



Round Hill Community Church

Sermon: March 15, 2009

Signs of God's Covenantal Love: Laughter's Promise, Robert B. Culp

Genesis 17:1-7; Romans 4:13-25

There are a number of good books and programs these days that deal with the process of aging. One of the books is entitled *Successful Aging* by George Valiant, who is a psychiatrist, and who, I suspect, knows of the work of Dr. Barry Boyd, who gave such an insightful and challenging talk here last Sunday. Valiant builds upon the Harvard University study that has been going on now for over 60 years. It's a study that has periodically interviewed people as they move through their life cycles, charting the course of their lives, and seeking to discover a wide variety of data.

Valiant's concern has to do with one question – “What does it take to age well?” He lists all the factors that seem to characterize successful aging, including regular exercise, a healthy diet, good relationships with children and grandchildren, reasonably good health or a positive attitude toward health concerns, and so forth. But there is one characteristic that seems to stick out in Valiant's work as a key factor in successful aging – namely, the presence of a healthy sense of humor ... laughter ... joyful and authentic laughter. He notes that people who age well do so with a sense of humor. They are able to face the predictable trials and tribulations of aging with a smile – all those aches and pains, those griefs and sorrows that move many to tears or to smile.

Somehow that smile is evidence of someone who has learned not only to take the pain of life with a grain of salt, but also someone who has learned to look upon all the ups and downs of life with the eyes of faith. To believe that God is alive and active and involved in the unfolding adventure of life, and that the good purposes of God shall not be finally defeated ... is to be moved from tears to laughter.

It is interesting to me, though, that laughter is only rarely mentioned in the pages of the Bible. In the Hebrew Bible there's the geriatric laughter of Abraham and Sarah when they are told they're going to have a baby. I can't resist sharing with you Fred Buechner's description

of their laughter. He writes, “They are laughing at the idea of a baby’s being born in the geriatric ward and Medicare’s picking up the tab. ... and their laughter comes from as deep a place as tears come from – not as a symptom of darkness but as its antidote.”

Interestingly, in the entire New Testament, laughter is mentioned only twice. There is the instance where Jesus goes to the grieving home of a synagogue leader where his little daughter has died. When Jesus dares to speak of life in the midst of death, saying the little girl is only sleeping, the crowd laughs. But their laughter is that of mocking and cynical derision, the laughter of disbelief. Could they sense an Easter after Good Friday? No, the crowd laughed when Jesus spoke of new life, for he was speaking at a time when there was so much darkness and death enveloping them.

Then there is another New Testament type of laughter, which is the laughter of surprised reversal, the smile that breaks out on your face when things go better than you thought they would, the grin occasioned by the undeserved and unexpected grace of God. It’s the laughter Jesus promised when he said “Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh.”

In this morning’s scripture passage from Genesis, we encounter an elderly couple. They are on the move still, many years after God had called them to pull up stakes from Mesopotamia and head off toward a promised land named Canaan where God assured Abraham he would make him the father of a great nation, which in turn would be a blessing to all nations. With no children, though, their thoughts probably began to be focused upon such matters as their aging and weary bones, the approaching end of their days, and the apparent dead end to their dreams, all of which could serve as an appropriate theme for our own meditation during Lent as we ourselves move toward the darkness of the Golgotha’s cross.

Sarah was old ... 90 years old. Back bent, no teeth, and digestive problems when God promised Sarah and her good as dead husband Abraham (which are the Apostle Paul’s words, not mine) that they would be parents of a great family, and that Sarah was going to give birth to a baby boy. Ninety-nine-year-old Abraham let out a toothless cackle when he heard God’s promise. And (later in the narrative) when Sarah, hiding behind the door of their tent, overheard the Lord talking about obstetrics about somebody her age, she laughed. And it was her laughter that got them all going.

According to Genesis, when God intervened and asked about Sarah’s laughter, Sarah was scared stiff and denied the whole thing. And then God said, “No, but you did laugh,” and, of course, he was right. Maybe the most interesting part of it all is that far from getting angry at them for laughing, God said, “Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?” Just for that, God said in effect, I’m going to have you name your baby Isaac, which happens to mean “Laughter” in order to remind you that the joke’s on you. In a way, we could say that God not only tolerated the laughter of Abraham and Sarah, but blessed it and in a sense joined in it himself ... which makes it a very special laughter indeed – God and his children laughing together, sharing a glo-

rious joke in which they are all involved.

A few chapters later in Genesis, scripture says, “The Lord did for Sarah as he had promised.” Nine months later, she laughed all the way from the geriatrics to the maternity ward! Isaac, “Laughter,” was born. And Sarah laughed again. But this time her laughter was no longer the laughter of cold, cynical disbelief. For hers was the laughter of wonderment. Later in this narrative, Sarah says, “God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.”

Can’t you see them all at the Thursday Morning Bridge Club? Ordinarily they are sipping some tea, munching on some light appetizers and cookies, and talking about upcoming vacations or operations. And now here comes Sarah ... along with the bassinet! Everybody jumps to their feet and embraces her, admiring little Isaac asleep, and they have a great time, all the while laughing with Sarah at the ability of God to work wonders. Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh ... because nothing is too wonderful for God.

When the cynical laughter of disbelief becomes the astonished, stupefied laughter that comes from the unexpected intrusions of a loving and living God, when the promises of God come true we laugh in life-giving ways. We recognize somehow that God is making a way where we thought there was no way. And even though we now find ourselves deep in the reflective and somewhat darkened days of the Lenten season, it suddenly becomes Easter.

I like very much how Will Willimon talks about the gracious connection between such laughter and that faith we not only share but into which we are ever growing. He writes, “Laughter is a close cousin to faith, for it entails a humble recognition that the fate of the world, even the significance of our very lives, is not left entirely up to us. God is busy,” he says, “so we are not permitted to give up hope for ourselves or for the world.” Or as Buechner puts it, “Faith is laughter at God’s promise of a child called laughter.”

Through the years, I have found that older people – perhaps because they have seen so much and lived through so many challenges in their lifetimes (whether it be the Depression or times of war, family illnesses and tragedies or their experiences in meeting the challenges that have come their way) – that those who are older seem sometimes to have a greater capacity to laugh. Though events may be sad, some of them profoundly tragic, perhaps they have learned that there is nothing too wonderful for God.

A husband and wife in their late-80’s were both becoming extremely forgetful. He would forget where he put his eyeglasses. Then as he went from room to room searching for them, he would forget what he was looking for. She would announce she was going to the store for some butter, but when she got there, she would forget what she went to the **store to get**.

One evening, as they were watching television, the husband stood up and the following

exchange took place:

She: Where are you going?

He: To get some snacks. It's my turn.

She: I want a hot fudge sundae. Write it down!

He: I don't have to write it down.

She: And put some nuts on it. Write it down!

He: I don't have to write it down!

She: And some whipped cream on top. Write it down!

He: I don't have to write it down!

The husband then left to get the snacks. When he returned, he presented his wife with a plate of bacon and eggs, and upon seeing the plate, she said, "Where's the toast?"

Fred Buechner writes about Abraham and Sarah, "Why did those two old crocks laugh? They laughed because they knew only a fool would believe that a woman with one foot in the grave was soon going to have her other foot in the baby nursery. They laughed because God expected them to believe it anyway. They laughed because God seemed to believe it. They laughed because they half believed it themselves ... and because laughing felt much better than crying. They laughed because if by some crazy chance it just happened to come true, then they would really have something to laugh about, and in the meantime it helped keep them going."

Indeed, a life that knows how to laugh each new day, whatever the day may bring, knows the perspective of a deep and abiding faith. As the writer to the Hebrews puts it, "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, and conviction of things not seen." Faith truly is laughter at the promise of a child called laughter, and at the promise of a new tomorrow.

Let us pray:

Gracious God our Father, allow us to know such laughter in our own lives, and such faith, that we may receive and embrace such promises as you bestow; in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.