10-24/25-20 Laughter at the Table Rev. Amy Haines

Gen 18:1-15 Come to the Table Series

Today we conclude our four-week series called “Come to the Table.”

Revelation- Hospitality- Enemies- Laughter—each we have found in God’s presence; each we have found in the presence of others.

Throughout these four weeks we have reflected on God’s Word, especially from the Gospel of Luke, where Jesus revealed God’s love and ways and grace at table fellowship, welcoming everyone whom God claims as beloved, including religious leader and outcast, men and women, saint and sinner, friend and enemy.

If we listen with our hearts to God’s story, we can hear the laughter of God’s delight in us

through God’s hospitality and welcome. If we expand such welcome to others, whether they are strangers or friends, those like us and those not like us, then we can also hear the laughter of God’s delight as we expand God’s love and grace to others.

Today, our Scripture comes from the story of Abraham and Sarah, and the faith to believe in the delight of the Lord, a Lord who makes the impossible possible, a Lord who turns despair into hope, a Lord who turns our crying into laughter.

Hear now the story of Sarah’s laughter in Genesis 18:1-15.

When my mom turned 70, my sister and I organized a surprise birthday party for her. We invited her sisters, extended family, church family and others. When Jen and Mom pulled up outside the building, and Mom saw my daughter Rachel run toward her, she didn’t know whether to laugh or to cry or to chastise us for surprising her again. So she gave us the look,

cried a little, laughed a lot, and many memories were shared and created that day.

Have you ever laughed when you knew you shouldn’t laugh? Hang around children long enough, and you’ll find yourself coughing trying to cover a laugh, or turning your head to keep from smiling, or giving up and letting out a belly laugh at something a child has said or done.

Rachel went through a spell when we called her our graffiti artist. You know when kids get quiet, something is wrong? Ken once found her covered in marker from head to toe, as well as the wall underneath our front table. She even had marks where she had pushed up her pant legs. Since I was at work when this happened, Ken had to take pictures and call me, not knowing whether to laugh or to cry.

Laughing and crying are both responses to emotions deep within us. Sometimes, our laughter comes from a place of deep joy, a place of celebration or thanksgiving, a time of contentment and connection with others.

At other times, however, our laughter comes from a place of deep struggle, a place of sorrow or uncertainty, a time when we must laugh to keep us from crying.

Kathleen R. Fischer reminds us, “Only those who know how to weep can also laugh heartily.”

-thepastorsworkshop.com:laughter

Follow Jesus long enough, and there will be times when you laugh for joy, and times when you laugh in disbelief. You may laugh in disbelief when God calls and you say, “who me, Lord?” or “you want me to do what, Lord?” You may laugh in joy when a family member says yes to following Jesus.

We are not the first believers to laugh at the wonder of the Lord.

Can you imagine the disciples laughing for joy after having fed over 5,000 men, plus women and children, with only a few loaves and fish? Nothing in impossible with the Lord!

Can you also imagine the disciples laughing from uncertainty when Jesus looked at them and said you will do greater works than me! Nothing is too hard for the Lord!

Our Scripture today is the story of one woman’s laughter in the face of the unexpected ways of God.

Abraham and Sarah were an ordinary couple, handpicked by God to be the foundation of a new humanity, the parents of a great nation, the ancestors of God’s people.

To be the chosen one of God was a great honor for Abraham. All Abraham had to do was obey the Lord and worship only Him, and in return Abraham was promised land and descendants too numerous to count.

Abraham was willing, yet skeptical. After all, Abraham was a nomad, a wanderer, with no prospect of land ownership. And his wife, Sarah, was barren, unable to have children. So how would the promise of land and children be fulfilled?

Abraham didn’t know how God would provide, yet he and his household still set out in faith on a journey toward an unknown land and an unknown future.

One day, as Abraham rested in the heat of the day, suddenly three strangers appeared at his tent. Abraham, being a good host, offered gracious hospitality to the strangers. He did not view them as enemies, but as fellow sojourners in the desert. Not only did Abraham invite them to stay and rest, he offered them the finest from his table. Fresh bread. Quality meat. Milk.

And then, while they ate, the Lord revealed through them the fulfillment of the promise—

by that time next year Abraham’s wife Sarah would bear him a son.

In Genesis chapter 17, when Abraham heard such news from the Lord, the Scripture declares,

“Abraham fell on his face and laughed. He said to himself, can a 100-year-old man become a father, or Sarah, a 90-year-old woman, have a child?” (v17 CEB)

In Genesis chapter 18,

Sarah overhears the revelation of the stranger, “So Sarah laughed to herself, thinking,

I’m no longer able to have children and my husband’s old.” (v12 CEB)

Sarah’s laughter is not the laughter of joy here, but the laughter of disbelief. Her laughter is born out of her pain, a laugh that masks her tears. For many years, Sarah has yearned to fulfill her role as a woman and give birth to a child. She has been shamed as a barren woman. Now, she is long past her prime and past her ability to have a child. While she has never lost hope, she is also a realist. What the stranger has declared is impossible!

To have faith in such a promise was unreasonable, unexplainable, and miraculous. And so, she laughed. Yet in her laugh was still a kernel of faith at the unexpected ways of God.

Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? Or, as some translations read, is anything too hard for the Lord?

God has the power to bring new life from a barren womb. God has the power to turn a young shepherd boy into a mighty king. God has the power to defeat death with eternal life. God has the power to forgive us no matter what sins we have committed. God has the power to turn our lives around from apathy and fear to love and reconciliation. God has the power to be present with us no matter what we face.

Do we have faith in a God that brings us through mourning to dancing, through darkness to light, through sadness to joy?

Such faith is like …“the bird that feels the light and sings to greet the dawn while it is still dark.”

-Illustrations Unlimited p. 187

When was the last time you laughed because God surprised you?

When was the last time you laughed at God’s unexpected ways?

I have to admit, when we shut down in person worship in March and went virtual in less than 48 hours, I had to laugh to keep myself from crying. I had too much to do at that time to cry.

And when we made it through that first service, I had to laugh at God’s holy shove into live stream after we had simply talked about the possibility for years.

Yet when I had to offer Easter service with only my family and Penny’s family present in-person,

I struggled not to cry that day, missing each and every one of you in the community of faith.

Yet by the end of the service, I was also laughing. Laughing once again at God’s power over death. Laughing once again at feeling the great cloud of witnesses surround me.

Each one of us will respond in different ways to what we experience in faith and in life.

Some of us are wired more to cry, and some of us are wired more to laugh. Some of us are more willing to share our struggles, and some of us are more willing to share our joys.

In whatever we face, may we recognize that we are not alone. God is with us. And the community of faith can be present with us, if we allow them to be.

No one can truly interpret our experiences for us. The same experience may produce different emotions in different people, and we need to respect that. We are not here to tell one another how to feel. We are not here to tell one another how to respond to pain.

Instead, God invites us to listen to one another’s stories, and laugh together, cry together,

encourage one another, care for one another. Then, as we share our stories, we can experience once again the power of God at work in unexpected and often impossible ways, in and through and around us.

Somedays God is most at work in our moments of joy.

Somedays God is most as work in our moments of struggle.

Somedays God reveals God’s self through our personal prayers or reflections.

Somedays God reveals God’s self through our interaction with others.

Throughout the Scriptures, God’s work among God’s people is often revealed in unexpected ways. Through an unwed teenager as the mother of God. Through a young shepherd boy anointed to be king. Through rural fisherman tapped as disciples to all nations. Through a fiery furnace, a whale, a storm, an exodus.

God’s work is often revealed in unexpected ways. Then and now. Throughout the scriptures and in our lives today. In sacred places and ordinary places. In laughter and in tears.

Yes, brothers and sisters in Christ, I know that doing God’s work in this world is not always easy.

We are accused of being political when we follow Jesus’ call to love our neighbor. We define that love in different ways, and judge others for loving differently. There is much in this world, and frankly, in the church, to bring us to tears.

And yet, today, I invite you to holy laughter. I invite you to laugh at God making the impossible possible. I invite you to live into the joy of the Lord.

As Ecclesiastes once proclaimed, “There is a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance.” (3:4)

Martin Luther has been quoted as saying, “If I am not allowed to laugh in heaven,

I don’t want to go there.” -thepastorsworkshop.com:laughter

We cannot draw others to Christ if we always act like we’re headed to a funeral. We follow a God of resurrection! A God who brought life out of death! A God who makes the impossible possible! A God who wants a relationship with each and every one of us! A God who forgives and redeems! If that doesn’t bring a smile to our face, I don’t know what will!

When we proclaim the good news of Jesus, we are called to rejoice! And celebrate! And laugh!

I have always imagined Jesus with a twinkle in his eye, and a holy charisma that drew others to him. Can you imagine what it was like to be at table with Jesus? Yes, times of serious reflection,

yet also times of joy-filled laughter. Amazement at the unexpected ways of God. Of healings and teachings. Of miracles and learnings.

As I was trying to find an image of Jesus laughing this week, I came across the paintings of Greg Olsen. This painting is titled “The Way of Joy.”

--**"*The Way of Joy"*** by Greg Olsen. Used with Permission. [www.GregOlsen.com](http://www.gregolsen.com/)

Look at Jesus’ face as he converses with an unnamed disciple. Joy- peace- welcome- contentment—all are embodied in Jesus’ smile and laughter in this painting. And I imagine Jesus showing the same joy and welcome when he looks into each and every one of our faces!

Can we share in such holy laughter? Can we share in such hopeful contentment that God is with us throughout our lives? Can we share in such joy as we live for Jesus, being a beacon of God’s love and welcome and grace?

As we conclude this series this week, I invite you to continue to come to the table. Come to God’s table where you are loved and welcomed, forgiven and encouraged. Where Jesus looks at you with a holy twinkle in his eye. Then expand that same welcome to your tables, your conversations, your actions, offering hospitality to those who agree with you and those who don’t, to friend and enemy, to neighbor and stranger. Be willing to laugh together and cry together, hope together and lament together, struggle together and rejoice together.

God, by your Spirit make us one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world until Christ comes and we feast together as his heavenly banquet. Amid our laughter and our tears may we share your holy presence and power and possibility with others at our tables and in our lives.

God, make it so. Amen.