

Funny!

Sermon by Leah Fowler

Presbyterian Church in Leonia

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

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What makes *you* smile?

I have a naturally smiley disposition. In Atlanta where I grew up, when you pass someone on the street, you look them in the eye and smile, maybe nod your head. This got me into trouble when I first moved to New York City as a 22 year old. I had some trouble with people cat-calling me, or inviting me to do things with them I did not want to do. I complained of this to my friend Debra, a long-time New Yorker. She said, "You know why that is, right? I'm watching you while we walk on the sidewalk together. Your smile-- it confuses people!" Now, I know it's not that New Yorkers cannot be warm, friendly people without becoming creepers. That same year I first moved to the city, my local grocery clerk was so friendly to me that once, when I was short on cash, he just let me take my groceries without paying saying "I know you'll be back." The bagel guy near my subway stop would start making my bagel as soon as he saw me, so that I would feel guilty if I ever changed my order. And there is a sense of camaraderie with other passengers on the subway anytime anything weird happens. Although we stay silent, we exchange knowing looks to one another, as if to say, "We're in this together."

Even here in Leonia, my smile seems out of place. When I go for a run in the park, people rarely smile back at me. At first I thought perhaps they believe that if they smile at me, they will become as slow runners as me, as if my slowness is contagious. But I recently read an article about how smiling is perceived in different cultures. In some cultures, smiling is a show of dominance. In other cultures, smiling gives the message "I want to become your new best friend," which I admit seems quite odd coming from

a stranger. Others smile when they are embarrassed or uncomfortable. So, smiling does not always portray a friendly, happy easiness with others.

Except, I've noticed, with children. My smiles are always returned when it is to a child learning how to ride her bike with her dad, or to a proud grandmother pushing a stroller. And if I am walking with my child, others even smile before I do.

I like to think Abraham had a big smile creep across his face, spreading his wrinkles wide and showing his aged teeth, when the three men of God announced they would return to old Abraham and old Sarah, and that Sarah would bear a baby. God had been telling Abraham this all along. A few chapters back, God brought Abraham outside at night and asked Abraham, "Go ahead! Count the stars, if you are able to count them! That's how many your descendents would be." Today, you and I shine, each as one of those stars. But it was a difficult way to get there, particularly for Sarah, who was brought into this covenant but had reached old age without ever getting pregnant.

Sarah did not smile when she overheard God's news to Abraham as she was peeking out from the cover of the tent. She did not smile. She laughed. Who can blame her? I mean, it is really absurd; she was old enough to be a great-grandmother. By now, God's promises to her and Abraham may have seemed like a joke. Funny, in a not-funny kind of way. And when The Lord asked, "Why did Sarah laugh? Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?", Sarah got scared: "Who me? Laugh? No, I didn't laugh." "O, yes you did laugh!" said the Lord.

Sarah's laughter shows something that all of us have. It is a gap, a distance between God's promises and human possibility. We measure God by what we are capable of doing, and in doing so, we package God up in a neat little box that fits nicely on a shelf, alongside a dusty Bible. But

this God does not have much to do with our lives and certainly not the larger world in which we live.

What if, instead, we were to measure ourselves by what God is capable of doing?

To those who would say, "I am too old! My joints creak and my body does not work as it used to," may you find Sarah's laughter as you consider God still has plans for your life here on earth, if you choose to participate.

To those who would say, "I'm too young!", consider the prophet Jeremiah, who God told "Do not say I am only a child" and then touched young Jeremiah's mouth to put God's words in it.

To those who would say, "I'm just a girl" look at Deborah, the prophet and judge, who sent an entire army to defeat King Jabin, who had oppressed the Israelites for 20 years. For those who like Wonder Woman, Deborah is another woman who makes us wonder.

To those who would say "Our town, our state, our country, does not have enough resources to feed the poor," consider the boy who presented just a few loaves and fishes to Jesus, who was then able to feed thousands.

The bible is just full of stories that inspire us of what can happen if we measure ourselves with God's capabilities. To some, taking these stories seriously might seem like magical thinking. Many of us prefer to think of these as quaint stories, but let's be honest: the God you may believe in perhaps set the world in motion, and then stepped back to let things run their course, for better or for worse.

And that is the reason we have to look to the children of our church to be part of the voices of faith. Children have not yet lived into their limitations, so in their minds much more is possible. We need young Isaac, whose name means laughter, to give us hope in what God can do. Now there would be those who, thinking they are acting in the utmost faith, would put Isaac on a sacrificial table, giving back to God all the possibility a young child could imagine, as Abraham once did. When we are about to do this, God steps in and says “No. This child is a part of my plan. Watch him and care for him, and see what I can do through him.”

Human lives showing God’s capabilities do not end in the Bible.

To those who insist on repeating a narrative of how divided this country is, I present Officer Crystal Griner of the Capitol Police, an African-American lesbian woman who rushed to protect the US Senators and Representatives in danger on a baseball field last week. She was shot in the ankle but even when her own life was at risk she continued protecting our nation’s leaders, some of whom had voted against her family.

To those who lament that the world’s religions can never get along, I want to tell you about last Thursday night’s dinner, when 9 of our church members attended an Iftar dinner. Christians and Muslims together, both descendents of Abraham, sharing in the meal that breaks the fast of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. We were strangers and yet they treated us like Abraham and Sarah treated the angels. They served a feast of their best foods. Even though they had not eaten all day, they made sure their Christian friends had full plates before they even sat down to eat. And when we left, they gave gifts to each one of us. I do believe that God was somewhere in our exchange, and that gives me hope for our divided world.

I enjoy watching improv comedy, and even took an improv class from the Second City theater company when I was in Chicago. The first rule they teach you is what Tina Fey calls the “Rule of Agreement: You respect what

your partner has created.” So if your acting partner says, “You’ll never believe who is on the phone with me!” and you say, “you’re not on the phone! You are just holding your hand to your ear and mouth!” then you have just said “No” to your partner’s creation and the scene has been killed and nothing funny can happen. If instead you tell your partner, “I will believe it because I just got a call from the same person! It’s pretty amazing that The Pope wants to visit Presbyterian Church in Leonia, isn’t it? We’re not even Catholic!” there you have a scene that could turn into something really funny.

Will we sometimes laugh when God presents us with a possibility? Of course we will! God can be a little funny sometimes. When presented with an absurd possibility, Sarah laughed, but she didn’t say no. She was willing to consider what God could do through her. When we agree to measure ourselves through what God is capable of, we are showing hospitality to divine angels. Amen.