

## “A Hidden Wholeness: Holding Laughter”

Genesis 18:1-15

With our focus today on laughter, I would like to begin with a story about the power of laughter in our lives, not just to heal us personally, but also to transform the social ills of society. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center,

In 1953, Eldon Edwards formed the U.S. Klan's, Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, in Atlanta. He attracted few members until the following year, when the Supreme Court ordered school integration in the landmark case *Brown v. Board of Education* and many whites throughout the South were determined to oppose the law and maintain segregation. By September 1956, Edwards was host to one of the largest Klan rallies in years, drawing 3,000 members to Stone Mountain, the site of the rebirth of the Klan in 1915. By 1958, Edwards' group had an estimated 12,000 to 15,000 members.

Presbyterian pastor and preaching professor Tom Long recalls growing up in Atlanta and knowing about fear tactics of the Klan in the 1950s in that area. Every year in the fall, on a Saturday, the Klan would gather on Stone Mountain for a ritual of hate during which they would burn a cross. And then they would get in their cars and drive into downtown Atlanta honking their horns. And then in downtown Atlanta they would pull their hoods over their faces, and they would march down Auburn Avenue. Auburn Avenue was Main Street in black Atlanta. The citizens of Auburn Avenue would lock their doors and shutter their windows for fear of the men under those hoods.

But then in the 60's the civil rights movement began to flower, and the first light of a possibility of a new and different way of living in society began to dawn. One year, fall came around and the Klan did as usual: the burning cross on top of the mountain, the motorcade of hatred down US 29, the robes and the hoods. Then they came to Auburn Avenue, and they started their parade of terror. But this time, the people living on Auburn did not lock their doors, and they did not shutter the windows of their homes and businesses. The citizens of Auburn Avenue stood out on the sidewalk; and, as the Klan went by, they laughed and laughed and laughed. And the Klan has never marched down Auburn Avenue again. The laughter of the redeemed, the laughter of hope toppled the powers and principalities.

Laughter that comes from deep within our souls, whether in times of fear or times of deep joy, has the power to heal because it opens the door for our souls to emerge. Laughter is not always healing because laughter can come at the expense of others when we laugh at people's flaws or shortcomings. But laughing with others can be powerfully healing. Parker Palmer notes, “The soul loves silence because it is shy, and silence helps it feel safe. The soul loves laughter because it seeks truth, and laughter often reveals reality. But above all, the soul loves life, and both silence and laughter are life-giving.”

Our Bible story for this week is about the transformation that took place in Sarah through the transformation of her laughter from a scoff of disbelief to deep laughter of joy. In her

old age Sarah received unexpected news that was so absurd that it made her laugh in disbelief.

Sarah and Abraham had taken the journey to which God invited them. They left their home and sought after God's vision for their lives. They had received the promises of God about having many children, but many years had passed (about 24 years) and nothing had happened. The promises seemed so far away and even forgotten at that point in their lives. Abraham and Sarah grew weary of waiting and devised another plan. They arranged for Abraham to have a child with Sarah's slave, Hagar. They tried hard to make the promise come true. After all they were in their nineties and the promise seemed so impossible. The dream of their lives had been put on hold for so many years that it seemed impossible!

But then a surprise visit took place. Let's listen to Genesis 18:1-15

The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. <sup>2</sup> He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. <sup>3</sup> He said, 'My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. <sup>4</sup> Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. <sup>5</sup> Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant.' So they said, 'Do as you have said.' <sup>6</sup> And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, 'Make ready quickly three measures<sup>[q]</sup> of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.' <sup>7</sup> Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. <sup>8</sup> Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

<sup>9</sup> They said to him, 'Where is your wife Sarah?' And he said, 'There, in the tent.' <sup>10</sup> Then one said, 'I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.' And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. <sup>11</sup> Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. <sup>12</sup> So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, 'After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?' <sup>13</sup> The LORD said to Abraham, 'Why did Sarah laugh, and say, "Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?"' <sup>14</sup> Is anything too wonderful for the LORD? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son.' <sup>15</sup> But Sarah denied, saying, 'I did not laugh'; for she was afraid. He said, 'Oh yes, you did laugh.'

The location of the story is important: The Oaks of Mamre in the city of Hebron (Genesis 13:18) was the place where Abraham built an altar after his nephew's (Lot) departure. So this was already marked as a sacred space by Abraham. When the guests appear on the scene, Abraham provides them with exceptional hospitality as this was the custom of the land. One was to host the strangers in order to preserve their lives. Abraham not only hosts the strangers, but he also provides them with the best meal that he could offer. The three measures we hear about in the story equal 40-60 pounds of flour. The strangers,

whom we as the readers know to be angels of God, remind Abraham of the old promise of a child for Sarah. But as she overhears this, Sarah laughs at the thought of getting pregnant at her age! She had waited so long to be pregnant and had given up hope. In a patriarchal culture that valued women only for their ability to have children, Sarah was especially hopeless and learned to just live with the pain of her life. But these strangers persist and say, "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" At that point, Abraham and Sarah had given up hope and here these strangers were challenging their faith. Abraham and Sarah had taken a long journey away from home based on God's call to them, but their faith had settled into a comfortable zone of realism about what to expect in life. They also were not all that faithful to God all the time. Sarah abused her slave. Abraham lied to Pharaoh pretending that Sarah was his sister so that he would gain Pharaoh's favor. No wonder Sarah scoffed at the words of the visitors. It was a laughter of despair and a way to protect herself from believing God's promise again. Laughter became her shield against the pain of the world.

Yet, her laughter of despair was transformed into a laughter of joy when she gave birth to her own son. In fact, she ended up naming him "Isaac" which means laughter in Hebrew. She remembered that moment by the Oaks of Mamre when God turned her bitter and cynical laughter into joyous soul-deep laughter.

Consider the times when you laugh with others (not at others) and how that act of laughter renews your soul.

I am reminded of my last visit with my brother while he was alive back in April of this year. The situation was pretty grim. He was mostly paralyzed at that point. He was struggling with pneumonia and had lost his ability to swallow. As we shared and talked about the abundance of love he has had in his life, his Spirit began to emerge and he started joking about the simple stuff of life. At one point his wife and I were really excited that his fever had gone and that his temperature had returned to normal. That is when he looked at us and gathered up his strength to say, "Pipe down, don't be so jealous of my normal temperature, you may accidentally hit me with the evil eye." In that moment, we all laughed so hard. It was a sacred moment of sheer joy and connection. There was so much tension and unspoken pain, but that sharing of laughter opened the door to deeper sharing and healing for all of us. What a gift!

Consider in your life where God has blessed you with the gift of holy laughter with others. How might we nurture it in our daily lives, family gatherings, and community events? Start a laughter memory journal to record your laughter memories. Write down your laughter memory at the end of the day or when the memory is fresh. Having these stories will help prime your laughter pump when you need a lift.

Here are several suggestions for locating laughter memories. Share funny articles or comic strips with others who like to laugh. You can also seek out "laughter yoga" clubs, where movement and laughter are combined to create daily, communal laughter memories. Another useful way to create a laughter memory is to simply recall a hilarious

film or TV show. Make a list of your top-five funny films and watch them again. You can also combine a problem you are experiencing with laughter. By doing this, you are integrating two apparent opposites and creating an entirely new mind-body feeling state. Since no situation is completely bad, this laughter memory can help you develop a broader and more humorous perspective on almost anything. At the end of the week, look over your journal and review your laughter memories.

— Donald Altman in *The Joy Compass: 8 Ways to Find Lasting Happiness, Gratitude & Optimism in the Present Moment*

I would like to end with a famous story about St. Teresa of Avila. “As St. Teresa ... made her way to her convent during a fierce rainstorm, she slipped down an embankment and fell squarely into the mud. The irrepressible nun looked up to heaven and admonished her Maker, “If this is how You treat Your friends, no wonder You have so few of them!”