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September 15, 2019

“Laughing Together”  
*Genesis 18:1-15, 21:1-7*

Anne Lamott, once wrote, “Laughter is carbonated holiness.”

When I was a child, the only time I remember laughing in church was when I wasn’t supposed to. My brother, always the trouble maker, would try his hardest to make me laugh. And everything he did was always 10x funnier at church because we were supposed to be serious. He’d look at me in a certain way and I’d get a fit of giggles. My mother would glare at us. And if it was really bad, our father would give us the eye.

It wasn’t until I was an adult that I began to realize how important it is for a church to laugh.

There was one Sunday in my first year here when I was officiating at communion. I took the loaf of bread in my hands, just like Jesus during the last supper, and I stood before you in that solemn moment and try as I might, the darn bread wouldn’t rip in half. I’m gripping it really good and trying my hardest to tear that loaf in half and I think – “oh no...this is embarrassing”...But you all just start laughing. In a good way. And I laughed too and then, we were laughing together. It was all okay. It was carbonated holiness.

Laughing together is a way we humans bond. Sophie Scott is a neuroscientist who has studied laughter. According to a BBC report, Scott has:

“... found out that the vast majority of laughs have nothing to do with humour... Instead, she...sees laughter as a “social emotion” that brings us together and helps us to bond, whether or not something is actually funny. “When you laugh with people, [she says] you show them that you like them, you agree with them, or that you are in the same group as them,” she says. “Laughter is an index of the strength of a relationship.”<sup>1</sup>

“Laughter is an index of the strength of a relationship.”

Who are you closest with? I bet it is someone you can laugh with.

I have the pleasure of working with one of the world’s greatest laughers. Julie Campbell in the front office. when she comes to work in the morning, I usually know she is in the building because I hear her laughing. I can go from a difficult pastoral care situation, or the most stressful meeting and then go sit in Julie’s office and suddenly it feels like everything is going to be okay. I’ve told her before that I think it’s the reason we can survive doing the work we’re doing. We’d cry our eyes out if we couldn’t laugh. Sometimes we do both.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.bbc.com/future/story/20150320-why-do-we-laugh-inappropriately>

And indeed, researchers have actually found that part of *why* we humans laugh has exactly to do with how to manage pain. Not only do we use laughter as a social tool, laughter might actually elevate our pain threshold.

Physicist Dr. Alex Lickerman has written that:

some psychologists classify humor as one of the "mature" defense mechanisms we invoke to guard ourselves against overwhelming anxiety ... Being able to laugh at traumatic events in our own lives doesn't cause us to ignore them, but instead seems to prepare us to endure them.<sup>2</sup>

Our laughter can bring us together and help us endure the pain of our lives. It is carbonated holiness, as Anne Lamott said, or it *can* be.

Because laughter can also separate, alienate us. hurt us.

If you've ever been laughed *at* you know what I mean. It bonds us but it also cuts us.

In our scripture reading today, Sarah, wife of Abraham, the great matriarch of the Judeo-Christian faith, laughs.

But she doesn't laugh because something is funny, exactly. She laughs because she has just been told something absurd. She laughs to endure the pain.

She's laughing at the promises of God, which are ridiculous.

She's been told that she, a woman who has wanted a baby her whole life, who went through menopause many years ago --she -- Sarah -- will have a baby.

And so far, in her life God has made big promises that God has yet to deliver on.

So Sarah laughs -- a bitter, cynical, "this is absurd!" kind of laugh.

A "yeah-right" kind of laugh.

God calls Sarah out on her laughter but Sarah denies it. Would she admit to God's face that she laughed at him? Because in her laughter is the accusation that God is not trustworthy.

Now I don't blame Sarah for laughing. It is a kind of cruelty to tell a woman this. It is cruel to tell an infertile woman who is past all physical chance of conceiving a baby that she will now have one.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/happiness-in-world/201101/why-we-laugh>

It is cruel in all circumstances but one – that it's true.

And we do this, my friends, all the time. We laugh at God. Or, thought of in another way, we laugh at the best of humanity – at our hopes, our dreams, our wishes for a better world, the things of God – we laugh cynically and bitterly time and time again.

We laugh at the young people who are working for climate change. Yeah, right, some of us say, chuckling to ourselves, good luck overcoming a whole capitalistic system based on killing the planet!

We laugh at those who talk about a living wage for all, Yeah right, you socialist. that will never work.

We laugh at people who tell us to pursue our dreams. I could never do that, we say dismissively, laughing to dull the pain.

We laugh at the person in our lives who has hurt us time and time again when they make a new promise, yeah *right* you're different -- been there before, not falling for that again -- because we cannot risk believing them this time.

We laugh at ourselves – when we fail and we hurt and we mess up.

Like Sarah, in our bitter laughter we think we know who we are – old and dried up, our time past, our best years behind us, our future already written, and we laugh at God. Bitterly. To help the pain.

But while we might cynically laugh, thinking we know our limitations, we forget who God is. we forget that while we are limited, God isn't.

Is anything too hard for God? the strangers ask of Sarah. In some translations it reads – is anything too wonderful for the Lord?

And that question in and of itself might lead us to the answer on which our faith rests.

Is anything too wonderful for God?

For it goes just as God has promised. Sarah does indeed conceive a child in her old age and when the child is born, they name him Isaac whose name means laughter, and Sarah finally *can* laugh. Not a derisive, bitter laugh that comes from enduring pain and expecting promises to be broken. But a laugh that comes from great joy, from immense gratitude, from the mystery of the goodness of God. Isaac is the bond of laughter between Sarah and God.

Issac whose name means laughter is the proof of that strengthened relationship between God and Sarah. He is their bond. Laughter becomes their bond.

We are limited by our bodies, our age and experience, by how much money we have, by how smart we are, by time and space –God is not. That’s what this story reminds us. God is not limited. God is not even limited by the stories in our bible nor is God limited by the word God or our religious speculations.

And God chooses ordinary and even unexpected people time and time again to further God’s work in the world.

These moments of delivered promise, of bonding laughter with God, might not come in ways we choose. It might not come *when* we choose. It might not come in a way we can explain.

But we do not follow a God of explanations, we follow a God of promises. A God who tells us that the limits we put on ourselves and others are not the same to God. That with God the wonderful and the difficult really are possible. That with God, pain can be turned to joy.

We are not too old or too young. We are not too weak or too poor or too naïve. Our story is not over. God is still doing wonderful things with us and with you. God is still creating new life where we think there is none. God is still making promises and we will keep waiting faithfully to see what wonderful thing God will do next.

And so we listen for that laughter – that laughter that overcomes our bitterness and our cynicism – that laughter that tells us we were delightfully wrong – that laughter that means new life has come, despite our doubts, that laughter that bonds us with one another and with God.

We listen and we wait for the day when the laughter of bitterness is exchanged for the laughter of delighted amazement.

As hard as it is, keep trusting in the God of promises, keep trusting in the best of humanity, keep trusting in the hope we all have for a better world for all people. Keep trusting in the kingdom of God.

Sure -- we have moments of bitter and cynical doubt and laughter, but we also have moments of carbonated holiness. When we cannot contain the wonders of God that we have witnessed, when we cannot contain our gratitude at the goodness of God, and we just have to laugh. May we all find those moments of carbonated holiness, of cackles and guffaws and belly laughs and chuckles and howls and whoops and snorts and giggles. May we find those moments. And may that laughter bond us together with the very source of life.

Amen.