

“Belly Laughs” A sermon based on Genesis 18:1-15; Psalm 116:1-2; 12-19 and Romans 5 :1-8 delivered on Sunday, June 14, 2026 by the Rev. Alison Dutton Jacobs at The First Congregational UCC of Onekama, Michigan.

There is nothing more infectious than a baby when he or she learns to belly laugh. You know what I mean: that deep down heartfelt rich laugh that seems to come from someplace so far down in their bodies that it resonates and echoes like it has come from an ancient cavern. And, indeed, I believe it has.

One late morning, when my late husband, Joe, and I were having breakfast at a popular local diner in Keene, NH, we were privy to just such a belly laugh. As we sat waiting for our order to come up, there were two women sitting across the way, with a baby in a highchair. As they too waited for their meals the woman, whom I assumed to be the mother, began to play with something that looked like a tall lipstick container. She would set it up and it would fall. As it fell, she would quickly grab it out from under the child’s gaze and each time this happened, without fail, he would let out a belly laugh. It was a laugh so rich with life and possibilities that, as I sat there, it gave me hope. Soon the whole restaurant was laughing. It was such a welcoming, comforting sound that we all wanted to be a part of it.

Later I learned (from eavesdropping, I must confess) that the baby was one of identical twins and that, in order for each of the babies to get some quality time alone, the Mom and Dad would split up of a morning and each give special attention to one of the twins. No wonder that baby was so delighted, he had his Mom’s full attention!

In Hebrew, Isaac, means “laughter” or “he laughs” and comes from the root *Shq* which means laughter, or even “ridicule.” When the three strangers came to visit Abraham and Sarah in the heat of the day (that would have been enough for our early ancestors to take special note) and then seemed to know their names and circumstances, it is no wonder that Sarah hid behind the tent flap and laughed. I can hear her belly laugh now! “How ridiculous” she must have thought. Here I am passed childbearing age and Abraham is even older, and I am to get pregnant and have a child? It is to laugh, it is ridiculous!

It is no coincidence that many of our best-loved standup comics are Jewish. Author David Heim, in the August, 2003 issue of *Christian Century* in an article entitled “A Joking Matter” explains it this way: “What’s interesting theologically is the way Jewish jokes tackle evil and suffering the most terrifying absurdities of life. “Adam Biro,” he goes on to say, “in the preface to his collection of Jewish stories, observes that Jewish jokes have a way of embracing all the worlds pain and all the worlds wisdom. They exhibit bottomless despair, joy of living, unspeakable misfortune of being, and also . . . the pride of being Jewish.” The stories he tells,” Heim remarks “bear him out.” (p.29) Then, Heim goes on to tell one of these stories:

Moshe was dying. He was old, very old. He had seen much suffering in his life. Golda, his wife, was seated on the edge of the bed wiping his brow. They had lived more than 70 years together.

“Tell me, Golda, do you remember the horrible pogrom in our village in 1905?”

“Of course I remember. I was with you through all that.”

“Do you remember when the Bolsheviks beat me up in 1918? Were you with me then?”

“Of course I was with you then, my love.”

“Were you with me in the Lemberg ghetto?”

“Of course, my love, I’ve always been with you, always.”

Moshe was silent for a moment, then he looked at his loving wife, “You see, Golda, I think you were bad luck.”

When I read that I laughed out loud, as you just did, and it came from deep inside, from deep in my history and yours. Heim concludes by explaining our reaction this way, Absurd egotism, marital discontent and the ghastly horrors of Jewish history are all a part of this joke. But beneath it all, improbably, is joy of living. (p.29) Laughter leading to joy is as old as Abraham and Sarah--it is as old as God.

In their brilliant book, The Art of Possibility, Rosamund Stone Zander and famous conductor, Benjamin Zander, a husband-and-wife team, have one chapter entitled “Rule Number Six” in their list of 12 practices for a life of possibilities. Rule Number Six is basically this, “Don’t take yourself too seriously.” In the stories that are shared in this

chapter, the main character always asks at the end, “What are the other rules?” and the answer each time is this, “There aren’t any.”

When Joe was diagnosed with cancer and then Lymphoma and Leukemia, we found ourselves making more jokes and not taking ourselves too seriously as a result. I know this seems counterintuitive, but it seemed to affirm our joy in living each precious moment together. When he went for his bone scan, he had to be injected with dye to make his MRI pictures show up properly. He said, “Maybe it will make me glow in the dark.” Without even thinking, I answered, “Well, that might be handy. It will make you easier to find when you get lost at night going to the bathroom!”

David Heim in his article says that Ted Cohen in his book Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters supports this idea. Heim states it this way: “The peculiar capacity of jokes to absorb absurdity is theologically significant, .. to laugh at the world’s absurdities implies an acceptance of incomprehensibility,” and that this acceptance is a kind of religious affirmation. Such jokes offer a way of being reconciled to the creation and the Creator even as one expresses anger or despair at Gods world.” (p.29)

One of my favorite authors, Anne Lamott, writes books which are a case in point. The New York Times Book Review section reviews her writing in these words, “Even at her most serious, she never takes herself or her spirituality too seriously. ..Lamott is a narrator who has relished and soaked up the details of her existence, equally of mirth and devastation, spirit and grief, and spilled them onto her pages.”

In her book Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith, I think she is at her best along these lines. In a chapter about her friend Sue, who was dying of cancer, she says, “She got sicker and sicker. It was unfair. I wanted to file a report with the Commission on Fairness; and I still want to ask God about this when we meet. That someone so lovely and smart and fabulous was going to die, and that horrible people, whom I will not name, would live forever. It broke my heart. At the same time, she had so much joy. She loved her family, her

friends, and eating. She ate like a horse. I have never known a woman who could put it away like Sue..." (pp. 270-271)

Finally, this heady exasperating combination of joy and laughter and pain and sorrow is what Paul is talking about in our Epistle lesson this morning. Not really a letter, *per se*, but a sermon that Paul has written to the church in Rome, a church he has never visited, it seems so organized, so complete, so redundant, so so exasperating sometimes it even makes me laugh! It can bring a chuckle to my mind because I often think of it and feel its sing-song cadence like I do when I hear a nursery rhyme like "in the House that Jack Built," kind of a way. When I hear these words: "We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us." (Romans 5:3-5) I think of such nursery rhymes. You remember those kinds of nursery rhymes, don't you? Like: "for lack of a nail, the shoe was lost, for lack of a shoe the horse was lost, for lack of the horse, the rider, was lost for lack of the rider. the war was lost."

In Abraham and Sarah's day there was no joy for them. Back then, there was nothing quite so devastating as being barren. Sarah had reached her old age without being able to have children. This was a shaming thing. It meant that she and her husband had done something to anger God. Something to make God close her womb. This is no joke. So, when she hears that she will have a child, she laughs. What else was there for her to do? I can hear it now, a deep-down belly laugh! Gurgling up from the depths of her spirit and soul. A laugh so deep that it reaches back to the day of Creation! I hear Sarah's rich belly laugh that will come to fruition "in due time" when she literally is carrying laughter in her belly when Isaac is conceived, carried, and born!

None of us knows what it is in store for us, but one thing that we do know is that God is as intimate with us as our own laughter. David Heim in his article says that "when we laugh at the same time, we satisfy a deep human longing for intimacy. When we gather in community or share an intimate inside joke with our partner we are touching on the holy in

a way that is unexplainable.” So, remember to laugh. Remember that it is a holy moment, when it is shared and when it is honest and wise. And remember, above all else, ”Rule Number Six,” You remember that one, don’t you? I thought that you did. “Don’t take yourself so gosh darn seriously.”¹Amen.

¹The Art of Possibility by Zander & Zander

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