

July 23, 2023

Let us pray.

O God of Love, O God of Truth;

Let us say strong things gently and gentle things strongly.

Let us speak the truth in love to all
and love the truth that lives in each.

Let us hear the truth as we each need it and live that truth.

O God, we heed it through Jesus; Your Word & our Lord.

Amen.

Laughing With God

Genesis 18:9-15 & 21:6-7

(While Abraham was generously showing hospitality to those angelic visitors by the Oaks of Mamre, they asked him) “‘Where is your wife Sarah?’ He replied, ‘She is there in the tent.’ Then one of the strangers predicted, ‘In due season she will bear a son.’

Now Abraham and Sarah were very old and she had long ago ceased to be of child-bearing age. Hearing this Sarah laughed, ‘After I have grown old, shall I still have the pleasure? But God said to Abraham, ‘Why did Sarah laugh? Is anything too wonderful for God?’ Sarah denied laughing. But God said, ‘Oh yes you did.’”

(So Sarah went on to give birth to Isaac - whose name means ‘One who laughs’.) Then Sarah said, ‘God has brought me laughter and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me.’”

Matthew 13:33

“(And Jesus continued) ‘The kingdom of God is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into her measure of flour until the whole batch was leavened.’”

I'm a much nicer person on vacation.
My whole family thinks so.
They say I laugh more, have more fun.
Basically, the more I relax,
the more I regain my sense of humor.

To appreciate this light-heartedness,
for my summer reading, I enjoyed Ken Jennings book
entitled *Planet Funny*.
Yes, it is the same Ken Jennings who was
the champion of Jeopardy!
And *Planet Funny* is a cleaver but scholarly
history of humor.

The word "humor"
stems from a common root with the word "human".
And Jennings believes that being fully human
includes having a sense of humor.
He reminds that, medically speaking,
it has been well proven that laughter eases stress
and boosts our health.
In other words, humor enhances our human-ness.

But our bible story this morning,
about Sarah & the birth of Isaac, takes it one step further.
It begs a larger question.
Is humor supposed to be a part of faith & faithfulness?

And, larger still - does GOD have a sense of humor?

Annie Dillard, in her book, *Teaching A Stone How to Talk*, imagines that God must have a sense of humor to tolerate all the presumptions and predilections humans have about God.

And you've probably heard it suggested that the mere existence of animals like the duck-billed platypus, the ostrich, the kangaroo are signs of God sense of humor.

The other day a woman who recently lost her husband told me a sweet story about needing some life around her empty apartment - so she bought a large aquarium and 5 multi-colored fish!

These fish are one of the first things she sees when she comes home, and seeing them swim around it's as though they are waving to her as she enters and wishing her well.

They are like "God's little clowns"!

God is clowning around with Sarah in our bible story - gently teasing her into a deeper faith.

*(Hearing Sarah laugh
over the possibility that she might bear a child
at such an old age)
God said to Abraham, 'Why did Sarah laugh?
Is anything too wonderful for God?'*

*Sarah denied laughing.
But God said, 'Oh yes you did.'"*

It reminds me of the afternoon

Alex caught our 2-yr.-old grandson, Ian,
standing on a upside-down laundry basket
stretching up as high as he can reach
to unlock the front door to their apartment.

Trying hard not to laugh, Alex gently but firmly asked,
"What are you doing?"

"Where did you get that laundry basket?"

Ian, turned around sheepishly, and avoiding the question,
he said, **"Pappa help me reach."**

Without any exaggerated panic, Alex said,
"Ian, mustn't unlock the door without our permission."

Children have a way of inspiring in us what I call
"An Isaac Spirit".

The name "Isaac" means, "One Who Laughs",
and aren't kids a constant reminder -
yeh! even instigator -
that life comes with laughter, and laughter births life.
And today's story says, God enables it.

Do you need more Isaac spirit in your life?

Do you take everything seriously
and sees problems in everyone?

Then you need greater Isaac spirit.

Ironically, Christianity has NOT always been a great cheer-leader for humor.

In his chapter entitled, "*Mirth Control*"

Jennings reminds us that the early Catholic church was quite often AGAINST humor and fun.

John Chrysostom, the great preacher, said telling jokes led to sin.

St. Basil preached that unrestrained belly laughter was a sign of intemperance.

(Skip, don't worry we still love you!)

St. Jerome advised young women not to encourage the decline of young men by laughing at their jokes.

Church theologians from St. Augustine to Bernard Clairvaux denounced laughter by pointing out that, in the Gospels, Jesus didn't laugh once.

Maybe, maybe not -

but that doesn't mean he didn't have a sense of humor!

It's just that we aren't used to looking for it.

But I believe it's there.

It's there in so many of his parables.
It's there in how he related to children.
And can't the miracle of his resurrection be construed
as the greatest joke ever played on death and despair?

When Jesus preached,
*'The kingdom of God is like yeast
that a woman took and mixed into her measure of flour
until the whole batch was leavened.'*...
I believe he was celebrating that kissing-cousin
to the word "leaven" - in other words, LEVITY?

And from another angle,
the church did us no favors by ridding our faith of humor.
It stole from us all good and faithful guidelines
for how to judge humor.
Because, let's face it,
our society is filled with humor;
some of it vile, some of it hilarious.
Some of it stifling and some of it liberating.

But our story of Sarah helps restore those guidelines.
It shows us 2 kinds of laughter.
In the beginning, Sarah laughs AT God.
Her humor is sarcastic, dismissive, filled with doubt.
But, as her faith takes over, she ends up
laughing WITH God.

Laughing AT God, or laughing WITH God,
these are the 2 basic options a person has
to be unfaithful and faithful with their sense of humor.

What's the difference?

Humor that demeans and belittles laughs AT God.
Whereas, humor that energizes the promise of life
and increases faith in the future - laughs WITH God.
Humor filled with sarcasm and cynicism,
humor that casts doubt and plays on fears,
laughs AT God.

But humor that tickles our funny bone
and raises the human heart to positivity
laughs with God.

What is an example of laughing WITH God?

Some of you may remember Art Linkletter;
he had a popular TV show called
"Kids Say The Darndest Things"
filled with examples of how funny
the innocent reasoning of children can be.

A little girl was attending a wedding for the first time.
She whispered to her mother.

"Mommy, why is the bride wearing a white dress?"
The mother thought for a moment and then said,
"White is the color of happiness"

and this is the happiest day of her life.”

The little girl processed this quietly,
and then asked,

“Then why is the groom wearing black?”

Cute, positive, enlightening.

It is laughter generating an “ah-ha” moment.

But there are many examples of laughing AT God.

Ken Jennings’s book chronicles how humor has gotten
more and more perverse and hurtful.

He mentions Beavis and Butthead,
and how popular their comedy became
even though it was humor based on absurdity
and clever wit was replaced with profanity.

He goes wider still

and shows how so modern politics has been fueled
by bad humor.

Political speeches are increasingly filled
with name-calling and bad-mouthing.

Just because it’s popular doesn’t make it godly!

Just because someone says what’s on their mind
doesn’t make that mind faithful to God.

Another example of “laughing At God”

is seen in all the current banter about WOKE.

“Florida is where WOKE goes to die.”

is the phrase that is meant to be funny and clever.

Ironically, the history of “Woke” is extremely godly, because it is all about new birth.

It began with a call from Martin Luther King Jr.

to “wake up” from our social apathy,

and believe in the American promise

that all people are created equal and should have the chance to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Any humor that attempts to kill that promise laughs AT God.

Certainly, all politics has it’s fun and unfunny side.

Certainly, we all must learn

to take seriously what must never be pooh-poohed.

Those issues Jesus always took seriously

should always be taken seriously by us.

We should never passively laugh along with others

when we hear cocktail jokes

filled with racism, elitism,

pornographic locker-room bravado

and un-Christian prejudice.

Likewise,

we all must learn to laugh more at ourselves.

We should all learn to accept one another
with greater grace, greater forgiveness, greater love.

In other words, we should mix into our hearts
the leavening spirit of God's kingdom,
which is Jesus Christ our Lord.

As one early church thinker once said,

“He who laughs with the devil does not rejoice in Christ.”

So dear friends - at the end of the day,
the story of Sarah and the birth of Isaac teach us
that laughing is no-laughing matter!

That humor is meant to be a holy thing
IF we laugh WITH God
instead of laughing AT God.

How faithful is your sense of humor?

Prayer of Pastoral Care Sunday, July 23, 2023

Psalm 105 speaks of God's faithfulness. *"O give thanks to the LORD, call on God's name, make known God's deeds among the peoples. Praise the LORD!"* Our response is: God of mystery and grace, **hear our prayer.**

God, you have given us a dream of your world made whole, a heavenly realm that is near in heart and close at hand. It is ours to choose each day. May our smallest acts of courtesy, when transformed by your love, grow abundantly into a realm of flourishing by all.

God of mystery and grace, **hear our prayer.** Gracious God, we are on a journey of becoming, and do not fully know how to pray. Yet your Spirit helps us in our weakness and intercedes for all your creation with sighs too deep for human words. We offer our prayers in the confidence that the Spirit prays in us according to your will.

God of mystery and grace, **hear our prayer.** Holy God, you have blessed humanity with understanding and the ability to choose the good; give to all leaders and people a vision of your world made whole, the wisdom to pursue it, and the will to accomplish it. We continue to pray for the war and all its victims in Ukraine as Russia seals off ports vital to the international food supply. We pray for the people, especially women, who have been victims of violent ethnic clashes in India. We pray for the victims of gun violence and their loved ones.

God of mystery and grace, **hear our prayer.**

Creator God, you bless us with the gift of creation. Join us with the Spirit's movement in caring for your world, and working to mitigate climate change. We pray for the end of heat waves across Spain, Italy, Greece, China, and the western and southern United States; and for all victims of severe storms, flooding, and forest fires, along with the far-reaching smoke and its effect on many people. God of mystery and grace, **hear our prayer.**

You have given your world the gift of Jesus to transform our suffering into healing and hope. Be with all who suffer hardship, distress, or need, and help; us to honor you by serving together, as we grow in the mercy and compassion of Christ.

God of mystery and grace, **hear our prayer.**

Hear our prayers for those on this church's prayer list.

We give thanks that nothing can separate us from your love. in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

HYMN # 244 Loving Spirit

OFFERING Let us offer our gifts this day, for the kingdom of heaven is near, growing in our midst like yeast in the dough of life in our world.

*DOXOLOGY

*PRAYER We dedicate our lives to you this day that the treasure of your kingdom may be shared by many. In Jesus' name. Amen.

CLOSING HYMN #272 The Church's One Foundation