

Laughing Boy, by Daniel H. Kuhn, Jr. 04050612
Genesis 18:1-15 and Romans 5:1-8
Elon Community Church, United Church of Christ, 12 June, 2005

The children were lined up in the cafeteria of a Catholic elementary school for lunch. At the head of the table was a large pile of apples. The nun made a note, and posted on the apple tray: "Take only ONE. God is watching."

Moving further along the lunch line, at the other end of the table was a large pile of chocolate chip cookies. A child had written a note, "Take all you want. God is watching the apples."

We have many unwritten rules of religious behavior, among them: Don't laugh in church; Don't laugh at yourself; and Anything that seems like fun must be sin.

Christianity is a laughing faith. God gave us the ability to laugh. Look at the story of Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac. Abraham was ninety-nine and Sarah was eighty-nine when they received the news that they were going to have a baby. When she heard the news, Sarah laughed. We can imagine her hiding in the shadows of the tent when one of the three guests said to Abraham, "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son." That is the origin of their son's name: Isaac. It means, "He laughs!"

Abraham and Sarah thought it was a joke. Sarah laughed because she thought the news was funny. After all, at her age she was experiencing full menopause. But, the news came true. That sly old guy got his wife pregnant, and she had a son, Isaac, which also means: "Laughing Boy."

The birth was a fulfillment of the angel's question, "Is anything too wonderful for the LORD?"¹ The New International Version translates the question, "Is anything too hard for the LORD?"² Later on, Jesus would say, "for God all things are possible."³

The birth of Isaac is a sign of the covenant between God and Abraham, who is called "The Ancestor of many nations." His descendants were to be as great as the number of grains of sand on the seashore. This was all to take place after Abraham was ninety-nine years old. At my age, I can picture his tired old body tossing in bed wondering how he was going to toss a ball to his son without throwing his shoulder out of joint. He was so old, he probably had forgotten what his own childhood was like!

It all seemed like a joke, but it wasn't. Life was entirely new for them now. Abram's and Sarai's names changed in this birth process. The little addition of the syllable "ah" was added to each name, making "Abraham" and "Sarah". God's name *Jahweh* contains the same syllable. It is an important syllable that refers to ownership by God. Abraham and Sarah declared that they belonged to God. They are examples of faith and obedience.

In welcoming the three strangers, Abraham and Sarah were practicing hospitality. This is an art neglected by many today, even many who call themselves followers of Jesus Christ. As the writer of Hebrews said later on, "Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it."⁴ The author was commenting on the Genesis passage about Abraham, Sarah, and the three strangers.

Hospitality was important in a desert environment where a few days without food or water spelled certain doom. How did Abraham and Sarah practice hospitality? Abraham saw three

¹ Genesis 18:14, NRSV

² Gen. 18:14, NIV

³ Matthew 19:23

⁴ Hebrews 13:1-2

strangers and ran from the tent to greet them. He begged them to stop. He washed their feet—the equivalent today of giving them a pedicure! He offered them bread. He asked Sarah to bake the bread. (It helps to have a wife one can order around!) Remember, these were three strangers!

Hospitality is a demonstration of love. We open our homes, our church, and our hearts, to strangers. When Abraham invited those three strangers to his tent, he did not know that they were angels, or appearances of God. He did not know if they were there to help or harm him, but he invited them anyway, and he and Sarah lavished food on them. In the process, they opened their hearts to God. They were blessed with “Laughing Boy,” symbol of the covenant of God’s everlasting love. In the act of vulnerable hospitality, we open our hearts to God.

From this story we derive four valuable kernels of our faith. As with the birth of a child to an aged couple, we know that with God, all things are possible. Nothing is too wonderful for the Lord! We know that there are greater things ahead.

As Abraham’s and Sarah’s names changed with the addition of the “ah” syllable, they knew that they belonged to God. We too, through God’s gift in Jesus Christ, know that we belong to God. We don’t “belong” to parents, or to our children. We don’t “belong” to a spouse. We don’t “belong” to a business firm, or to our schedules, or to memories. “Ah” we belong to God!

As we belong to God, we will practice hospitality. We will extend the very love of God to all we meet. We will share what we have to survive the deserts of this life. What we have to share is our knowledge of God’s love.

As with the name Isaac, “Laughing Boy,” we know that with God, we can laugh! We can enjoy life. We can laugh at our own mistakes. We do not need to take our faith so seriously that we judge or condemn those of other faiths. Part of problem of the Middle East, – part of the problem of the United States right now– is that people take their faith too seriously, thinking their own faith is the only proper one. In Northern Ireland, Protestants and Catholics take faith and politics too seriously.

We can laugh at the seeming devastations that might happen to us. We have faith in an eternity with God, a faith and hope that we did not earn on our own. God’s grace has provided us with this precious gift. It was Paul who described this faith: “We can boast 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 been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.”⁵

Although we often take our faith too seriously in the wrong way, the Christian faith is serious business. The Christian faith asks us to follow the commands of God and the example of Jesus. This is a serious commitment, if we keep our side covenant. God makes a covenant with us through Abraham, the father of Jews, Christians, Muslims: The world will continue and be populated with many nations, if we take part in creation, not chaos.

Let us give ourselves over to God’s ownership. Laugh creatively. We can improve ourselves if can laugh at ourselves. We can improve human relationships if we can laugh with one another.

Christianity is a laughing faith. Love God, love one another, and enjoy!

⁵ Romans 5:2-5