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Genesis 18:1-14 (15)
Pentecost 6

MEDICINE BETTER THAN LAUGHTER

Do you like to laugh? When was the last time you laughed a full-throated, belly-bursting, delightfully disorienting laugh of pure, unadulterated joy? What would it be like to be so light and carefree as to be able to laugh indefinitely for no particular reason without an inkling that anything will ever damper the good humor? Isn't that oftentimes what we find so endearing about children's laughter? The purity of it all.

We all know the old adage that laughter is the best medicine. That's more than just a saying because it has been studied and tested. The Mayo Clinic website explains that laughter lowers the heart rate and blood pressure. It increases oxygen intake, stimulates blood flow and relaxes muscle tension. But you and I also know that the generations-old saying that laughter is the best medicine is referring to something deeper than physical ailments. It's medicine for the soul.

There is a world of hurt out there. Each week we stagger in and assemble here each loaded with our own burden of hurt -some of us reeling, some of us aching, some of us grieving, some of us wearing a lifetime of scars. As much as we might try to repress it, you can sense it simmering just beneath the surface. It bubbles up in a brief exchange of, "How ya doin?... "Well, been better." In other cases it is raw and immediately evident in a person's eyes or when you observe their posture from across the worship space. In some cases it is buried deep within – a dark, appalling secret never meant to be discovered by anyone. But the damage it does cannot be hidden.

Laughter would seem to be just what the doctor ordered. Laughter is good. But laughter can only go so far. What if I told you that there is a medicine better than laughter for the wounded soul?

We find out about that medicine in the reading from Genesis chapter 18 today. Laughter is a prominent feature of that reading. But God offers something better.

Living about 2000 years before Christ, Abraham is sometimes dubbed the father of all believers. When Abraham was 75 years old God had singled him out and had made a profound promise that through his offspring all the nations of the earth would be blessed. All the nations of the earth. You know what's implied in that promise? What's the only way all nations on earth could be blessed through someone's offspring? Only if that offspring were to bring salvation to all nations. God was promising Abraham that he would be the ancestor to the Savior of all nations, that Abraham's DNA would one day be in the genetic code of the human nature of Jesus Christ.

Only there was one problem. 75... 85... 95... Abraham was now a hundred years old and no child. His wife, Sarah, was 90. Not exactly prime child-bearing years. How could the Savior come? How could they have any descendants at all if they didn't even have a child yet?

God had made the promise. But here's a vital truth about this story that you and I need for ourselves. God's gifts pertaining to salvation are only received through faith. As we believe, so we receive. If we don't believe, we don't receive.

If Sarah did not believe God's promise to give her a child then she would not conceive. If she did conceive, it would only be through faith. It would not be an immaculate conception, but a miraculous one. If Abraham and Sarah believed God's promise, then prompted by their faith they would do what married couples do –even though at their age it might have seemed like an exercise in futility - and God would bring about the miracle. God loves to work like this... making the impossible happen for those who believe so that we clearly see He gets all the glory. This is what Jesus was driving at when He said that if you have faith the size of a mustard seed you could tell a mountain, "Go throw yourself in the ocean," and it would.

What an extra encouragement for us, then, to have faith when the Bible says, *God is able to do immeasurably more than all we can ask or imagine according to his power that is at work within us.*

But here was the issue. Faith was missing for Sarah. We know because she laughed. This wasn't just a girlish giggle. This laugh was the accumulation of decades of crying herself to sleep at night because she couldn't get pregnant which in her culture was a disgrace. This was a scornful laugh devoid of humor.

Our own laughter has not always been so pure either, has it? Cruel laughter at a schoolmate, cynical laughter at a national leader, self-indulgent laughter, bawdy laughter at a dirty joke, vengeful laughter, gloating laughter, alcohol-fueled laughter... Jesus said, *Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery,* and so on. So does sinful laughter come out of a sinful heart, a heart that therefore condemns us before a God who has a pure heart.

The astonishing wonder is how the Lord of Glory gave Sarah medicine better than laughter for her aching heart. Listen again to Genesis 18: *"Where is your wife, Sarah?" they asked [Abraham]. "There in the tent," he said. Then the LORD said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son." Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, which was behind him. Abraham and Sarah were already old and well advanced in years, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing. So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, "After I am worn out and my master is old, will I now have this pleasure?" Then the LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Will I really have a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too hard for the LORD? I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son." Sarah was afraid, so she lied and said, "I did not laugh." But he said, "Yes, you did laugh."*

First consider the Lord's kindness in this extended visit to their home. The three men were the Lord Himself and two angels we find out later. They appeared in tangible human form. Isn't this beyond amazing? In techno-pastor-speak we call this a manifestation of the pre-incarnate Christ. Pre-incarnate meaning before Jesus was born of the virgin Mary. He made special appearances in human form for particularly important situations. In this case the matter was of utmost importance. God was carefully nurturing along His plan of salvation and assuring its success. In particular, this visit was not for Abraham but for Sarah – God knew her need and cared enough about her to go to so much trouble.

Secondly, notice that this patient Lord does not condemn her for her laughter. But he does replace her laughter with the promise of a son. And that was the best medicine of all. By the power of the Holy Spirit that promise sprouted faith in her heart, healed her sorrow, and restored her dignity. For tied to this son was not merely the removal of social disgrace, but the assurance of eternal salvation. The Savior would come. He would come from Sarah. God would see to it.

The New Testament book of Hebrews tells us: *By faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise.*

God heals our sinful, aching hearts with medicine far better than laughter in the same way, except He gives us *the* Son, Jesus. If God gives us Jesus, then He gives us everything that Jesus has done and everything that belongs to Jesus. His righteous deeds, His atoning sacrifice, His resurrection from the grave, His glory and His Kingdom, His grace and mercy, the gift of the Holy Spirit, His power and authority over creation, His everlasting life, the love of God the Father, the family of all believers – all of it belongs to you through faith – that is to say, as you believe it, so you receive it.

You and I actually have an advantage over Abraham and Sarah. Sarah gave birth to a son, who was still only an ancestor of Jesus. You and I are alive after the Savior has already come! For us it's a done deal. The Lord visited Abraham and Sarah with the appearance of human form. Jesus visits us from heaven every week in the flesh here in the Lord's Supper. This is the best medicine of all that ultimately will heal us in every way. For with our sins forgiven, everything is restored between us and God. Therefore God promises in the Psalms that He will turn our tears into dancing.

A year later, Sarah gave birth to a son just as the Lord promised. The Bible tells us, *Sarah said, "God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me."* She even named him Isaac, which means laughter. Notice, gone are the sarcasm, the hopelessness and the unbelief. There is only joy in this laughter, a joy realized in God's promise fulfilled. I imagine heaven is filled with laughter like that. That joy is ours too as we trust in Jesus. Laughter is good. But Jesus is a medicine better than laughter.

