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*Being Open to Laughter*

## **Smiling**

People often notice that I smile a lot while I'm in worship. When I started at the Kirk, I had to learn about walking into worship in processions and recessions. First there were the acolytes, up to eleven youth carrying a large Bible, crosses, candles, and flags – all of whom were taught expressly what they should and should not do. Next came the choir, two-by-two as though they were boarding Noah's ark, singing and walking in step to their assigned stalls. Finally, the pastors came in, led by one more acolyte. Our movements were precise, and our purpose was serious. We'd walk slowly together, singing, and looking straight ahead, focused on our task. At the end of the service, we'd recess in like manner – acolytes, choir, and pastors, together concluding the serious business of praising God.

But then I showed up. It was difficult and stressful at first. I did have the secret advantage of having been in marching band for five years, so I knew how to do this stuff! After a few weeks of getting used to the march in and out I was able to relax and remember what I love about worship. So I began to smile...a lot. I'd smile on my way in. I'd smile when I declared God's forgiveness. I'd smile when I'd talk about the offering. I'd smile when I preached. And particularly on the way out of worship, I'd positively beam with joy because I got to do what God creates all humans to do – cause God joy with my life. It wasn't even on purpose. People were surprised at the smiling. No one ever smiles like that in church, Troy, they said, but we love it. I figured that I was in the wrong business if I couldn't enjoy worshipping, so I just kept smiling. I just love

smiling in worship because it is in worship where I often experience so clearly God's love and grace for me and for the world!

So, you'll see me smile a lot around here. I love what I do because God created me to do it. And I surely hope that you catch yourself smiling a lot around here. Joy is contagious, and as this church gets known in our community for its joy, more and more people will want to be a part of what God is doing through us.

### **Laughing**

Laughter and joy are two amazing parts of God's creation, so I'd love to begin by sharing with you a joke I heard on the NPR program *Wait, Wait, Don't Tell Me* this past week.<sup>1</sup> It's a story about Harry Caray, the beloved baseball announcer, both for the White Sox and the Cubs. As the lore surrounding Harry Caray has grown, I think we've kind of come to see him as a caricature of himself, partially through the strange but hilarious impression Will Ferrell did of Caray on SNL. Ferrell's version of Caray was smart and kooky, one step removed from the man himself, but close enough that it was drop dead hilarious. Here are just a couple of his lines from skits on SNL.

Former Cubs' pitcher Ryan Dempster shared this story about Harry Caray in front of thousands at Millennium Park in Chicago a week ago. Here it is:

Caray and his broadcast partner, Pat Hughes, were riding together toward a game at Wrigley Field, when Caray got pulled over for speeding, doing about 90 on the Edens Expressway. And Pat's like, oh, you're in trouble here. He

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.npr.org/2017/07/29/539351320/not-my-job-we-quiz-baseball-pitcher-ryan-dempster-on-belly-itthers>

says, (imitating Harry Caray) hey, pal, I'm a broadcaster for the Cubs. I'm never in trouble, all right? You watch this. I'll get out of this ticket. No problem.

So the police officer shows up, he pulls up to the car. And he says, can I get your license and registration?

And Harry says, (imitating Harry Caray) you know, Officer, I would give you that but this is a stolen car.

So he says, sir, you mind getting out of the vehicle? At this point, he kind of starts to sense something's going on. He says is there anything else you want tell me? He's like, (imitating Harry Caray) to be honest with you, I've got a loaded gun in the glove compartment.

But he says, all right, sir. He's like, you know, come on out here. He gets him out of the car. And he says, is there anything else?

I'm going to call my partner in here. Is there anything else you want to tell me? He's like, (imitating Harry Caray) you know, if we're going to get right down to it, officer, I have a dead body in the trunk and I'm on a little bit of a timeline here.

So now they got Harry and Pat and they're over by the car and the trunk of the car and this cop's going through the car. And then all of a sudden, his partner comes up to him. He says, hey, Mr. Caray, can I talk to you? And he says (imitating Harry Caray) what is it, Officer?

He says, well my partner said that you said this was a stolen car.

It's registered to you. He said you have a loaded gun in the glove compartment. There's nothing in there but insurance papers. And he said you have a dead body in the trunk and all you have in there is golf clubs. And he looks the cop in the eye. He says, (imitating Harry Caray), let me guess, he was going to tell you I was speeding too.

### **Laughing in Church**

I think laughing is one of the greatest joys of what it means to be human. It's a part of who God created us to be, and that means that laughter is one of the very things we offer back to God as part of ourselves. Too often churches are known for stoicism, for clamping down on behavior, and for wagging the finger, but I really hope that we become a church that is all about human flourishing – the way God intended – and I believe being a church that is filled with laughter and joy is a part of that.

Today's text is about laughter as the natural human response to God doing something completely unexpected for Abraham and Sarah. We know that God told Abraham he would become a great nation, and we know that he and Sarah were childless. Throughout these chapters of Genesis we see Abraham in particular stumble around trying to make something on his own of God's promises. He twice denies that Sarah is his wife, leading to her almost entering two different royal households as another wife for a king – talk about a comedy of errors. Eventually Sarah and Abraham decide that maybe God wants Abraham to have children through Hagar, which he does and which Pastor Jill preached on last week. Here we are around fourteen years later for Abraham and Sarah, when the laughter really begins.

Presbyterian pastor and writer Frederick Buechner once observed, “Laughter gets mixed up with all sorts of things in the Bible and in the world too, things like sneering, irony, making fun of, and beating the competition hollow. It also gets mixed up with things like comedians slipping on banana peels and having the soles of your feet tickled. There are times when you laugh to keep from crying like when the old wino staggers home in a party hat, or even in the midst of crying like when Charlie Chaplin boils his shoe for supper because he’s starving to death. But one hundred percent, bonded, aged-in-the-wood laughter is something else again....Nobody claims that there’s a chuckle on every page, but laughter’s what the whole Bible is really about. Nobody who knows his hat from home-plate claims that getting mixed up with God is all sweetness and light, but ultimately it’s what that’s all about too.”<sup>2</sup>

God has promised children to Abraham and Sarah, but God has taken his sweet ole time in fulfilling that promise. (There’s a lesson of patience right in this text for another day!) Finally in Genesis 17, God comes straight to Abraham and renews his word to him. God changes Abram’s name to Abraham (from exalted father to father of many) and changes Sarai’s name to Sarah, which means noblewoman or mother of nations. God gives Abraham circumcision as a sign of this covenant, which might have caused him laughter to hide the tears in that moment, but Genesis 17:17 says, “Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, ‘Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?’” So when we read Genesis 18, we see that Abraham has already gotten his laughter out of his system. He has thrown himself on the ground, pounding his

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<sup>2</sup> Buechner, Frederick. *Peculiar Treasures*, 172-173.

fists into it as he cannot control how crazy he thinks this word is. So by chapter 18, Abraham has gotten used to the idea. But Sarah eavesdrops on the divine visitors' word to Abraham, and she tries to stifle her laughter, which is nothing compared to the fit Abraham threw one chapter earlier.

But then we get the beautiful questions from the Lord, "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" which can also be translated, "Is anything too difficult for the Lord?" (It's the same word used in the Lord rescuing the Hebrews from Egypt, by the way.)

This is not only the central question to this text. It is not only the central question to the entire Abraham and Sarah story. It is also the central question to how each of us approaches the Lord with all of our lives. Do we trust that nothing is too difficult or wonderful for the Lord? Or do we live believing that God isn't up to much in our lives or our church? When we look at the world, do we see the beauty and movement of our Lord everywhere, or do we just see a mundane existence that is here one day and gone the next? Do you live in this place of trust and gratitude, or do you operate out of self-preservation and disappointment?

Of course, this question – is anything too difficult for the Lord? – presents two challenges to all of us, according to Walter Brueggeman. On the one hand, if you answer "yes," some things are outside of God's power, then you are confessing that God isn't who God claims to be. On the other hand, if you answer, "no," nothing is too difficult for God, then you are choosing to live in the place of accepting God's freedom and power to act or not act in your life and in the world according to God's purposes and power, not your own. It's a

question that we encounter throughout the Bible. It comes up directly when the angel tells Elizabeth in Luke 1 that she will bear a son, John the Baptist, in her old age. It comes up when Jesus is praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, “Father, everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will” (Mark 14:36). Jesus answers this question with a “no,” nothing is impossible for God, and that puts him into the position of trusting in God’s purposes for his own life.

I think we as a church, both as individual members of it and as a community together, need to put ourselves in the position of being surprised by the Lord. I would love for us to laugh out loud at God’s surprises and plans for us. I’d love for us to receive God’s work among us with joy and laughter, like Abraham and Sarah, who ultimately named their son Isaac, which means “he laughs” – what a great name!

“Sarah and her husband had had plenty of hard knocks in their time,” Buechner writes, “and there were plenty more of them still to come, but at that moment when the angel told them they’d better start dipping into their old age pensions for cash to build a nursery, the reason they laughed was that it suddenly dawned on them that the wildest dreams they’d ever had hadn’t been wild enough.”<sup>3</sup>

May we be a church that laughs. May we be a church that dreams wild dreams. May we be a church ready to be surprised by God!

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<sup>3</sup> Buechner, Frederick. *Peculiar Treasures*, p. 173.