses, aches and pains, my strengths, the gifts, all that life is bringing me this particular day. I don’t know what it’s going to be but I receive all that life brings. And it’s really wonderful to be in the kitchen later in the day fixing lunch or dinner and to look over and to remember, ah yes, ah yes, I received all that life is going to bring today.

I did this ritual on the morning of September 11<sup>th</sup>. I’ve learned that it’s not just receiving the good stuff. It’s receiving the good stuff and the messy stuff and the really hard stuff. And as we can practice that receiving it all, whatever life brings, then it makes us much more flexible and able to move through life with grace. I like to think of ritual as a sacred pause where we do connect at that deep level and I think these rituals really, if we can consciously build them into our life, will help us remember who we are.

At the end of the day I will take the bowl and the last thing before bed maybe water a plant with

the water. Sometimes just pour it down the sink and let it go and then leave the bowl upside down until the next morning.

## INTRODUCTION

**Daniel Pawlus:** Denise Roy is a spiritual director and the author of a book called, “Momfulness: Mothering with Mindfulness, Compassion and Grace.” For more information, you can go to our web site at [30goodminutes.org](http://30goodminutes.org).

Now, let me tell you about today’s speaker. After law school at Wake Forest University, Susan Sparks embarked on a ten-year career as a trial lawyer before leaving the courtroom to travel the world. She climbed Mount Kilimanjaro and volunteered with Mother Teresa’s mission in Calcutta while discovering a call to ordained ministry, putting herself through seminary by moonlighting as a stand-up comedian. As she admits, it might not be a normal career path, but it prepared her to become pastor of Madison Avenue Baptist Church in New York City, where she is the first woman to serve in the church’s 160 year history. Susan is a well known motivational speaker specializing in the healing power of humor. It’s such a delight to have her with us today on “30 Good Minutes.” Welcome, Susan.

## MESSAGE

**Susan Sparks:** Thank you, Daniel. I’m honored to be here.

You should know up front, that I am an ex-lawyer, turned standup comedian and now Baptist minister. It’s ok, you can laugh. It is a pretty strange combination I admit. I like to think of it as following your dream. Others have considered it a personality disorder. Whatever you consider it, though, it’s my ministry—but it wasn’t easy getting here. Like getting through seminary for example. The professors I had were definitely not prepared to teach theology to a comedian. And they sure weren’t ready to teach Hebrew to a southerner. *Baruk Atah Adonai, y’all*.

But as strange as some people might have thought the combination of humor and religion was, I knew deep down that there was a powerful connection between the two. In fact, I always said you could laugh your way to grace. And you know what? I was right.

Over the years, working as a minister and a comedian, I have discovered something quite amazing: if you can laugh at yourself, you can forgive yourself. And if you can forgive yourself, you can forgive others. And isn’t that what grace is all about? A capacity to forgive?

Let’s just take a minute and look at each of these statements. First, if you can laugh at yourself, you can forgive yourself. I think one of the biggest problems we all face is keeping perspective. We carry thirty-seven page to-do lists and then beat ourselves up when at the end of the day, there is not a little check by every single item. We spend our lives trying to manage and control and accomplish everything. We create outrageous expectations for ourselves, expectations of who we should be, who we must be. Well, I’ve got news for us. It doesn’t matter how many checks are on the to-do list. It doesn’t matter how efficient, or accomplished or important we have all become. In the end, we are all just human.

There is a story about the Archbishop of Canterbury taking a train trip out of London. When he

boarded the train, he didn't realize that he had boarded a car that was also transporting a number of mental health patients from a local hospital. As the train pulled out, a hospital attendant entered the car and began to take a head count. "One, two..." He got to the Bishop and said "Who are you?" He said, "Well, I'm the Archbishop of Canterbury." "Ah hun, right. Three, four, five..."

In the end we are all just human. And when we think about our crazy efforts to feel in control, and accomplished, and make everything just perfect, it's actually kind of funny. I mean, look, it doesn't matter how much control, or money, or accomplishments we may achieve in this lifetime, the bottom line is this: the size of our funeral will always depend solely on the weather that day. Think about it. And the moment we realize that, the moment we can step back and laugh at all our crazy expectations and our need to make everything perfect, that's the moment we begin to find forgiveness for ourselves.

If you can laugh at yourself, you can forgive yourself. And if you can forgive *yourself*, you can forgive others. Jesus, like many other world religious traditions, taught that we should love our neighbor. Remember the story in Luke? A lawyer questions Jesus (of course, it has to be a lawyer that has to be the pain!) and asks "Lord, what do I have to do to receive eternal life?" Jesus, with his wonderful sense of humor, basically says, "Um, it's written in the law. You're a lawyer. You tell me." And the lawyer thinks and then says this: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself."

It's a deceptively simple formula. Love your neighbor as yourself. Or as W.H. Auden put it "Love your crooked neighbor, with your own crooked heart." However you say it, doing it is not always that easy. Love your neighbor? What if your neighbor is a telemarketer! I mean, it's a hard commandment. But, you know, it really shouldn't be, for telemarketer or not, in the end we really aren't that different from one another.

One of the great accomplishments of this century is the mapping of the human gene. And you know what scientists found in this discovery? We are all 99.9% the same. Doesn't matter what our religion is; doesn't matter what the skin color is; doesn't matter what our ethnic origin is, we're 99.9% genetically the same. Which means all our warfare, and killing, and cruelty, and inhumanity, is about that .01% difference. Yet, we just can't let go, we can't forgive, that .01%. The Buddhist teacher and author Jack Kornfield once offered a story about two ex-prisoners of war. One asks the other, "Have you forgiven your captors yet?" The other POW answers "No, never." The first POW thinks for a minute and then says, "Well, it seems they still have you in prison, don't they?"

For some reason, we'd rather stay prisoners of our inability to forgive. For some reason, rather than letting it go, we'd rather drag all that heavy, unnecessary baggage with us. Like my Dad who used to carry all this unnecessary extra stuff in the trunk of his car. He had emergency flashers, and chains and snow tires and blankets and food 'cause just might hit a blizzard. A blizzard in the .7 mile drive from his office to our home; our home in Charlotte, North Carolina!

It is very hard for us to let go of that .01%. Yet, one of the things that will loosen our grip the

fastest is laughter. When we laugh with someone, whether it is a friend, a stranger or an enemy, our worlds overlap for a tiny, but significant moment. And its then we begin to see through that .01% to the 99.9% that we have in common.

A good friend of mine is a standup Rabbi. Don't you love it? And after 9/11, he went on the road with a standup Islamic comedian—to synagogues, and mosques, and churches, and college campuses – to open an interfaith dialogue through humor. I had the privilege of appearing in some of their shows. I was the Christian chick! And it was amazing to watch, for through humor, they were able to talk about things—deal with things— that no one else could. I remember Ahmed on a stage in a synagogue up in Connecticut. When he got up there was a tense nature to the audience and no one was just what he was going to say. He got the mike and said, “You know I don't get this thing about giving yourself two hours to get through airport security. Last time it took me a month and a half!” Everyone laughed and the tenor of the meeting changed. The author Peggy Noonan said “We all weep in the same language.” Well, I'm here to tell you, we all laugh in the same language, too.

If you can laugh at yourself, you can forgive yourself. And if you can forgive yourself, then you can forgive others. And its not just “other people” that we need to forgive. Sometimes we need to forgive God. There are times in this life where we get hit with things—cancer, the death of a loved one, a divorce—things that can bring us to our knees, things for which we sometimes blame God. But, as Rev. Calvin Butts, pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church, said, “The will of God is never seen in tragedies. The will of God is seen in our response to tragedy.”

I lost my Dad a few years ago. And I remember sitting with him in one of his final days. He was in a lot of pain and in and out of consciousness. Well, in and out of consciousness at least until the new nurse came in. She was about, seven-years-old? Looked kinda like a Dallas Cowboys cheerleader. All of a sudden, my Dad sits up. Starts smiling. Fixing his hair. It's like it's a miracle! (Did I mention he was 90? I don't know if I did.) She then says to him, “Mr. Sparks, I am here to check your catheter.” I immediately got up to allow them some privacy, and as I was walking out of the room, I heard my dad exclaim in a heavy southern accent, “Well, honey, you just make yourself to home!” We all began to laugh hysterically and then the energy was transformed.

Like my Dad, in any place of tragedy, we have two choices. We can sit in a place of blame and anger, refusing to forgive God and everyone else. Or we can transcend that place and live our highest calling, that of joy.

Laughter is the tool that brings us perspective and self-forgiveness. Laughter is the tool that allows us to break through our differences and see the common bonds that join us as brothers and sisters. Most of all, laughter is the tool that enables us to transcend suffering.

The philosopher Albert Camus said, “In the depths of winter, I finally learned that there was within me an invincible summer.” We have all been given that holy gift of an invincible summer. It is the gift of joy. To choose joy over blame is one of the most courageous of all human acts. But you know, it is also one of the easiest. For it requires only one simple act: laughing your way to grace. Amen.

## CONVERSATION

**Lillian Daniel:** If you'd like a free printed transcript or audio copy of the message you just heard from Susan Sparks, stay with us and we'll tell you how to place an order at the end of the program. Or you can visit our website at [30goodminutes.org](http://30goodminutes.org) to watch the video or download the text anytime.

Now, let's talk with Susan Sparks. Susan, I've been waiting my whole life to find the right person to ask this question to.

**Susan Sparks:** Oh, no! I'm scared!

**Lillian Daniel:** Get ready for it! Why are all the best jokes beginning with "a priest, a minister and a rabbi"? Why are those the best jokes?

**Susan Sparks:** I think because no one expects a priest, a minister or a rabbi to have a sense of humor. And so that's to me the joy of being able to do humor in the pulpit. People don't expect it. You get up and they expect some kind of sin and harsh fire and brimstone. If I get up and say something funny, people are just like, "What do you do with that? That's blasphemous! That's sacrilegious!"

**Lillian Daniel:** That's a dog walking on its hind legs!

**Susan Sparks:** Yeah!

**Daniel Pawlus:** That's why I wanted to ask you, can you give us some specific examples of how you use humor in your speaking engagements, from the pulpit? I'd really like to know. You must get some wonderful reactions, as you just mentioned from you congregation and so forth.

**Susan Sparks:** Sure. Well, I have a lot of fun with the sermons. A good example: last September my boyfriend and I took a motorcycle trip out West and I came back and did a sermon called, "Hell's Angels." I had the motorcycle jacket with the clergy robe. We talked about how we were out West in our outfits and got turned away from a hotel because they thought we were bikers. I explained I was a Baptist minister just in gear from my vacation and they didn't believe us. So I gave a sermon about how people make judgment calls on the surface. But it was done with humor in the storytelling of that wonderful adventure. I also went to surfing camp one time and did a sermon called, "Hang Ten for Jesus." That was a big hit, too, talking about how surfing and the Gospels parallel in their stories.

**Daniel Pawlus:** Now, at the church in New York that you're serving at now, do you use humor to engage people to bring them in, as well?

**Susan Sparks:** Definitely.

**Daniel Pawlus:** How do you do that?

**Susan Sparks:** Our services actually start with a short welcome from me. I always have some humor in the beginning. It's interesting. You'll see visitors come in and something funny will come up and the congregation will laugh. And they'll be like [looking around], "What do I do with this? I must be on Broadway or something's not right!" After that moment, then we have a passing of the peace. Everyone greets each other. And then we have a call to worship. You can see peoples' shoulders kind of settle in. They sit back, they smile. There's a home, a connection, and a safety that's created. So, yes, I think it's a very important tool. An important tool not only within worship but also in the spiritual search because it brings such honesty to us.

**Daniel Pawlus:** Absolutely.

**Lillian Daniel:** I love what you said about how hard we are on ourselves and the endless seventeen page to-do lists. I'm imagining in a church on Madison Avenue you have a lot of people who are pretty hard on themselves and driven. I, myself, was watching that beautiful spiritual journey with the woman with the bowl of water and I was thinking, "If I fill that bowl with water every day, will my kitchen be that clean?" We get so caught up in things that really aren't important. How do you break that down?

**Susan Sparks:** Lillian, I find that a lot of people come into church and expect to be beaten down. We get beaten down all week. Why would you get up out of bed on Sunday morning if you weren't lifted up? So one of the things we try to talk about is what's important. Not the to-do list, not the things that your boss might have said, or the difficulties you're having in your family, but the fact that you are a loved and honored child of God. Part of that experience is to experience the joy and the laughter that that brings. It's trying to pull everything into perspective. If folks don't come into my congregation and leave a little straighter, then I need to stop and quit my job because to me that's the whole point. That's the Good News of the Gospel.

**Daniel Pawlus:** The laughter really is a great gift from God, isn't it? To find that scene for humility. And the other thing that resonated in your message was when you talked about control and perfectionism. I think I wrestle with that sometimes and I need to pull back and be able to laugh and get that perspective. That's what laughter ultimately does, doesn't it?

**Susan Sparks:** Absolutely. I love what you said about laughter and God because I believe that we are all children of a God with a sense of humor for sure. I think it was Voltaire that said, "God is a comedian playing to an audience who is afraid to laugh." I think a good way to get the perspective that you're talking about is to look through the Scriptures and find the humor that's there. Certainly there is humor in the Gospels. Jesus uses wonderful irony and juxtaposition of ideas. Certainly my favorite scripture is I Samuel, chapter five, verse nine, the wonderful story about where God strikes all of the Philistines with hemorrhoids.

**Daniel Pawlus:** I don't know that one!

**Susan Sparks:** My very favorite. So we are all children of a God with a sense of humor and that's a part of us that we need to tap into.

**Lillian Daniel:** Susan, if humor is that related to our ability to forgive ourselves and others, what

do you do with people who don't have a sense of humor?

**Susan Sparks:** That's a hard call. To me, I think of it from a stand-up comedian's standpoint. You get up and deliver a line and then there is this: [silence]. At that point you have two choices: you can slink off the stage or you can just stay there and continue with the message. I think, to me, that's the answer to your question. You're always going to have people who have let joy go or have blocked it from their lives. The only thing you can do is continue to show *your* joy, continue to show the love that you feel, and they can either accept that or they can't. That's not something that we can control. I guess to me it's about not letting others effect our sense of joy and our place of happiness and love.

**Daniel Pawlus:** To be able to model laughter that leads to joy, that leads to grace, as you talk about, is a really important talent, isn't it? Certain people just have the ability to laugh more and engage in that type of conversation and are wonderful to have around to give us that gift.

**Susan Sparks:** Right. I think people tend to compartmentalize humor. Like, oh, it's OK at the movies and it's OK here, but it's certainly not OK in church and it's not OK when something bad happens. Actually, a year and half ago, I was diagnosed with breast cancer. Thank God I'm OK and went through the treatments. But what I found in going through it was this amazing wealth of people who had joy and humor and laughter that was a lifeboat for them. Not just something that was funny and that they enjoyed, but it got them through that experience. They were laughing in the surgery room. They were laughing in the chemo room. They were laughing in the hospitals. There was no place that it was inappropriate. I was quite moved by that, that humor is always appropriate if it is a tool that pulls people up and supports them and brings the joy of the spirit into the situation.

**Daniel Pawlus:** That healing power of humor that you talk about.

**Lillian Daniel:** And yet sometimes people can really get offended in humor. Sometimes humor is a sharp sword. Have you ever crossed the line or hurt people?

**Susan Sparks:** That's a great question. There are so many types of humor. You see a lot of comedians on TV today where there are no boundaries. They're going to go wherever they're going to go. I remember asking a professor of mine, one of the few that was behind this whole idea. I said, "Where are the parameters with humor in the church or the Scripture?" And he thought for a minute and he said, "If you honor the material, there are no boundaries." I loved that answer because if you are using it as a tool for celebrating the spirit, for worship, for honoring the spirit, there aren't really any boundaries. I mean, certainly humor can be destructive. It can undermine people. It can harm. But so can sanctity.

**Lillian Daniel:** We're so glad that you chose that path and you've made us smile today. Thank you, Susan.

**Susan Sparks:** Thank you, Lillian.

INTRODUCTION TO REFLECTION

**Lillian Daniel:** And now, writer Tom McGrath brings us this final thought on what it means to forgive.

### REFLECTION

**Tom McGrath:** I used to think I could hold on to secret resentments and no one would be harmed. Then one Sunday at Mass our pastor changed my mind. He had put little slips of paper in the pews and he asked us to write down the names of people we had a resentment against. Then he instructed us to fold the paper and hold it tightly—and he stressed tightly—in the palm of our hands. He then proceeded to give his homily. After a minute my hand started aching. A minute later it started shaking. Soon after, it became numb. When Father Tom finally asked us to open our hands, our fingers had grown stiff and inflexible. “This is like your heart,” he told us. “But if we ask, God can take our stony hearts and turn them into hearts of flesh.” I got the message: open your hand, open your heart.

### CLOSING REMARKS

**Lillian Daniel:** Thank you, Tom, and our thanks again to Susan Sparks, Denise Roy, and to you for joining us today on “30 Good Minutes.” I’m Lillian Daniel.

**Daniel Pawlus:** And I’m Daniel Pawlus. As we go, I encourage you to visit our website at [30GoodMinutes.org](http://30GoodMinutes.org) for more information about today’s program and a wonderful collection of messages, reflections, and stories to deepen your faith. Now, from all of us at “30 Good Minutes,” may your faith be strong in the week ahead and may your heart be open to God.