

“Meet Them at the Door Laughing”  
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus,  
concerning Genesis 18:1-15; 21:1-7  
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco,  
on June 18, 2017

Sometimes Sarah gets a bad rap for laughing when she overhears the messengers as if her faith were too small and too weak. Let us begin by challenging that distracting assumption that Sarah was bad.

First of all, she wasn't the only one who laughed. Directly before this story, in Genesis 17, God appeared to Abraham and told him Sarah would bear a son. The Scriptures report, “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?’” My friends, Abraham did not merely giggle. According to Scripture, Abraham guffawed. He *fell over* he was laughing so hard. I imagine Abraham on the floor holding his sides, gasping for breath. If laughter was a sign of disbelief, both Abraham and Sarah were guilty as charged.

Then again, their laughter may say less about them and more about the extraordinary imagination of God that exceeds human comprehension. If you aren't a bit incredulous after conversing with God, maybe you weren't really listening.

As far as we can tell, Abraham found the promise of Sarah's pregnancy so implausible that he didn't even mention it to her. She seemed sincerely surprised when the messengers delivered this news about her impending pregnancy one chapter later. It's like she didn't know that Abraham had heard this all before, so the message caught her by surprise, and she laughed.

If she hadn't been caught off guard, chances are she might have contained her laughter for fear her guests might overhear. As it happened, she did try to keep her thoughts to herself, but the Lord said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh, and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?”

Embarrassed and afraid, Sarah denied it, saying, “I did not laugh.” I imagine she wasn't so much ashamed of her lack of belief as she was unnerved by her lack of hospitality. It doesn't exactly feel inviting to be laughed at, and in those days it was very important that your guests feel honored. You would never ridicule guests for being ridiculous. You would give them a place at the table, wide enough for all of who they were, goofiness and grandiosity included.

Neither Abraham nor Sarah had met these travelers before, but Abraham ran to them as soon as he saw them and begged them to stay. He ran to Sarah to ask her to make bread; he ran to his herd for a calf, and the servant ran to prepare it. Abraham served his guests bread and milk and curds and meat; he brought them water for washing their feet and invited them to rest beneath the tree.

Nowadays we are more cautious, guarded, and suspicious of strangers. We run away rather than towards. We are quicker to judge and slower to listen. We are wary of differences and unfamiliar ideas; we resist the unscientific belief in miracles. We consider ourselves more discerning and

less gullible than those before us. For us, Abraham's extraordinary effort to welcome his guests seems unusual.

Now truth be told, many of our defenses are there for good reason—we've been hurt, lied to, slandered, and betrayed. We've been conditioned by past experiences to feel afraid and to keep the doors locked and the shutters drawn. Sometimes we end up shutting people out just so our souls can breathe or because it is the only way we know how to survive. And so it is that hospitality *must* extend both to yourself and to your neighbor. If you are erasing the self to make room for guests, that isn't hospitality at all. To be hospitable you must be fully present. You cannot give from a non-self.

By laughing, Sarah let herself into a conversation from which she had been previously shut out—not just once, but twice. The first time she was shut out when Abraham did not tell her the message from God—even though the message was about her own body—and the second time was when she participated by eavesdropping on the guests rather than being included in the conversation from the outset. Upon being discovered at the sound of her laughter, she was immediately afraid because in those days women were to be seen, not heard, and the Lord made it clear that she had definitely been heard.

It is an infinitely tricky balance to be hospitable both to yourself with all your quirks and flaws and to your neighbors with all their quirks and flaws, and thus we often focus on one or the other. We deny ourselves to please our neighbor, or we deny our neighbor to please ourselves. But the radical hospitality of our God calls us to the difficult and joyous work of extending hospitality both inward and outward so that everyone—including self—is welcome.

What if the Lord's question about Sarah's laughter isn't a chastisement but an acknowledgment of her presence, her voice, and her place in the story? What if the Lord's recognition is meant to reassure her, not scold her, to remind her that nothing is too much for God? Abraham welcomed God into his home, and then God welcomed Sarah, laughter and all. Abraham discovered what the rest of us are also discovering—that anytime you welcome God into your midst, you can expect God to turn around and expand the welcome. Sarah was afraid to be heard, but she needn't have been. God was more than willing to host her just as she was.

By the time she gives birth to a child, Sarah will no longer be fearful or ashamed. She will name him Isaac, meaning laughter, and without hesitation or a hint of embarrassment, she will say, "God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me." She will change from covering up laughter to naming it, inviting it, and celebrating it. She will say with joy, "Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age."

This isn't a story about Abraham and Sarah's failure to believe. It is a story about the power of God to turn the laughter of cynicism into the laughter of joy. It is about the God who can call retired dreams out of hiding, brush off the dust, and bring them back to life. This is a story about a God with a sense of humor, a God who believes you are never too old to start a new adventure or birth a new evolution of yourself or parent a child. This is a God who still wants to have fun with you when you are in your nineties. This is a story about the God who invented laughter.

In this often inhospitable and unjust world in which we live, what might this story about a welcoming God evoke for us? For those of us with disillusioned hearts, who have been waiting a long, long time for dreams to come true and justice to prevail and love to emerge, what might this story about God who delivers evoke for us? Perhaps we will want to respond with laughter and cynicism. After all, it cannot be true. The evidence we have seen suggests God will not be faithful, or perhaps that God is not even there at all.

But if we discover that God is open to receiving our cynicism, our anger, and our doubt, might we at least remain open to the possibility of God and God's goodness, open to being surprised? Go ahead and laugh if you want to, and even let yourself be heard, but whatever you do, do not lock the doors and keep to yourself.

“For this being human is a guest house,” as Rumi tells us, “every morning, a new arrival—a joy, a depression, a meanness, some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor. Welcome and entertain them all!” he advises. “Even if they are a crowd of sorrows who violently sweep your house empty of its furniture. Still, treat each guest honorably. He may be clearing you out for some new delight. The dark thought, the shame, the malice—met them at the door laughing and invite them in. Be grateful for whoever comes, because each has been sent as a guide from above.”

Church, after all that goes on this world that is dark and ugly and violent, it is more than a little absurd that we keep showing up here and proclaiming the resurrected Christ. After witnessing warring factions and rising racism, after violence against women and violence against black and brown bodies continues unchecked, after children die of hunger and politicians disappoint us, after our friends continue to suffer from illnesses and heartache and our prayers are not getting answered, isn't it laughable that we keep coming back to God? I say, laugh away, but do not stop showing up.

Extending hospitality to God and to our neighbor—even when they both disappoint us—is an act of defiance to a system that tells us despair has won and will always win. The systems of oppression would like nothing more than for us to go home, lock our doors, and quit gathering together. They'd like for us to think that hope is an absurdity, a joke, and a farce, and so we might as well stay home and not waste our time. But they don't want us to laugh, because to laugh, to doubt, to question, and to grieve is to engage. Despair is meant to shut you down, not set you free. But by laughing, you are letting yourself into the conversation. By bringing all of who you are to the hour of worship, you are practicing hospitality to yourself and to God.

So may we continue to be a people of wide welcome—welcome to God, welcome to self, welcome to the stranger, welcome to what is strange in us and strange about God, welcome to being surprised at any age. In the face of all that is evil, our hospitality may seem like a small and insignificant gesture, but it is more than that. It is an act of courage and an invitation to God and a radical acceptance of the self. It is a stubborn belief in the power of relationship and the possibility of a new Pentecost. It is like laughter that is contagious. May everyone who hears us laugh with us, share joy with us, share hope with us, share dreams with us. Amen.