

*Don't Laugh When I Tell You this*

Genesis 18: 1-15      Matthew 9:35 - 10:8

I thought laughter was a universal characteristic of human beings, and most likely a frequently utilized mode of expression by the Creator, particularly when regarding that human creation, alternating between laughter and tears. I learned to my great distress that there are people who do not laugh, who cannot laugh, and that people can lose the ability to laugh.

Maya Angelou famously stated: "I don't trust people who don't laugh." She seemed to take a particularly dim view of people who insisted on being serious all the time. I would agree. Lighten up!

A Rutgers doctoral student did a study and discovered that the more someone practiced self-deception, the less likely they were to genuinely laugh. He used a facial action coding system to examine particular facial features. People can fake a guffaw or a smile, but this system ensures whether subjects genuinely smiled or forced it. The researcher claims the laughter comes from the eyes and an authentic is impossible to fake.

He says, "[Laughter] is an honest, involuntary emotional signal and it is signaling enjoyment. People who are self-deceptive could be more concerned with honest signaling. It's a little bit dangerous for them to be laughing because they don't get it themselves and there are concealing the truth to themselves and they are concealing it to others."

Loretta LaRoche, a suburban Boston stress management consultant says: "It all depends on how your brain functions. Give yourself permission to find humor. It's almost like a spiritual practice, finding ways to laugh at yourself."

Laughter is a sign of health and a healthy spirit.

This is good because God gave us this gift, and if we're being faithful in our discipleship, we need to make sure that laughter is in our toolkit all the time. However, when God gets those God-like ideas about what God's faithful people should be all about, we may need to check our laughter. You know, like people do in church, even when the pastor actually says something that is quite funny, but no, you swallow it, your eyes bulge, you snort, and you don't laugh. Being a stand-up pastor means facing the worst audience every week because they're all programmed not to laugh.

One day, old Abraham notices three visitors coming along the road. He goes out to greet them and invite them in for some simple hospitality. It isn't every day that visitors come walking along the road by his place, being in the middle of nowhere. However, he does seem to be going out of his way to get them to stop and sit a spell. His simple offer of bread and drink for them becomes something entirely different when he instructs his servants. He adds a calf to the cakes, and milk and curds besides water.

He's pulling out all the stops. He must have recognized that these were special visitors indeed.

They ask where his wife is, calling her by name. "Oh, she's inside the tent," he says. Of course, Sarah's ears pick up at the mention of her name, by these strangers no less. She is all ears now inside the tent.

The text says: *Then one said, 'I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.'* Sarah hears that remark, and she can't help but laugh out loud. I'm guessing it was a loud guffaw, bursting out before she can stifle herself. Admit it: isn't that what you'd do with that news?

The one who spoke is now referred to in the text as "the Lord." He says, *'Why did Sarah laugh, and say, "Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?"* Before Abraham can think of anything to say, the Lord continues: *'Is anything too hard for the Lord?'* Uh-oh.

Sarah heard that, too, and perhaps emerges from the tent to offer an excuse, like, *It was my allergies*, or *I was laughing at something else*, or some other lame cover. Sarah also figured out that these were no ordinary visitors. She feared having caused an offense. The Lord wasn't letting her off the hook, and said, *Oh, yes, you did laugh.*

Sarah's laughter is never mentioned again until much later in Genesis 21 when she says after Isaac's birth: *God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.* Therefore, we shouldn't read too much into Sarah's laughter. It's nothing more than the natural human reaction to some crazy thing that God has dropped into our laps. Laughter is a generous and graceful reaction to such remarkable news. We could imagine other reactions.

It would seem from the Lord's chiding about the laughter that her raucous response discloses a strong **dis**belief in what had been promised. Indeed, this promise was totally preposterous. Of course, what we learn in scripture is that God (and Jesus) do some totally preposterous things in totally preposterous ways. God could have seen to her pregnancy at a much earlier and more likely time in her life. No, God waits until she is long past child bearing age.

Much hinges on that phrase, *Is anything too hard for the Lord?* It's a rhetorical question since the answer is quite obviously, 'No, nothing is too hard for God.' That doesn't make God's will and promise any less preposterous. We are taught that God will provide in God's own time. We are taught that God's preposterous promises are something worthy of our attention and our faith. We are taught that God is gracious enough to provide at a time when we least expect to be blessed and led into something new and remarkably different from anything we could have imagined. We are taught that God has ways to bring life out of what seems lifeless in ways we could never imagine.

What does all of that, wonderful as it is, have to do with our passage from Matthew?

That passage starts off with Jesus doing his mission among God's people. It says he is teaching and preaching, healing and showing compassion. His spirit was moved because he saw them as harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

Let's understand this condition of God's people. "Harassed and helpless" is an expression that could easily be trivialized by the comfortable standards we enjoy and the privileged place we have in our society today. The more literal expression of "harassed and helpless" would be "oppressed and thrown to the ground." There is nothing trivial about this. They are supine in their weakness, on their backs, on the ground, pleading for mercy, like George Floyd among many victims of oppressive violence. They are oppressed, exploited, targeted, and victimized, ravaged by the beasts of society who prey on the weak and keep God's people weak, anxious, and needy.

The expression "sheep without a shepherd" is common in the Hebrew scriptures of the Old Testament indicating that a king – the shepherd – has failed God's people, allowing and condoning God's people to be exploited and oppressed, or even directly doing the oppression and exploitation *as the king*. Ezekiel has damning words for the rulers of his days and how they have failed to care for God's sheep. When we say the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, *The Lord is my shepherd*, then we should hear the psalmist stating that no earthly ruler or leader is truly lord, but only the Lord God is one's true and faithful shepherd who makes all things right and good. In the Kingdom of God, 'the Lord is my shepherd.' "Sheep without a shepherd" is a political phrase that condemns social and political systems that fail to bring healing, justice, peace, and goodness to God's people.

I've spent a bit of time to make sure we understand the condition of God's people because we're going to get one of those often corrupted passages again. It's when Jesus says: *The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into his harvest field.*

Going back to last week's corrupted crusader version of the Great Commission, here we have the First Commission of Jesus, or rather its prelude. This is the set-up scene as Jesus, *acting in ministry*, remarks that 'the harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few.' Well, what's the harvest and who are the workers? Those are the questions.

In the corrupted crusader version, the harvest fields awaiting is a world of unconverted heathen who need to get right with Jesus, get baptized, and be saved. The workers are missionaries going out to convert those heathen to love Jesus.

Once again, the only problem with that corrupted crusader version is that **Jesus doesn't say any of that**. Rather, it is Jesus seeing the pain and suffering of God's people who are exploited, oppressed, trapped, and defenseless. **Those desperate people of God are the harvest field**. The workers are the disciples who will follow Jesus and do ministry to bring new life for God's people. The harvest is new life for God's people. That doesn't mean new life *after they die*. It means new life **right now**,

just the way Jesus did it. It means getting health care and substance abuse treatment, food for the hungry and housing for the homeless, education that's appropriately funded for our children, training for real jobs in a new era of work, fairness and justice in the courts and in the laws and in sentencing. That's a lot of work in ministry. It's a whole lot harder than getting people to love a warmed-over, doe-eyed Jesus. Besides, doing that work of Jesus' ministry could get you into trouble, too.

Let's keep going. In chapter 10, it starts out with Jesus gathering his inner circle of 12 disciples, and giving them "authority to drive out evil and to heal every disease and sickness." That can mean a whole lot of things. What it basically means, particularly in context, is that Jesus is giving them the power and authority to do all the things that he has been doing. They're supposed to teach, preach, heal, and show compassion, knowing that God's people are oppressed, poor, weak, and defenseless, and they're looking for a shepherd – God's people are looking for the servant-workers of the Kingdom of God, the harvest workers in the fields of need who bring new life, justice, and peace.

Jesus' instructions return once again to *doing the ministry* that Jesus had been doing. Again, there is nothing here that would even come close to validating the corrupted crusader view. 'Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the unclean, and drive out evil.' **Not** 'convert unbelievers.'

The message for them to preach: "The Kingdom of heaven is near." It is not a message of conversion; it is a political and spiritual message. The message is like this: 'Earthly kingdoms have failed you and will keep failing you; the Kingdom of heaven is **near**, (NEAR!) and the Lord is Jesus who has sent me – a servant-worker for his Kingdom, for God's Kingdom.'

The disciples that Jesus would send out today should have basically the same charge put to them. Today's disciples are to do the same work that Jesus did: heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the unclean, and drive out evil. That's preposterous, of course. We can't do all that! We might even have a mocking laugh, just like Sarah. Preposterous! Yet when the power of the Holy Spirit goes ahead, and Jesus promises to be with us, that's exactly what disciples of the Lord are called to do. *Is anything too hard for the Lord?* No, of course not.

Today, the harvest fields remain plentiful, but the workers also remain few. God's promise of new life for God's people remains, too. It awaits the work of today's servant-workers of the Lord to heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the unclean, and drive out evil. *Is anything too hard for the Lord?*