

“The Humor of our Situation”

Genesis 18:1-15; 21:1-7

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As part of our training, many Presbyterian clergy have to complete a unit of “clinical pastoral education,” CPE for short, which for most of us means a short stint as a hospital chaplain. It’s in those hospital rooms that pastors-in-training wrestle with our identity as clergy, seeking to be present to people often in painful, transitional times while navigating all the assumptions that people of all walks of life bring to clergy, faith, suffering, life, and God. As a young chaplain I was turned loose on patients at Grady Memorial Hospital in Atlanta, the largest public hospital in the state and later at a Catholic hospital in the outskirts of the city. Every two weeks, CPE students were required to meet in a small group, led by an experienced supervisor. Over the course of study, each student had to present what’s called a verbatim, a word-for-word conversation with a patient, transcribed by memory from the chaplain who made the visit.

For one of my verbatims, I chose a particularly challenging conversation with a patient in her ‘80s who was accompanied by her husband. I remember the salty, negative comments directed at her husband. Each time she expressed her anger, I did my best to inquire about what lay beneath. And each time I pressed her, she turned pleasant, even playful with me, deflecting my questions, choosing instead more personal banter. The conversation went on like this for a full 30 minutes - anger and bitterness toward her husband, followed by levity, deflection, and jovialness with me. I finally gave up and moved onto the next room. That day in the supervisory group, I asked for help.

In the wake of my presentation, the supervisor had the look of someone who is clearly dealing with a green, naive, member of the clergy. “She’s flirting with you,” she said directly. My face flushed. “She’s like 80 years old!” I stammered. “And she’s married. How could she be flirting with me?” My supervisor studied me for the longest time. “Let’s talk about your assumptions about old people,” she said, finally.

I’ve never underestimated older adults again. You would have thought that my biblical training would have given me all the wisdom that I ever needed. So many of these early biblical stories are about old people - *really old* people. Noah was 600 years old before he built the ark, just before he got sloppy drunk in front of his shocked adult children, which seems really reasonable after what he’d been through with the flooding of the world and all. Joseph was 110 before he died. Elizabeth, the mother of John the

Baptist and strong support to Mary was described as “getting on in years” when she first gave birth. Anna was 84 when she blessed the baby Jesus and proclaimed him Messiah.¹ Abraham was at least 100 and Sarah 90 years old when these strangers let them know they would be having a child.

Centering senior citizens in the biblical story is a weird move, if you ask me, since according to Atul Gawande, author of the book *Being Mortal*, over the hundred thousand years that humanity has been in existence, it’s only in the last 200 years that the median age has moved out of the 30s.² Up until that time, most people were dead before 40. That makes Noah, an Joseph, and Elizabeth, and Anna and Abraham and Sarah outliers.

But it certainly explains why Sarah laughs. Strangers show up and deliver the news that you are going to have a baby at age 90. You’d laugh, too. Reinhold Niebuhr, in an essay on humor and faith, points out that humor is an important way that humans process incongruities in reality. The incongruities between our self-confident, independent veneers, and the reality of our vulnerable, dying selves. So someone dignified slips and falls and we chuckle because of the incongruity between the image of that person and the actual situation that befalls them. Humor, then, serves us well as a coping strategy. A way to let us see ourselves from outside of our particular, absurd realities; a guard against taking ourselves too seriously.

But Niebuhr argued that when this kind of humor is extrapolated out to the ultimate things in life - life itself either becomes a bad joke - an absurdity in itself, or something that has meaning only in the presence of God.³ Sarah’s laughter is evidence of the incongruity between being the reality of being a 90 year-old woman, and the news announcement that she will birth a child. But the announcement itself is God’s own kind of joke - the incongruity between the predictable life that we expect in a world that assumes no God and the actual unpredictability of the life lived in the presence of a God who does things like surprising the elderly with new, ridiculous assignments. God has the last laugh and Sarah and Abraham have to learn to go with it.

And go with it they do. In fact, I wonder if Sarah’s humor is precisely the kind of gift that enabled her and Abraham to adapt. That’s the kind of wisdom that older adults have often taught me. The wisdom learning how to laugh as best we can at the absurdity of our situation - the fact that we are all going to grow old and die - the

¹ I credit Terri Thomas Primer’s excellent essay, “Aging with Hope and Wonder” for the compilation of these biblical characters who more than qualified as senior citizens. Her essay was published by the Center for Christian Ethics in 2003, p. 66.

² Atul Gawande, *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End*, (New York: Metropolitan Books), 2014, p. 32 (kindle edition).

³ Reinhold Niebuhr, “Humour and Faith,” *Twenty Centuries of Great Preaching*, eds. Clyde E. Fant and William M. Pinson, vol. 10 (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1971) cited in Ben Patterson, “Keep on Laughing,” *Direction*, Fall 1989 · Vol. 18 No. 2 · pp. 86–94.

ultimate absurdity. And so better to mine that experience for the laughter it brings rather than bemoan that which we cannot change. Not every older person learns that, of course. Humor doesn't come automatically with age. But while life seems to be hard and tragic for those without it, humor seems to accompany those who have learned to live a joyful life in the face of the reality of our coming death. It may be the only way to face that essential tragedy - that our lives are temporary - with joyous expectation.

The church would be a terrible place without the elderly, including because of the humor that, in my experience, they bring to our human condition. "Don't let aging get you down," someone once told, "it's too hard to get back up." Lots of older adults have shared with me the same sense of humor that gave them life even facing the absurdity of old age.

So Joy Price invited me to happy hour with friends at her retirement home. "It will be more fun that way," she said, "and I can show you off to all the old people," she laughed with a wink. Catherine Marshall who made it to Abraham-level age told me one time with a laugh that growing old isn't for sissies. "I wish my church deacon David Rollison would come and pick me up under the arms and put me in his truck and get me out of this place," she told me one time. "I want to go for a drive and get a Coke." When Jane Swope and I met to plan her funeral long before she died, she told me to "keep it short. I don't want people there all day. They have things to do." Mary Walker told me something similar when planning her service. "I don't want it to go long," she said resisting my suggestion that we sing all the stanzas of each hymn instead of just 1-4. "If they don't know this old girl by now," she told me, "they've got no business being at my service." And Marion Bascom used to poke fun at all the pomp and circumstance of his fellow clergy in a way that reminded us that beneath our regalia, underneath our titles, we are all just children of God.

They could laugh some instead of crying all the time at the tragedy of our decline, because they knew that their humor had come to them honestly, from the Holy One of Israel. If God can say to a nearly centenarian couple, people who are more prone than any other age group to being settled in their ways that you are going to have a baby, then God can surprise any of us with life-altering blessing.

That's important to remember in these rapidly changing circumstances that we find ourselves in, and in the hard work of racial truth-telling that is the precursor for justice and healing. The blessing God is out there, "in the field," sneaking up on even the most settled of us, with serendipitous surprises. Like the promise of Isaac, those blessings sometimes come with a lot of turmoil, a lot of new assignments, a lot of headaches. Could you imagine changing diapers at 3 in the morning as a 90 year old? But that newness is the joy that is part of life lived in the presence of God. Just as I once underestimated that elderly woman in the hospital, so God is determined not to be underestimated in just what she is capable of bringing about in your life and mine.

Humor, for some, may sound like a luxury they cannot afford in these fraught times. I used to think that way. But more and more I think about humor as resistance to a culture that is always trying to commodify. Just as sabbath-keeping for the Jews formed a kind of resistance to the slavery of Egypt that valued them only for what they could produce, so humor becomes the way that we resist a culture that would have us always judging and fearing our neighbors. We laugh at ourselves to remind us that not only are we fallible, inconsistent human beings, but we don't have to fear or loathe ourselves or others for being this way. We can see each other in all of our foibles, cultivating a life of honesty with ourselves and others which is the basis of all relationship.

Community organizing teaches that one of the essential qualities of a leader is anger - that deep seated rejection of injustice at the level of my gut. Organizers look for that anger because it's the fire that sustains people in the face of opposition, in long term struggles for change. But often overlooked is another essential quality that organizers look for in those same leaders - humor. That ability not to take ourselves too seriously especially when answering the call to join the struggle. The ability to stand outside of ourselves, face our mistakes, and not be destroyed by them. That quality that leads us to the balance between accepting God's assignments that come to us, and knowing that only through God's provision can we accomplish them.

Sarah laughs. Perhaps her reaction was the quality that made her perfect for this assignment, the quality that God knew would be necessary in order for an old woman to fulfill this ridiculous and difficult assignment. Perhaps it's a quality that all people of faith need in a world that resists doing better even when we are desperate for it. The quality that sustains struggle and faith over the long haul, letting those fires for justice burn within us without burning us out. Sarah named her son, Isaac, "he who laughs," because, she said, "God has brought laughter to me." She knew the sustaining power of this healing gift. May we learn it, too, in the belly laughs that sustain our faith and lead us to it. Amen.