

## **“God Wants You to Laugh”**

Sermon by Dr. Robert Lee Hill

Text: Genesis 18:9-15

Community Christian Church

Kansas City, Missouri

Sunday, September 26, 2010 – 8:30 a.m., 9:20 a.m., 10:45 a.m.

Everybody ought to have Judy Joyce as a friend, or at least someone like her. During my recent recovery, Judy presented a prescription bottle that had a different kind of medicine broadcast on its label: *“LAUGHTER. Take one tablet at least three times daily as needed. Unlimited Refills. No Expiration Date.”* Inside the stereotypical medicine bottle were four dozen of the absolutely corniest jokes I had seen in a long, long time! Still, they were also, at once, some of the funniest. Judy knew that humor and laughter are part of any healing process. Judy knows intimately what God hopes for us all: God wants us to laugh.

God wants you to laugh, in season and out of season. On high, bright sunny days, and on gloomy ones as well. God wants you to laugh, in the midst of extremis situations and when everything is smooth sailing. God wants you to laugh, as a Christian, in order to have fun and express your joy. God wants all of humanity to laugh. God wants you to laugh.

### **The Scriptural Mandate to Laugh!**

The mandate to laugh is so very clear from Scripture. It is almost as if it were a duty! Some of the most famous and memorable lines of Holy Writ focus on the necessity of laughter and all the emotions and activities that attend the experience of laughing – elation, exhilaration, joy.

In two of the most somber passages of Scripture in the Old Testament, the note of joy is sounded:

*“Strength and dignity are her clothing,”* the book of Proverbs says about a good woman, *“she laughs at the time to come.”* (Proverbs 31:25)

*“Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy cometh in the morning.”* (Psalm 30:5)

The preacher Qoheleth offers one of our favorite quotes about laughing: *“For everything there is a season and time for every matter under heaven.... a time to weep, and a time to laugh ....”* (Ecclesiastes 3:1, 4)

And Jesus, too, is all about joy and its gifts, which include laughter.

In the Sermon on the Plain in Luke's gospel, Jesus says, "*Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.*" (Luke 6:21) And twice in John's gospel, Jesus proclaims the centrality of joy and its gracing benefits through laughter:

*"In the world you have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."*  
(John 16:33)

*"These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full."* (John 15:11).

### **The Historical Church's Call to Laughter**

The Church caught on to the Scripture's insistence on the necessity of laughter when it created Easter Mondays and Bright Sunday experiences. A thousand years ago, the Monday after Easter and the Sunday following Easter were times of great hijinx and laughter. Clergy played jokes on one another. Members pulled pranks. Jokes were told in church. And all of it was done in service of celebrating the fact that God got the last laugh, that death's grasp could not keep Christ from his divinely granted resurrection and death could not and will not be able to keep any of his followers down either. In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century some congregations have in fact adopted a Holy Humor Sunday and the sermon amounts to a series of jokes, and not all of them of great comedic value, I might add. It sounds risky but maybe we should even try it around here!

### **Our Common Experiences with the Saving Power of Laughter**

One of the most forwarded and copied sources of humor on the internet is the collection of so-called "*Letters from Children to God.*"<sup>1</sup> And I'm 100% half-way convinced that they have to have been composed by children, because no adult could be that inventive to create such gems. Gems like....

*Dear God: Who draws the lines around the countries? Nan*

*Dear God: What does it mean when the Bible says that You are "a Jealous God?" I thought You had everything. Jane*

*Dear God: Thank you for the baby brother, but what I prayed for was a puppy. Joyce*

*Dear God: I bet it is very hard for You to love all of everybody in the whole world. There are only 4 people in our family and I can never do it. Nan*

*Dear God: If You watch me in church Sunday, I'll show You my new shoes. Mickey D.*

*Dear God: I didn't think orange went with purple until I saw the sunset you made on Tuesday. That was cool! Eugene*

And just think of the power of humor to humble the haughty and embolden the used and abused.

Think of Forrest Gump and the wisdom he imparted to our culture, and you can't help but at least smile, even if you're the edgiest, meanest grump in the room. Think of the memorable adages that Forrest Gump's laughter -inspiring character has given to us....

Like Forrest's Mama said, *"Stupid is as stupid does."*

Or, *"Life is like a box of chocolates: you never know what you're going to get."*

Or consider the legacy of Seinfeld and the shenanigans of Jerry, George, Kramer, and Elaine. Remember the gems such as....

*"A show about nothing."*

*"Low talkers."*

*"Close talkers."*

*"The man-zier ."*

*"Serenity now!"*

And of course, how will we ever forget,

*"Yada, yada, yada."*

And besides what media does, remember your own glee when you tell someone else about a funny thing that happened to you or that you saw or heard or read about.

Humor is a natural elixir that we simply must have more of. Laughter may not be able to cure cancer – YET! – but it can surely ameliorate the sadness, confusion, hurt, and uncertainty that comes with cancer.

Humor may not be able to secure a job for you in a down economy. But it sure can lighten the load and keep you from self-pity and make your joblessness endurable so that you can detect your many other blessings.

Humor may not be able to stop all the craziness and brutality in the world. But it can certainly serve as a reminder of the best and the most humane possibilities that abide in us as human beings.

## Sarah and Abraham

It all started with Sarah and Abraham. In the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> chapters of Genesis we hear laughter for the first time in the Bible. In the account that was read this morning we encounter Abraham and Sarah after they have been given new names as well as new identities as the establishers of a new, free, and blessed people. They are told by God that Sarah will bear a son to Abraham. Further they are told that through them, and the lineage of their progeny, there will come great nations and kings. When they each hear this news Abraham and Sarah. In fact Abraham falls on his face when he laughs. (Genesis 17:17) Sarah laughs to herself. (Genesis 18:12)

Now most male commentators have been kinder to Abraham than they have been to Sarah about their respective laughter, "judging her severely."<sup>2</sup> But they needn't have been.

At first glance it seems that God is rebuking Sarah for her laughter. Is Sarah's laughter incredulity? Is it scoffing laughter? Is hers the kind of laughter that is unnatural in a situation like hers? Sensitive receivers of this story must say "No" to all such questions.

Who wouldn't have laughed in Abraham's and Sarah's situations? They are decades beyond picking up their first Social Security retirement checks. They've been on Medicare so long they can't remember not being on it. And now their Medicare benefits are going to cover the cost of a brand new baby? God has got be kidding! They're laughing instead of crying, they're laughing instead of going crazy.

But God questions Sarah. Why God doesn't question Abraham, we don't know. Maybe Abraham, as he has been on many other occasions, is too dense. Maybe only Sarah can get what God truly wants. Which is a relationship based on an on-going conversation. And notice that as God and Sarah engage in conversation, "God makes no judgment, even when Sarah denies that she laughed."

I believe that God, in essence, wants Sarah to laugh. God wants a dialogue to be maintained between Himself and his highest creatures. It is as if God were saying "Do you see how comical, how wonderfully funny you and all the rest of my creation is to me? And besides, I'd much rather laugh than weep over your behavior. So please, go ahead and laugh. I want you to laugh! That is part of the on-going conversation I desire with you."

### **Conclusion: The Holy Gifts of Humor**

Now before I close, it would be well for us to count the benefits of laughter as well. I believe God knows them intimately, but we know them far less well.

#### **1 - Laughing helps us not to take ourselves too seriously.**

Laughter truly can keep us honest about ourselves. Laughing truly can help us not to take ourselves too seriously.

Gary Simpson, pastor at Concord Baptist Church of Christ in Brooklyn, New York, tells the story of his father, who was also a pastor in Ohio, as he dealt with a rather unwelcome pie that a church member once made for him. Now, the member who had made the pie was not a good pie-maker. In fact they had missed their calling and everybody knew it. When Gary's father got home he threw the pie away. The next Sunday, the pie-maker member greeting Dr. Simpson at the door and inquired, "Well how did you like that pie I baked for you?" Well," responded Dr. Simpson, "such a pie as you created doesn't stay around our house very long!"

#### **2 - Laughter helps us heal physically, psychologically and spiritually**

Norman Cousins has documented how he participated in his own healing by laughing himself into health. When he was discovered to have a heart ailment he began taking massive amounts of Vitamin C and making himself laugh. Later he would be burdened by "reactive arthritis" and he applied the same remedy. He wrote about in *Anatomy of an Illness* that is still in print today. Cousins said that he made "the joyous discovery that ten minutes of genuine belly laughter had an anesthetic effect and would give me at least two hours of pain-free sleep."

#### **3 - Laughter helps us maintain balance in a world that is overly earnest, overly brutal, overly vindictive.**

In her new memoir, *Growing Up Laughing: My Story and the Story of Funny*, Marlo Thomas tells how when she was growing up, her father, Danny Thomas, would ask her, "'Anything funny happen at school today?' He was always looking for the fun." And so, Marlo included laughter and fun into the very fabric of her life. And she went on to become a celebrated television actress in her own right and the wonderfully generous steward inheritor of her father's philanthropic legacy, The St. Jude's Children's Hospital. Could you use Marlo as an exemplar for your own life? Could you make fun and laughter a plan for your own life? In a world as harsh as razor blades, as

brutal as a sledgehammer, and as humorlessly vindictive as a cobra, should we not try massive doses of laughing for the living of our days?

**4 - Laughter helps us individuals and communities stay sane.**

Maya Angelou recalls that in the antebellum American south, slaves had a practice of going to the “Laughing Barrel” to express themselves. Laughing was disallowed on many plantations, so when they couldn’t help themselves, they’d go to a barrel and lean way over, as if they were trying to retrieve something, and laugh themselves silly. Again Laughing instead of crying.

**5 - Laughter empowers us to live more and more into the IMAGO DEI (the image of God) in which we were created**

Could it be that laughter is part of the divine image, the *Imago Dei*, in which all of humanity has been created? Could it be that it is in laughing that we behold an angle of God’s personality. With all due respect to those who yearn to grasp the depths of God in their very souls, let us allow, no let us embrace and proclaim the notion that God wants us all to laugh, that it is a holy mandate to express ourselves with gales of laughter and chortling and jesting and cackling!

This past week, our pastoral staff was inspired, touched, and divinely disturbed by the MAAFA Suite presented at the St. Paul Community Baptist Church in Brooklyn, New York. MAAFA is a Kiswahili word that roughly translates as “catastrophe.” Just as “holocaust” conveys the horrors of what was done to Jews by Hitler’s demonic minions, so “Maafa” is meant to convey something of the ravages of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. The motto of the presentation, established by the MAAFA founder and St. Paul’s former senior pastor for 34 years, is “The Way Out Is Back Through.”

In the middle of the MAAFA Suite presentation there is a long prayer, entitled “The Preacher’s Prayer” in which a singular figure rages in a soliloquy of anguish: “Why don’t you help us, why don’t you come and relieve us of this oppression?! I want an answer! I want You to answer me NOW! Now! Now!” And then there’s a dramatic pause, and the preacher says, “And if not now, then as soon as possible.” At which point the entire audience breaks out in laughter. Not only because there is a theatrical need for some relief from the dramatic anguish, but because it is a real human need. We all need to laugh, even in the most devastating of circumstances.

These are but a few reasons God wants us to laugh, today, tomorrow and every day of our lives. Laugh long and hard and loud. Or softly, politely, demurely. Whatever you do, laugh. At yourself and the pretentious foolishness we too often get ourselves into. Laugh at the foibles of everyone, and then know that we all have a common bond in our broken-ness. Laugh at the outrageous possibilities God wants to implant and then see them come to fruition in us.

So, laugh! Tell jokes, even bad jokes, do skits, practice jesting, hold on to the comical. Laugh! Laugh, instead of complaining. Laugh, instead of whining. Laugh, instead remaining silently indignant. Laugh, instead of living in regret. Laugh, instead of abiding in resentment. Always remember that it is your holy duty as a person of faith to laugh. God wants you to laugh! AMEN.

## NOTES

1 <http://tgulcm.tripod.com/ohc/humor.html#Hunter>

2 *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. I, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994) p. 463.