

The Rev. Christine Love Mendoza
The Church of the Good Shepherd
The Second Sunday after Pentecost – Sunday, June 14, 2020
Genesis 18:1-15

One of the things I continue to find so remarkable about 12-step meetings is the abundance of laughter. It was something I never expected. When I first realized I was in big trouble and was finally desperate enough to actually start attending AA meetings, I wasn't feeling particularly light-hearted. Depression and addiction have a way of turning you so inward that you can't see or experience much outside of yourself – and let me tell you that there isn't much hilarity in that dark place inside.

At first, the laughter of the recovery group would really make me mad. How dare they find their challenges funny! How dare they laugh at the ridiculousness of our self-destructive thoughts and behavior! I was offended.

After I had done enough of the hard work of recovery to regain a measure of emotional and mental health, I began to realize that I, too, was laughing. But I realized I wasn't laughing at people and their antics, or finding them pathetic. Nor was I expressing the mean humor of *schadenfreude*, when you take joy at another's suffering. Rather, I was laughing at how their stories reflected my human condition. I was laughing at how unnecessarily foolish we can be. I was laughing at how easily we lie to ourselves and obfuscate our intentions and motivations. I was laughing at our endless capacity for self-delusion.

Mostly, I was laughing at the ridiculousness of God's grace, love, and forgiveness. How, even though malformed by sin, addiction, self-contempt, and complete self-centeredness, the very God I often pretended didn't exist loved me anyway and continued to move through my life. How, even though I in no way deserved it, God simply would not stop forgiving me (even when I couldn't forgive myself). How, no matter how far I ran and how much I tried to hide, God always found and embraced me.

To be fair, not all 12-step group meetings have the capacity to be light-hearted. I suspect this has something to do with the collective health of the group members. It's hard to find humor when everyone is consumed with their own pain. And the meetings themselves weren't all fun and games – there were lots of tears shed, suffering shared, and tough-talk as well. But, overall, the healthiest meetings I attended shared equally and openly the pain and joy, suffering and laughter, that mark the living of fully human lives.

This laughter comes from the abiding sense of one's place in the scheme of things – both the humility of knowing that I am no better or worse, really, than anyone else, as well as the stability and security of knowing that I am nonetheless lovingly held in the palm of God's hand. Secure in knowing my place within creation and my relationship with my higher-power, I am liberated from the bondage of self. This is a term used in AA which means I am freed from the self-imposed prison of my perceived needs, fears, insecurities, addictions, and unworthiness. This doesn't mean that I don't sometimes still walk into that dark prison, but now I no longer shut and lock the door behind me. I now know that I am always free to choose to walk back out and into the light.

Being freed from the bondage of self, I am able to take things a bit more lightly. Sixteen years into my resurrected life of recovery, I now laugh at it all. I must laugh ten times as much as I did before. I find joy in the ridiculousness of humanity and God's grace. And I especially laugh at the ridiculous things God does in our lives – those totally unexpected movements of grace that both never should have happened and that I didn't even know were possible. I laugh because God really does fulfill his promises, but often not in the way we expect. This is ridiculous, this grace of God, and it is joyfully funny.

Abraham and Sarah know something of this laughter. God called Abraham and Sarah to a life of radical faith. God said to Abraham, take your wife and leave your family and travel to “the land that I will show you.” While they were already getting up in years by that time – Abraham was 75 and Sarah was 65 – God made a promise to Abraham saying, that from him will come a great nation and descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky. Which was ridiculous given their age and the fact that Sarah was barren. Nonetheless, they leave and travel for many years and have quite a few adventures – and mishaps – along the way. After twenty years of this journeying, Sarah has not yet conceived a child and Abraham quite reasonably questions this promise.

God then visits Abraham again and renews this promise of blessing upon Sarah, saying that she will “give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.” At this, Abraham, finally falls on his face and laughs. He laughs because it is so preposterous, saying to himself, “Can a child be born to a man who is one hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?” God responds to Abraham laughter’s by saying that God’s covenant will be established with this son whom he is to name Isaac.

Not long after this, God appears again before Abraham in the presence of three strangers. Abraham offers hospitality and invites these strangers into his home. And yet again, God’s promise of Sarah bearing a son is given. This time, Sarah, while unseen, has been listening in to the conversation. When she hears what is said, she is overcome with laughter at this preposterous promise of blessing. Hearing her, the strangers ask Abraham why she laughs and pose what may be the most important question asked in scripture, “Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?”

I think Abraham and Sarah’s laughter at the ridiculousness of God’s promise is not a sign of doubt, rather it is a sign of faith. Theirs was not a cynical or derisive laugh, rather they laugh because the whole thing is ridiculous, and yet they know that theirs is a God of ridiculous grace and love. They laugh because no matter how preposterous it all is, God just might do it. And God didn’t seem to hold their laughter against them. Indeed, God seems to have laughed along with them when he tells them the baby boy will be named Isaac, which in Hebrew means “laughter”!

Abraham and Sarah have already traveled a long, dusty, and dangerous road with God. They have learned that God continues to bless and be present to them in spite of circumstances or their failings. Over this time, they have learned to trust God and have developed a deep and abiding faith. And it is from this foundation of faith that they laugh at God’s ridiculous promise. They laugh because they have learned that nothing – absolutely nothing – is too wonderful for the Lord.

I have found in my life that this kind of laughter is healing and generative, and it is sometimes the only response to the ridiculousness of love. Love, whether human or divine, is not rational – it is not reasonable, explainable, or predictable. And it most certainly is not the product of merit – love happens seemingly without cause or reason. God rains love upon the righteous and the unrighteous simply because God is love.

Opening one’s heart for this sort of love-sourced laughter also means making oneself vulnerable to suffering. These two seem, in fact, to be two sides of the very same coin, but it is what brings true joy into the world. Note I did not say “happiness”, rather joy. Happiness is an ephemeral thing – an emotion that comes and goes – while joy is something much deeper and more resilient. Archbishop Desmond Tutu has written that “Discovering more joy does not, I’m sorry to say, save us from the inevitability of hardship and heartbreak. In fact, we may cry more easily, but we will laugh more easily, too. Perhaps we are just more alive.”¹

When we live fully human lives – lives vulnerable to suffering but also fully receptive to joy – we may live lives of great laughter. This laughter is great not so much because of volume but

¹ Dalai Lama, Desmond Tutu, and Douglas Adams, *The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World* (Penguin Random House: 2016), 57.

because it is born of the joy and suffering that is found when living faithfully within the deep streams of life.

So often, we characterize lives of great faith as lives that are serious and grave. While I think that this is true some of the time, my own experience of a faithful life is one that also fully embraces great playfulness, joy, and laughter. Laughter because of the ridiculousness of love and life. Laughter because I no longer need to take myself so seriously. And laughter because I now know that God has created me, and you, to be imperfect people of joy.

Amen.