

Winfield United Church Reflection – June 14, 2020

Laugh

Genesis 18:1-15

Charlie Chaplin, well-renowned entertainer from the 20th century once said, a day without laughter is a day wasted. We know how good it feels to have a good laugh. Science tells us that when we express this emotion, the feel-good endorphins are released and improves our mental health and sense of wellbeing. But what I didn't know is that laughter has also been proven to boost our immune systems, improve circulation and relax tense muscles, and sharpens our ability to remember things.

Laughter is a distinguishing feature of human beings. Research indicates that laughter may have evolved to facilitate bonding across large groups of people. In primates, the grooming process releases chemicals that help to build social bonds; it served a social purpose rather than a hygienic one. Humans eventually came to live in groups that were larger than the grooming process allowed. So, like speech, laughter facilitates our social belonging to one another and helps us to bond quickly in a large community. And I suspect we would know this experience...we gravitate towards people with a sense of humor that resonates with us.

This morning, find some laughter in our story. We encounter Abraham and Sarah, whom we could describe as the first family of the Old Testament. To catch us up, a few chapters back in Genesis, Abraham, a successful warrior in battle against the Babylonians, experiences God in a vision and makes a covenant with him, promising Abraham and his wife many descendants, land, and blessings. However, Abraham and Sarah are in their senior years and past their child-bearing years. They believe the promises God has made, yet years later, Sarah has not been able to conceive. The years continue to go by and the promise of descendants continues to become less and less likely it would seem. Other plans are made that sees Abraham father a child with Sarah's slave girl, Hagar. Tensions ensue in the family as one might imagine. And here we arrive at our story this morning. Three strangers pay the couple a visit. Abraham and Sarah extend gracious hospitality and a

place of rest for the travellers. After the meal, one of men asks about Sarah and predicts that this time next year they will return and find Sarah has born a son.

Sarah can't help but overhear the conversation. She has heard this before. She laughs to herself, bemusing the notion that she and Abraham will have a child of their own. They are just too old. But the visitor wants to know why Sarah just laughed. "Is anything impossible for God?" he asks.

This question is rather haunting. It hangs over the story this morning and is left to Abraham and Sarah to answer. I appreciated Walter Bruggemann's commentary which unpacks the question, "Is anything impossible for God?" It gave me pause to consider how things are and how I hope things will be. Abraham and Sarah have already made up their minds...they are too old to conceive... it is not possible. The visitor however affirms the promise that God made to Abraham years earlier, that he will indeed have many descendants. The open-ended question functions to challenge the assumptions of the couple as to what is possible. We use reality to gauge those things that are possible and those which are not. Reality is a construct of one's experience, logic, learning, economics and ideology. We rely on governments to organize us, the world of academia to explain our physical and theoretical environments. We have constructs that tell us what is possible. But Bruggemann asks where does the Church fit into this function of reality? Drawing on the thinking of Karl Barth, he says that reality and realm of what is possible becomes reduced to only that which modern logic will allow. The Church, founded upon a message from Jesus of radical inclusiveness and justice for all, challenges the reality we find ourselves part of to find new possibilities the world judges as impossible. Bruggemann reminds me that the Church has the opportunity to reshape that which is deemed to be impossible.

This week, I read a letter from Paul Douglas Walfall, ministry personnel at Fort Saskatchewan United Church in Alberta. As a person of color, he invites white people in the United Church of Canada to make an intentional commitment to end racism. For Paul, this is an act of love. He says it best and I will quote him directly... "Consider the ways that you

can put love into action as a means of counteracting racism. Remember that love in the Christian faith is more than an emotion; it is an act of will. When we love, we choose the highest good for those we love. This love is both transformative and revolutionary.

When you love you cannot accept it when another person is discriminated against or treated unkindly because of the colour of their skin. When you love, you treat every person with dignity, as all people are created in the image of God.”

We have hope when we read Paul’s invitation. The impossible can be made possible. Our news of the past months is full of situations that bring much pain and strife. We wait for COVID updates, only to hear as things begin to reopen that it most certainly has not disappeared. Police brutality, Black Lives Matter, racial justice and equality are at the front and center of our consciences as angry and weary calls for change reverberate around us. How can the church be part of the change that is all around us?

Laugh was the theme of today’s message. I don’t know if I have said much of anything very funny this morning. But I do think this story shows the bible with a bit of a sense of humor. Sarah laughed at a moment when she didn’t know what else to do. Was she frustrated, fed up with promises going nowhere? We too live in this tension today. Between the way things are and the way we long for things to be.

Amen and Amen