

The Congregational Church in South Glastonbury

Sermon - August 7, 2005

Rev. Lucia Anne Jackson, Guest Preacher
Gen 18:1-15 Psalm 100

In a Time magazine article entitled “The Funny Thing about laughter” I recently read: “It’s no joke, laughing may be one of nature’s cleverest tricks for keeping us healthy and safe . . . “ Yes, it’s true, there are actually researchers paid to research why, how and when we humans laugh. It turns out that laughter is 30 times more frequent in social situations and that laughter flatters the speaker thus encouraging more conversation. Have you ever started laughing in an inappropriate situation – say during worship? – and found yourself unable to stop and then that the giggle bug spreads to the person sitting next to you? This is evidence the “social bonding nature” of infectious laughter. Interestingly, laughter may protect us from disease. “In 2001, Lee Berk, professor of pathology and anatomy at Loma Linda University in California tracked two groups of cardiac patients for a year after a heart attack. One group was asked to watch 30 minutes of comedy a day as an adjunct to medical therapy; the other received medical care alone. At the end of the year, the laughing group had lower blood pressure, lower stress-hormone levels, fewer episodes of arrhythmia and more important, fewer repeat heart attacks.” Berk’s conclusion? “Laughter is a form of internal jogging – what a nice way to get the lungs to move and the blood to circulate”. You can now join therapeutic laughter groups and visit a website offering training in becoming a certified laughter master – masters of mirth who establish clubs in hospitals and nursing homes to bring patients together and get them laughing. (Time Mag Jan 17, 2005)

Of course, contemporary researchers and articles act as though all this information about laughter being good for us were news when in actuality, the writer of the book of Proverbs knew it thousands of years ago: Proverbs 17:22 *“A cheerful heart is good medicine”* 15:30 *“A cheerful look brings joy to the heart, and good news gives health to the bones.”*

I got thinking about all this laughter because of the wonderful story in Genesis “and Sarah laughed”. Earlier in Genesis 17, Abraham laughs at the same promise. We were created to laugh. Often that laughter is an expression of joy. Occasionally, laughter is in a response to wonder. Unfortunately, laughter is too frequently used in cruelty, to mock, shame and sneer. Sometimes, laughter is a cover for pain. Regularly, laughter and tears co- mingle. I am one who often starts out laughing and ends up finding myself crying. The writer of Proverbs understood this too: Prov 14:13 *“Even in laughter the heart may ache and joy may end in grief.”* How often I have sat with families

in the hospital beside the bed of a family member or in the planning of a memorial service and the memories quickly turn – from laughter to tears and back again.

But, the ability to laugh at life’s daily challenges, to see the humor in ourselves, in our stories, in our memories is a glorious gift. I do not like humor that puts down others, I am not personally fond of stand up comics or canned jokes, but I do get a kick out of life’s chaos. Regrettably, when I am tired or feeling stressed out, I get angry when I could be laughing. Case in point: Thursday afternoon, it was hot out. I am not a hot weather person. I was struggling in my garden trying to water the wilting plants and remove the thriving weeds. Asher – our 7year old - was hot, bothered and whiny because he had not been invited next door to go swimming. We are blessed with neighbors with a swimming pool, who are generous and gracious in sharing. However, they had the nerve to invite other friend’s over and Asher was stuck at home with hot, crabby me. He begged to run in the sprinkler. I was using the hose in the garden. I was weeding, I was busy. He wined. Ultimately, I said, fine, we’ll set up the sprinkler next to the garden and you can run in it. (I should note that it is not a good sign of my mood when I say “fine” – as Micah – our perceptive 11 year old often asks –Mom, is that a good “fine” or a bad “fine”?) Instead of turning off the water, I had Asher kink the hose while I hooked up the sprinkler. Perhaps you can see where this story is going. Just as I finished hooking it up, Asher enthusiastically dropped the hose and I got blasted with a FACEFULL of cold well water. I jumped back and looked at Asher, who looked a little fearfully (if the truth be told) at me as I stood drenched in the sprinkler – and then I laughed. So, Asher laughed. We laughed and ran in the sprinkler together. It was a great joke. A holy moment. A moment of holy laughter when the anger and frustration and whining all melted away. The laughter was not forced, it was not at anyone’s expense, but my own. Asher and I were reconciled. What could have been lost to anger, was found in laughter. Laughter had healed the moment and reclaimed the day.

So it is in scripture. I believe in the laughter of the matriarch Sarah. Frederick Beuchner writes: “Quantitatively speaking, you don’t find all that much laughter in the Bible, but qualitatively, there’s nothing quite like it to be found anywhere else. . . . Sarah was never going to see ninety again, and Abraham had already hit one hundred, and when the angel told them that the stork was on his way at last, they both of them almost collapsed. Abraham laughed “till he fell on his face” (in Gen 17) and Sarah stood cackling behind the tent door so the angel wouldn’t think she was being rude as the tears streamed down her cheeks. When the baby finally came, they even called him Laughter – which is what Isaac means in Hebrew – because obviously no other name would do. Laughter gets mixed up with all sorts of things in the Bible and in the world too, things like sneering, irony, making fun of, and beating the competition. It also gets mixed up with things like comedians and slipping on banana peels

and having the soles of your feet tickled. There are times when you laugh to keep from crying or even in the midst of crying But one hundred percent, bonded, aged in the wood laughter is something else again. It's the crazy parrot-squawk kind that issue out of David as he spins like a top in front of Ark (II Sam 6). It's what the Psalms are talking about where . . . they get so excited they yell out "*Let the floods clap their hands, let the hills sing for joy together!*" because the Lord had come through at last (Ps 98). . . . it's what the rafters ring with when the Prodigal son comes home and his old crock of a father is so glad to see him he almost has a stroke and "*they began to make merry*" and kept on making merry till the cows came home (Luke 15:24). It's what Jesus means when he stands in that crowd of cripples and loners and odd-balls and outcasts and says "*Blessed are you that weep now, for you shall laugh*" (Luke 6:21) Nobody claims there's a chuckle on every page, but laughter's what the whole Bible is really about. Nobody who knows his hat from home-plate claims that getting mixed up with God is all sweetness and light, but ultimately, it's what that's all about too. Sarah and her husband had had plenty of hard knocks in their time, and there were plenty more of them still to come, but at that moment when the angel told them . . . to build a nursery, the reason they laughed was that it suddenly dawned on them that the wildest dreams they'd ever had hadn't been half wild enough".

And that is true for all of us. Sarah laughed for she recognized the sheer absurdity of the Lord's way. The way of God is often so foreign to us humans that the most genuine way we can respond is to laugh. God's way takes us out of our ordinary worlds, into other orbits of wondrous flight and glory. Oh Sarah, you did laugh, you were glimpsing the wondrous realms of God's world, the fulfillment of time. God is at work, breaking into our world like some crazy joke. A babe for two centenarians? Of course, God wants to save the world through Isaac. A babe lying in a manger to be the savior of the world? God's ways are not, thank goodness, our ways. Sarah laughed at the wonder of it all, and so should we.

Rev. Agnes Norfleet, pastor in Atlanta GA writes "It is part of the history and nature of God to produce something out of nothing. This is how the world was created. . . . It is fabulous, unbelievable, stunning. And when the world looks broken and damaged and empty again around us – which it often does if we have eyes to acknowledge the truth – when the world looks broken and empty around us time and time again, then it is the absurdity of God's work which redeems it again. Think back over your lives; you have been saved by God, not just once in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, but time and time again. God has brought something into your life out of nothing. God's business of redemption saves us no matter what circumstances we are in. Look at Psalm 126 written as the Hebrews were returning from exile and death, back into the promised land "*when the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream, then our mouth was filled with laughter and our*

tongues with shouts of joy!” Such holy laughter is the sign that God has been at work again, bringing forth life from death. . . .Holy laughter is not the avoidance of pain, but emerges when the emptiness becomes filled with the grace and love of God. For this reason, pain and suffering need not be evidence that God has forsaken us, instead they can be the fields lying empty in the winter fallowness, in which God will plant new seeds of spring hope. Your suffering and pain today is not the final word. The places where you suffer will be the very places where God will come alive. That is the gospel. That is the source of holy laughter.”

Faithful people know how to laugh. I remember Mother Theresa had many memorable one liners -, short and direct statements of the truth, built upon her direct acts of Christian mercy. One of her frequent newspaper interviewers was finishing up his questions for her, when he decided to ask a question meant to be practical, meant to involve us – 20th Century Western readers back in America enjoying our comfortable lives – He asked her “given your ministry, what can we do to live out the good life?” She did NOT say, “go and sell all you have and work with the poor like me” Perhaps the interviewer, and we, would have expected her to say that. But, instead, she said simply and directly, “smile at the people you live with”. The reporter, a bit confused, pressed the issue, retorting “That’s easy for you to say. You don’t face family pressures, and the work place.”

“Oh” said Mother Theresa, “I live with Jesus. Believe me, he’s a hard person to live with.”

You laugh and I laugh. Because it is true. Because I know that it is truth born out of experience with pain and suffering of the greatest order. I would say that Mother Theresa saw suffering and difficulty and the harshness of life as clearly as any one might experience it, but she retained a sense of joy and wonder so that she could offer the simple advice “Smile at the people you live with, even Jesus, when he’s hard to live with. “

So laugh. We were created to laugh, not at the pain of others, not to mask the fear in our own lives, but to celebrate the wondrous grace of God. God has reconciled the world through Jesus Christ. It seemed impossible once and it may seem impossible again, but God has done it anyway. Laugh at the good joke.. Afterall, if you don’t believe me, the medical researchers tell us “Laughter is a form of internal jogging – what a nice way to get the lungs to move and the blood to circulate”. But far more importantly, Enjoy the fabulous, incredible love of God Smile at Jesus. And smile at the people you live with.

Thanks be to God.