

Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC  
June 18, 2017

**“Not a Laughing Matter”**

“... Sarah laughed to herself ...”

Genesis 18:12

“Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?”

Genesis 18:14

**PRELUDE**

It has been said that laughter is  
good for the soul.

A biblical Proverb echoes this thought –  
**“a cheerful heart is a good medicine,”**  
so we read in Proverbs 17:22.

We are often in need of such medicine.  
Laughter, the blessings of mirth,  
is antidote to being downcast;  
it breaks the gloom and mood of sullenness  
into which we can sink,  
the melancholy to which we are susceptible,  
and lifts us up, that we might be  
spared despair.

**“Laughter is serious.  
More complicated, more serious  
than tears”**  
(Toni Morrison, *Jazz*, the character Violet).

It is worthy of our pursuit,  
worthy to embrace as grace.

A little over a century ago,  
the French philosopher, Henri Bergson,  
did scholarly work on laughter,  
addressing the role of the comic in our lives,

and the social function of laughter.  
Bergson noted it's hard to laugh alone.

He saw laughter as a **"corrective force"**  
which prevents us from **"becoming cranks."**  
That's serious, for cranky Christians,  
irritable souls, are not good conduits for  
demonstrating gospel.

Laughter is serious. How serious?

Laughter is **"instant vacation,"**  
someone once said. It is a welcome  
break, an altered state,  
from what is normal, often listless,  
in our days.

Laughter is a serious matter.  
Norman Cousins, so many years ago,  
wrote a book, *The Anatomy of an Illness* (1981),  
in which, while working with his physicians,  
he surrounded himself with good humor;  
he credited "laughter," and a positive attitude,  
with his recovery. Laughter is **"inner jogging"**  
Cousins said. It is a workout for our outlook  
on life, a mental toning for mind set, our  
attitude toward whatever challenges await.

And he went on to say:

**"I have learned never to underestimate the  
capacity of the human mind and body to regenerate ...  
even when prospects seem most wretched."**

Laughter. It's a serious subject matter.  
**"... if I did not laugh, I should die,"**  
Lincoln once said, in reference to the  
**"fearful strain"** that was upon him  
day and night when our nation  
was engaged in its Civil War.

We - as a people - may not know the  
“**fearful strain**” Lincoln suffered,  
but we know enough of our own  
burdens to appreciate his sentiment;  
we know enough to nod, to welcome,  
the sweet relief laughter spells.

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I’m always on the lookout for good humor,  
    which is not an easy hunt.  
Lots of humor in the world, but good humor,  
humor that doesn’t disparage or demean a people,  
humor that doesn’t put down one to build  
up another, humor that doesn’t butt someone  
    different so as to diminish,  
    that’s not an easy acquisition.

So - indulge a story I heard the other day.  
Suitable, I hope, for Father’s Day.

Four men, first time fathers- to-be, pacing the waiting room  
in a maternity wing of a Minnesota hospital. Proud, a bit nervous,  
wondering what is soon to come upon them and their world.

A nurse comes with a report to the first man. Congratulations,  
you are the father of twins. “My goodness,” he said, that’s  
strange. “**I work for the Minnesota Twins.**”

Another nurse comes with a report; he speaks to the second  
man. Congratulations, you are the father of triplets. “My  
goodness,” he said. “**That’s strange. I work for 3M.**”

Another nurse comes, reporting to the third man.  
Congratulations! Your wife has delivered quadruplets.  
“My goodness,” he said. “**That’s strange. I work for  
the 4 Seasons Hotel chain.**”

Another nurse comes. She sees the fourth man quite pale and shaking, in a stupor really. “Good gracious, What’s wrong with you,” the nurse asked. He looked up and said: “**I work for 7 Up.**”

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We have laughter in our scripture lesson this morning. But we need be careful. It doesn’t qualify as good humor. It is of a different kind.

It’s laughter that is scornful; dismissive; disbelieving. As described in my study Bible, it is a reasonable response to the “**absurd disproportion between... divine promise and ... human possibility**” (see the annotation, *The New Oxford Bible*, p. 22). I’m not sure I agree with the “**reasonable response**” angle. It is edgy laughter, defensive in nature. The kind of laugh that sounds when we parry with an adversary, and we vow not to be play as fool.

Let’s briefly revisit this story from Genesis, and the portrait offered by our faith parents. The Lord appeared to Abraham, we read, in the heat of the day; three man are seen “**standing near,**” visitors on the doorstep of Abraham’s mobile abode; the time: “**noontime siesta**” is how my study Bible describes it. For a moment, I imagined Abraham in a sombrero – which is a good example of cultural conditioning at work in biblical interpretation.

Abraham busies himself, he hustles to honor the strange and unexpected Visitors. He welcomes them; makes room in his oasis. Water is ordered, there is cake to bake, and curds, and milk and a calf, to prepare and share.

All is a flurry, until a question is asked:  
Where's the wife, Abraham.  
Where is your dear Sarah?

Sarah, of course, is near. She has her ear to the door,  
waiting for any incoming text message Abraham  
might be inclined to send. One of the three then  
declares: In due season, in the spring, "**according  
to the time of life,**" (KJV) I'll return,  
and Sarah shall have a son.

For Sarah, the proposition  
is quite preposterous.  
She is old (90 yrs.), as is Abraham  
(99 yrs. at the time).  
They both were "**well stricken in age**" (KJV).

So she laughed to herself.  
"**I am waxed old, and shall I have pleasure?**"  
I'm not even sharing the old man's bed,  
that these three wise guys augur baby?

Sarah laughed - the laughter of disbelief.  
She isn't buying her inclusion  
in what is promised.

Tense exchange briefly follows;  
she is challenged with the question.  
"**Is anything too wonderful  
for the Lord?**"

It's a question that remains unanswered.  
She takes refuge in a lie; she denies the laugh.  
It is a biblical "Watergate" moment,  
covering up the disconnect between  
what she was really thinking and  
what she was actually saying.

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Just a couple of thoughts to share on this.

- (1) Sarah is a designated instrument for the future God intends to be. She can't see it, and we shouldn't fault her for what faithful vision she can't muster. She is past prime, resigned - to life in her Well-stricken state.

The promise, though, is clearly stated - Sarah will be source for the future God intends.

We are invited to insert ourselves in this story. To ponder in a Sarah-like way, are we able to play our part in the future God intends?

The issue - for us - isn't about procreation; the issue for us is about new creation, being faithful to the Visit of Jesus, who left us his Word, and who promised us a Spirit, to sustain and empower us, to keep us advancing into the prayer he taught in the "Our Father ..."

"thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

This is the issue:  
will our faith, our belief, our resolve  
link our now with the future God intends?

**"We are made wise  
not by our recollection of our past,  
but by our responsibility for our future"**  
(George Bernard Shaw).

Will our faith have a future?

Will we be Holy Spirit wise,

and responsible,  
to forge the future,  
with Jesus love?  
Will we live with trust and knowledge  
that nothing is too wonderful  
for the Lord?

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We are failing the future  
intended by God -  
both us and our children.  
We are laughing too much like Sarah -  
in disbelief, in spite of the future  
God has in mind for us.

In some church circles, today is  
Refugee Justice Sunday.  
I've included an insert in today's worship  
material and encourage you read.  
It is such an overwhelming challenge  
in our world community.  
It is a Middle East problem,  
an African problem,  
a Central American and Mexican problem.  
It is a fear issue - with restrictions on  
"welcome" preventing and hindering  
those who are eager to help.

Executive orders have created a noxious  
atmosphere, messaging we are not welcoming  
of people tired and poor and displaced.  
Our Church World Service (CWS)  
is not able to do all it can do.  
In February of this year, World Relief laid off  
140 staff members, and shut down 5 offices  
(Sojourner's, July, 2017). Catholic Charities  
here in Fort Wayne is wanting and able to do more -  
but will not be permitted.

In an hour so desperate for so many,  
we can't afford to retreat; or to pause  
into a Sarah-like laugh.  
We must charge, advance by faith,  
to welcome the future God intends.

I appeal - please consider the pledge  
**"to do everything in our power to extend hospitality  
and welcome to all people - regardless of where they  
are from, how they pray, or what language they speak."**  
Consider the world and its brokenness,  
and vow to contribute to its regeneration,  
with generosity, and courage, with  
resilience, with love like that of Jesus,  
who said, **"be of good cheer ... be of good courage ..."**  
for I have overcome the world.

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The Interfaith Solidarity Declaration:  
released tomorrow. An odd set of supporters.  
Surprising. We are on the list. With Quakers  
and Catholic and Brethren. And Muslims and Jews.  
Who would have thought it possible?

Not all are on the list. How regrettable, indeed  
tragic, when Christians table the question:  
Is anything too wonderful for God  
working with and through us?

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Here is the good news. Eugene Peterson reminds us:  
God does not require good people in order  
to do good work. God will use folks who laugh  
in disbelief; God will use the well stricken;  
the overlooked and underestimated;  
God will use the down and dirty;

the bona fide sinner, the broken saint,  
human beings with glaring faults and  
resumes filled with failure.

The God who can take a crooked stick and draw  
a straight line (St. Ignatius),  
can work with anybody who says,  
I may not be much and  
I may not have much,  
but here I am.

Here I am: so melt me, mold me,  
fill me and use me.  
For this is My Father's World,  
and our hope and prayer,  
our sincere desire, is to be so aligned,  
to be such faithful correspondents,  
that we are able to laugh and sing,  
and welcome and serve together  
a people of good humor,  
in the world as it is,  
in the future as it is promised,  
both now and forever.

Amen.

*(Sermons are typically composed in haste,  
for the demands of the day are many;  
so be charitable as you read; and remember:  
the contents of this sermon have not been edited  
and may or may not have been a part of its public presentation)*