

Sermon Text for October 25, 2015

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

John 16:20-24, Genesis 21:1-7

“God’s laughter”

I know that you have heard and maybe even felt that laughter is out of place in the church. After all Presbyterians aren’t called the frozen chosen for nothing. I thank God that we are at least a bit more flexible and good spirited and warmer than most. But even so there seems to be an internal perception that laughter is out of place in the church. When children laugh or speak too loudly we tell them to hush. One Sunday a preacher was trying to make a point about grace and the love of God and the joy of Christ and he was pounding it home and a little girl asks her daddy why is the preacher so mad?

During communion instead of a smile of celebration we find the frown of mourning. There is, once you step into a church a seriousness but also a shade of morbidity that should not be around. But Bob, surely God did not laugh. We don’t find anywhere in the Bible God’s laughter. One evening a family was sitting around the table listening to Jesus’ parables on judgment and the dad was reading Scripture and he got to the passage that states: before you take the speck out of your neighbors eye take the log out of your own. The youngest child of the family started giggling. What is it, asked the father somewhat irate. The child responded, you can’t have a log in your eye and walk around. Can you image what you would look like with a log in your eye. The whole family started laughing. There is humor in Scripture if we just stop and think about Jesus’ parables on judgment to the first tennis match ever played when David served in Saul’s court.

Today we get to see God’s laughter in the lives of Abraham and Sarah. God’s laughter becomes for us the realization that we too can laugh because we are like Sarah and Abraham protected, safe, and we can see the carrying out of God’s promises in our lives daily, and that ought to make us laugh with joy.

I don’t think that there is any doubt that Christians have the reputation of being far too serious. I had a real difficult time writing this sermon on God’s laughter and I think it is because I am too serious. But Christians have been considered to be for the most part microgelasts: which means laughter haters. From Billy Joel who states in his song Only the good die young “I’d rather laugh with the sinners than cry with the saints” to Fredrich Nietzsche in his book Live Dangerously “Would that he had remained in the wilderness and far from the good and just! Perhaps he would have learned to live and to love the earth – and laughter too.” There is a common perception that Christians if they are good Christians must be somber and well no fun at all.

But if we look at Scripture and in the Gospels we find that Christ’s example in this field is very different from the way that we live and the way that Christianity is perceived. You remember John the Baptist with the camel hair suit and eating locusts and wild honey. This is the picture that most people feel comfortable with today when describing Christianity. He preached fire and brimstone and repentance or damnation every single day as he was baptizing. This is the image that many people have of us.

But then we have Jesus whose first miracle is changing the water to wine at a wedding reception so that the party could go on. We have Jesus who comes eating and drinking and called a glutton and a friend of sinners. He states himself that he would rather hang out with prostitutes and tax collectors than with the serious religious leaders such as the Pharisees and scribes. Charles Schults said once that “No one would have been invited to dinner as often as Jesus was unless he was interesting and had a sense of humor. He had to have been fun to be around or nobody would want him around. Jesus’ nights out and time with his disciples yes were filled with teaching but I can guarantee you that they were also filled with laughter.

Let me ask you, if we have a choice, and we do, who would you rather follow the John the Baptist example of that of Jesus which we have just described. Well of course Christ as he gives us life through his joy and his way of living which was one of complete freedom. I believe very strongly that when we laugh we get a glimpse of God and what it will be like in God’s kingdom. When our heart and body is filled with laughter we get a taste of the way we were made to be in the first place. The way that God created us to be like. How often do we sing for joy in this church and yet when look around those who aren’t sleeping hardly look like they are enjoying themselves. I have heard that the opposite of joy is not sadness but rather unbelief. How can you believe in the joy of Christ and not feel it when you are worshipping God.

This is at the core of Jesus’ NT teaching for today. He describes a world where currently the disciples were mourning because they were persecuted, but their mourning would turn to joy and outright dancing. Jesus describes what it is going to look like when he comes back again to reclaim his disciples. Today is Reformation Sunday and it is a hard topic to just brush over. Either you cover it completely and talk about the discovery of Scripture and how that changed the people gathered, or you don’t address it at all.

At the heart of reform is being able to identify elements of our relationship with God and changing it in such a way that it will lastingly strengthen our relationship with our Savior. You see in Luther’s day the people were just going through the motions. If anyone is in danger of going through the motions it is those of us who attend and are involved in a historic church. We need to make sure that we are not only reforming the society around us, but willing to be reformed, and that reformation in this modern day has to come from an ability to have a joy that leads to laughter. We need to feel Christ more, be able to touch the emotional side of ourselves and of God especially when we look at God’s laughter.

In our Old Testament Scripture of Genesis we find God’s laughter in the birth of Isaac. You know that the word Isaac really means in Hebrew laughter. There is a great play in the words here in this Scripture. Sarah really states that God has brought Isaac or laughter to me. Her laughter, her joy, any celebration in her life had been gone a long time ago. She had even laughed at God when the angels came to promise her that within a year after her 90th birthday she would have a child. She had no joy, no laughter, but now her joy is complete and she celebrates it with laughter and anticipating the laughter and joy that will come with those around her.

There is a big difference in laughing at someone and laughing with someone. Before Sarah had Isaac the people were laughing at her, she was after all an object of scorn. Without being able to bear a child to her

husband she was not esteemed very highly. But now she says they will laugh with her as God has indeed carried out his promises. We find in this passage that laughter is a biblical way of receiving a newness which cannot be explained. Sarah's laughter is a result of her delight, her participation in this anticipated yet not truly expected event.

Kierkegaard said that in order for something to bring laughter it must contain something profound. If we are to be Christians we must have laughter if we believe in something so profound such as the salvation of our sin and of all humankind from the death and resurrection of one man. If we are not joyful, if we are not laughter filled people then we are people who do not believe that God is capable of fulfilling his promise. If we are not able to hear God's laughter in the midst of our harrowing lives then we need to look again at the profundity and the completeness of our salvation in Christ.

We will soon be saying goodbye to someone who like many before her, have contributed freely and given of her time and energy for the sake of allowing her worship to lead others to Jesus Christ. Her love for the people that she worked with, our members, our family, was evident from the time she spent and the product she and her praise team was able to produce. There was something definitely profound after which she strived. Yet, she is someone who is extremely enjoyable, profound, and thorough. Being effective does not necessitate a morbid approach to life. The times we spent laughing in staff meetings and our 7:15am vision team meetings are too many to count.

As Christians we can laugh when we know that God has followed through in God's promises and that God is in control. We can allow ourselves to relax, to live, to laugh. Even though you may walk through the valley of the shadow of death you will fear no evil, in fact you will laugh especially in the face of evil and death. God's laughter comes only with an underlying interest in our welfare. Sarah could laugh because with Isaac comes the proof that she needed that God was caring for her.

Jesus' own words and example of joy that comes in the morning after the birth of a child, only a man could say that, but it is very, very applicable. But there is a sense that when we know that God has us in the palm of His hand, then and only then we have purpose. None of what we do is an end to itself. Justice does not find its completion in mere human actions and goals, but rather in a recognition that God's plans as seen in Jesus Christ are good and perfect. This provides joy, and I would argue only this provides complete joy. That's what Jesus is talking about here.

Laughter is a sign of a believer. Voltaire once prayed: Oh Lord, make my enemies ridiculous. When we are able to look at adversity and laugh at it, when we are able to look at evil and laugh at it, when we are able to look at the tragedy of our lives and laugh because we are assured of God working out all things for good for those who believe in him, then we can understand this passage in Genesis and hear God's laughter. Amen.