

The Ways to Laugh

11:00 a.m. Service: June 15, 2008

Do you know on what day that there are more collect phone calls than any other day of the year? It is Father's Day! Thanks to those fathers who are there to answer their children's collect calls today and to help them through thick and thin everyday. There is also sadness for some people today who remember their fathers who have died or for those who struggle to resolve strained relationships with their fathers.

In Genesis 18, we heard about three strangers who visit father Abraham. When they arrive, Abraham pulls out all the stops. He offers them a place to rest, a basin to wash their feet, some bread to eat, and fresh meat from one of his best calves. Abraham does not know these men are special: Abraham makes them feel at home simply because he is gracious and has good manners. Scholars disagree about exactly who these three men were: some say they were angels, other scholars claim they are simply humans who carry an important message, and some even assert God himself is speaking. What is clear is that these men bring a message directly from God to Abraham and Sarah. The divine messenger shares that Abraham and Sarah will have a son. Listen now as the story continues.

Genesis 21:1-7:

The Lord dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as God had promised. Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him. Abraham gave the name Isaac to his son whom Sarah bore him. And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. Now Sarah said, "God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me." And she said, "Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age."

One: This is the Word of the Lord. **All: Thanks be to God.**

Do you think God has a sense of humor? As I was working on this sermon, I was surprised to find how many people don't think God has a sense of humor. For centuries many cultures have considered laughter an impolite imposition. Several church leaders even claimed laughter was sinful. For example, Robert Barclay, author of Apology for True Christian Divinity, wrote in 1676: "It is not lawful to use games, sports, plays, or comedies among Christians under the notion of recreations, since they do not agree with Christian silence, gravity, and sobriety."¹ I'm betting that Robert Barclay was wrong about this. If he wasn't, then I'm in big trouble! I believe that if God made silly-looking creatures like giraffes, hippopotamuses, and camels, then God must certainly have a sense of humor.

¹ Conrad Narrow, The Healing Power of Laughter, Nutrition Health Review, 1993, p. 15.

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus is playful. The Pharisees and scribes always tried to ask Jesus questions that would get him in trouble. The Pharisees hoped to catch him in their trap. Jesus, however, would reframe the situation by telling a parable that would catch them off guard. I bet Jesus and his disciples had a good laugh at the surprised looks on the faces of the scribes and Pharisees.

When a little child was sitting in Jesus' lap, he told his followers to be like that little child. What do you think Jesus meant? In part, I believe Christ was telling us to emulate a child's ability to laugh and to enjoy this amazing creation God has made. The average child laughs 150 times a day, according to a study from the University of Michigan. Can you guess how many times the average adult laughs? Only fifteen times: the average child laughs ten times more often than the average adult every day.²

On *The Tonight Show*, Jay Leno has a segment called "Headlines" where people send him funny mistakes that have been printed in their local newspapers. Over the last week, I came across this list of funny mistakes that have been printed in church bulletins. In honor of Sarah's laughter, I thought I would read you a few of these bulletin bloopers:

* Ladies, don't forget the rummage sale. It's a chance to get rid of those things not worth keeping around the house. Don't forget your husbands.

* Bertha Belch, a missionary from Africa, will be speaking tonight at Calvary Methodist. Come hear Bertha Belch all the way from Africa.

* Eight new choir robes are currently needed, due to the addition of several new members and to the deterioration of some older ones.

* Scouts are saving aluminum cans, bottles, and other items to be recycled. Proceeds will be used to cripple children.

* Low Self Esteem Support Group will meet Thursday at 7 PM. Please use the back door.

* The church is glad to have with us today as our guest minister the Rev. Green who has Mrs. Green with him. After the service we request that all remain in the sanctuary for the Hanging of the Greens.

* Ushers will eat latecomers.

* Weight Watchers will meet at 7pm at the First Presbyterian Church. Please use large double door at the side entrance.

* Don't let worries kill you: let the church help.

* The peacemaking meeting scheduled for today has been canceled due to a conflict.

* And finally: For those of you who have children and don't know it, we have a nursery downstairs.

With our friends, we can let our guard down and have a good laugh. We laugh when we feel comfortable with a friend and get each other's silly jokes, but not all laughter is good. Some laughter builds up, but mean-spirited laughter can tear down. I suspect that all of us, at some point, have experienced being the butt of someone else's joke; it is painful when others are mean-spirited and laugh at our expense. Sometimes

² Youth Worker Update, Signs of the Times, August, 1993, p. 6.

the other person is not trying to put us down, but he or she can still unintentionally hurt us with their teasing.

Healthy laughter, laughter that builds up and is a means of grace, is the when we laugh together, not at someone else's expense. In Genesis 18 and 21, Sarah laughs in two different ways. Sarah's laughter at the announcement that she will have a son is not mean-spirited, but it is not the kind of laughter that brings people together.

When Abraham and Sarah hear they will have a son, it seems ridiculous to this married couple, even cruel. The text reports that Abraham is 100 years old and Sarah is no spring chicken herself. They have tried and tried to have a child for years, but Sarah remained barren. Sarah even gave permission for her husband to have a child with their slave girl Hagar because Sarah could not give him a child. Genesis illustrates how Abraham's son with Hagar strained his relationship with Sarah, making her feel even more vulnerable and empty than she did before.

Have you ever had to come to terms with accepting that you will not achieve one of your dreams, something you want deeply? Have you ever gotten really excited about a future possibility, only to have your hopes dashed? Had to give up a relationship with the person you thought was the one for you? Have you ever been passed over for the job that you think you'd be perfectly suited for? That is the place where Abraham and Sarah are.

So when Sarah laughs, I do not blame her. She is laughing as a means of self-protection. It is easier to laugh than it is to get her hopes up again, when disappointment seems inevitable. Abraham and Sarah are resigned to their fate. The Lord does not chastise Sarah for her laughter, but gently reminds her when she is embarrassed to admit that she laughed that she did it. After Sarah laughs, the divine messenger asks, "Is anything impossible for the Lord?" That is the key question for Abraham and Sarah, people throughout the Bible, and for us today.

It is a genuine question. Is anything too hard for God? If we answer yes, there are some things too hard for God, then Walter Brueggemann argues that we have not yet confessed God as God. "We have not conceded radical freedom to God. We have determined to live in a closed universe where things are stable, reliable, and hopeless."³

As Presbyterians, we are members of one of the mainline denominations. That means we are part of a moderate, mainstream religious tradition. That's good, solid, and dependable, but we all need to remember, myself including, that God can do some amazing things. Jesus told his disciples in Matthew 17:20, "Nothing will be impossible to you." Are we open to receiving some wonderful, unexpected surprise from our Lord?

Isaac's birth in Genesis 21 shows us that God is reliable. The Lord promises Sarah a baby and she has the son that she thought she would never have. On this Father's Day, the love that both parents, Sarah and Abraham, have for their son Isaac reminds us of the sacrificial love of so many of our fathers. By the way, Sarah says, "God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me." Abraham and Sarah even name their child Isaac, which is the Hebrew word for "he laughs." Sarah's

³ Walter Brueggemann, Commentary on Genesis: Interpretation Series, p. 159.

skeptical laughter becomes a confident laugh that is full of joy. She is inviting all of us to laugh with her.

As Christians, we need to be on the lookout for opportunities to laugh together. Where there is mean spirited laughter that demeans a fellow child of God, we are called to try to turn the conversation into a more positive direction. Gossip that tears down does not honor Christ. We, like Sarah, can discover true joy in those moments when we can laugh, not AT, but WITH each other.

Bonnie Brechill tells the story of when her five-year-old daughter met an Amish girl her age. Within a few minutes, they were off, hand-in-hand, to play. Bonnie saw them chattering and giggling. Even though Sylvia, the Amish girl, spoke a Pennsylvania Dutch dialect, she and Crystal enjoyed each other. Later Bonnie asked her daughter, “Could you understand anything Sylvia said to you?”

“No,” she replied.

“But you played so well together. How?”

“Oh, Mommy. We understood each other’s giggles.”⁴

Immediately after worship today, I will be joining twenty other youth and adults from our church on a mission trip to Morehead City. I have been on enough of these trips to know that, during the week, not everything will go according to plan. I invite the mission team to help each other to work together to solve our problems. I bet by the end of the week, we, like Abraham and Sarah, will be able to laugh at the amazing things God has taught us during the mission trip.

In *The Anatomy of an Illness: As Perceived by the Patient*, Norman Cousins tells of being hospitalized with a rare, crippling disease. When doctors told him his illness was incurable, Cousins checked himself out of the hospital. He was aware of the toil that negative emotions can bring, so he tried to remain upbeat. Cousins came up with his own treatment: he would watch comedies, including old Marx brothers’ films and reruns of “Candid Camera.”

Cousins discovered that ten minutes of laughter provided him two hours of pain-free sleep. Amazingly, with no other treatment, he was healed from his supposedly incurable disease. After an article about Cousins’ recovery appeared in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, over three thousand doctors sent him letters to show their appreciation.

When I feel depressed and am beating up on myself, I have a hard time laughing at myself. I can tell that I am starting to get a healthier outlook when I am able to laugh about my problems, not minimizing them, but realizing that whatever misfortune I have faced is not the end of the world. After all, in our best moments, we remember that nothing is impossible for God. Madeleine L’Engle, author of the classic children’s book *A Wrinkle in Time*, has said, “If we are sure of our God we are free to laugh at ourselves.” Thanks be to the Lord that our God has a sense of humor. Amen!

⁴ *1001 Quotes, Illustrations, and Humorous Stories*, Ed. Edward Rowell, p. 435.