

"The Laughter of Love"
A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan, CT – June 18, 2023

Please Read:
Genesis 18:1-15
Matthew 9:35-38

This is a true story: Chippie the parakeet never saw it coming. One second he was peacefully perched in his cage. The next, he was sucked in, washed up, and blown over. The problems began when chippie's owner decided to clean Chippie's cage with a vacuum cleaner. She removed the attachment from the end of the hose and stuck it in the cage. The telephone rang, and she turned to pick it up. She'd barely said "hello" when... "Ssssoppp!" Chippie got sucked in.

The bird owner gasped, put down the phone, turned off the vacuum, and opened the bag. There was Chippie, still alive, but stunned. Since the bird was covered with dust and soot, she grabbed him and raced to the bathroom, turned on the faucet, and held Chippie under the running water. Then, realizing that Chippie was soaked and shivering cold, she did what any compassionate bird owner would do... She reached for the hair dryer and blasted the bird with hot air... Poor Chippie never knew what hit him!

A few days after the incident, the reporter who'd initially written about it contacted Chippie's owner to see how the bird was recovering. "Well," she replied, "Chippie doesn't sing much anymore – he just sits and stares..." It's not hard to see why. Sucked in, washed up, and blown over... That's enough to steal the song from the stoutest heart."¹

We may find Chippie's experience humorous, but sometimes we all go through experiences that leave us sucked in, washed up, and blown over. And we need to recover, get a fresh perspective, and recover the joy of the Lord in our lives! It was Martin Niemoller who said, "If you can laugh at yourself, you're going to be fine. If you can allow others to laugh with you, you will be great!" Or as Groucho Marx put it, "If you find it hard to laugh at yourself, I would be happy to do it for you!"

Over the years, I have had some tell me laughter isn't appropriate for church. One saint thought it a virtue that he was able to suppress laughter for years... Worship is serious business, and too many people assume it's supposed to be *only* sober, reverent, and dignified. There's nothing "decent and in order" about laughter, right?

We all know that we who come here each Sunday to join in corporate worship know as much of the painful side of life as we do the joyful. We, of all people are

¹ Max Lucado, *In the Eye of the Storm*, p.11.

aware of the suffering and brokenness of the world in which we live, and we come together to seek God's strength in times of weakness, forgiveness when we have succumbed to sin's insinuation upon our lives, and celebrate the Lord's goodness and grace even when we are left sucked in, washed up, and blown over...

But my message to you today is this: Into our deadly, serious, fixed world, God intrudes. And when God intrudes, our cynical, mocking laughter of deadly disbelief is transformed, like Sarah's laughter, into the laughter of love and gratitude for the grace of God.

There isn't a whole lot about laughter in the Bible. In the Genesis reading for today, we encounter the geriatric laughter of Sarah and Abraham when told they are going to have a baby. In the New Testament, laughter is only mentioned twice. First, in Matthew 9:24. Jesus dares to speak of life in the midst of death, and the crowd laughs in mocking, cynical derision; the laughter of disbelief. The crowd laughed when Jesus spoke of life, where there was so much death.

Then there is a second New Testament laughter, the laughter of surprised reversal, the Easter smile that breaks out when things go better than you thought, the grin occasioned by the undeserved, unexpected grace of God. This kind of laughter occurs for me, for example, when the seriousness of life is broken up by children playing outside my office window. I can go a little crazy with the hundredth time hearing *Puff the Magic Dragon* or *Baby Baluga*, but there is something completely disarming about children singing and playing with reckless abandon. It makes me laugh to see their pure unadulterated innocence and freedom.

I was laughing earlier this week at a friend's wedding. He was reciting his vows and at first wasn't looking at his bride. But he caught himself, and started over, gathering her in his arms to look directly into her eyes. The whole congregation laughed with understanding and love.

There is what might be called *the laughter of love*. It is the laughter of pure joy and gratitude for the simple privilege of seeing God at work. There is a serious dimension to the laughter of love. Jesus promised, "Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh" (Luke 6:21). This is a laughter for those who know the harder aspects of life, the deep longings, losses, and fears, but who have also come to know and experience God's surprising saving grace.

How is the laughter of disbelief transformed into the laughter of love? How is it that those who today weep shall tomorrow laugh? We all know the laughter of cynical disbelief. Sarah was old. Ninety years old. Back bent, not as many teeth as

she used to have. She probably had digestive problems when God promised Sarah and her "as good as dead husband" Abraham (Paul's words, not mine - Hebrew's 11:11-12) that they would be parents of a great family that would bless the world.

At ninety years old, Sarah laughed when she overheard the Lord talking obstetrics about somebody her age. Then the Lord said to her, "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" Just for that, I'm going to name your baby Isaac, which means 'Laughter,' to remind you, the joke's on you!

Is there anything too wonderful for the Lord?" Who's laughing now, Sarah?

In today's gospel lesson, we read that when Jesus saw the crowds, "he had compassion for them because they were harassed and helpless..." Then he tells his disciples, "the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few." I could remind you that the church needs more volunteers... that there are too many pew potatoes, that Christianity is not something you observe but do...

But what if the real work of our faith is simply to believe? To work on living out our lives by grace through faith... Working on not taking ourselves so seriously and trusting God to bless us come what may? Does that sound funny to you? Is it the laughter of disbelief, or the laughter of love?

We learn that "the Lord did for Sarah as he had promised." Nine months later she laughed all the way from the geriatric ward to the maternity ward! Isaac was born! And Sarah laughed. But this time, her laughter was no longer the laughter of cold cynical disbelief. Hers was the laughter of love. Gospel laughter, Easter laughter. In the Old Testament having a child was the closest thing to eternal life. God gave Abraham and Sarah offspring to carry the name.

The Gospel text continues in chapter ten with Jesus sending the disciples out "to cast out demons, and to cure every disease and every sickness." I wonder if we believe in that stuff anymore? Healing. Forgiving. Setting the captives free? Tomorrow, we celebrate Juneteenth to remember the final declaration of freedom for African American slaves in this country. And we need to remember that there is work to be done. I was debating whether to share this or not, but since she had the courage to write me last week, I thought I should have the courage to share her story. She is a Persian Chinese woman, raised in Hong Kong, and married a GE executive. He reported to Jeff Imelt, who had a home here in New Canaan. She asked me how I was enjoying New Canaan, because she said she couldn't live there. When looking for homes, the real estate agent told her she was too dark to live here. They bought a house in Greenwich... Now, I know that was just one

bigoted real estate agent and not typical for the people of our town... But it was a reminder that there is still work to be done. Racism and bigotry, economic disparity and injustice, and political shenanigans too often lead the crowds today, harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd...

I should say my friends now own a chateau in the Loire Valley of France, and they live there in the summer, and winter at their home in Australia. They laugh now about the real estate agent who told her she was too dark to live here.

It's quite a move, quite a spiritual shift, from the cynical laughter of disbelief, to the astonished, stupefied spontaneous laughter of love that comes from the unexpected intrusion of the living God, when the promises of God come true and the joke is on us and we have to laugh at ourselves.

Today being Father's Day, I have a special challenge for us all, but especially the men. Too often times we take ourselves way too seriously. Traditionally, we go out there and fight life's battles and bring home the bacon. We carry a heavy burden of responsibility. No wonder there are too many of us who find comfort in the bottle, or other forms of escapist addictions... What if we took the work of faith as seriously as our work at the office? How about letting go and learning to laugh with our families and play with our spouses and children? Wouldn't that be beautiful?

As we go through life, each one of us will face hardship, disappointment, even tragedy. God knows there is work to be done out there to do justice and love mercy and walk humbly with our God. The news is grim. But Jesus' invitation to help to bring in the Lord's harvest, my friends, is pure gift. It's a harvest of *grace*! It's a different kind of labor perhaps than what we normally consider "work." It requires effort, but the real work is in learning to let go, to believe, and to invest in what is good, true and beautiful, to remember that justice is what love looks like in public.

We are left to ask ourselves, "Is anything too wonderful for God?" Sarah's conclusion after God had done more than she could ever imagine was this, "God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me" (21:6). Everyone who hears the intrusive Word of life, who is surprised to discover again that the Lord comes to meet us wherever we may be, who comes to find that the way of Jesus really is the Way of Life, despite all their unbelief, they will surely laugh the laughter of love, of joy, indeed the laughter of faith, hope and love.

Even though, like Chippie the parakeet, we may have hard days in life, let's not take ourselves too seriously. There is work to be done, and perhaps it's to work out

a new vocabulary of faith. That's what "Ordinary Time" is all about, re-ordering our lives around the heart of God!

In Christ we are free to let go of the heaviness of life and the latest breaking news cycles. Abraham and Sarah were those who would fall into the category of "you just can't teach an old dog new tricks..." But beware. God will always have the last laugh. Jesus already had it about 2,000 years ago when all the heaviness of the world nailed his hands and feet to a cross, and he was left to rot in a grave. But hope against hope, he rose again from the dead, and all heaven shouted with joy. And those whose lives were filled with mourning once again were filled with joy.

Friends, whether you be young or old, fathers or mothers, cynics or saints: be free in Christ and with all the Sarah's and Abrahams throughout the ages, and join in the laughter of love.

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen..