

(Genesis 18:1-16 NRSV)

<sup>1</sup> The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. <sup>2</sup> He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. <sup>3</sup> He said, "My LORD, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. <sup>4</sup> Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. <sup>5</sup> Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on--since you have come to your servant." So they said, "Do as you have said."

<sup>6</sup> And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes." <sup>7</sup> Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. <sup>8</sup> Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

<sup>9</sup> They said to him, "Where is your wife Sarah?" And he said, "There, in the tent." <sup>10</sup> Then one said, "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. <sup>11</sup> Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. <sup>12</sup> So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?" <sup>13</sup> The LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' <sup>14</sup> Is anything too wonderful for the LORD? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son."

<sup>15</sup> But Sarah denied, saying, "I did not laugh"; for she was afraid. He said, "Oh yes, you did laugh." <sup>16</sup> Then the men set out from there, and they looked toward Sodom; and Abraham went with them to set them on their way.

(Matthew 18:1-6 NRSV)

<sup>1</sup> At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" <sup>2</sup> He called a child, whom he put among them, <sup>3</sup> and said, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. <sup>4</sup> Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. <sup>5</sup> Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. <sup>6</sup> "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea.

## The Joke's on Us

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge, Massachusetts

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Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Text: Genesis 18:1-16; Matthew 18:1-6

The start of summer. The start of summer brings to mind the idyllic summers when my children were young. Some of the fondest memories are of Julys spent a small island off the mid-coast of Maine. For several summers I was the July minister at Louds Island, off the Pemaquid Peninsula.

Louds Island was hardly a resort island. There was no running water, no electricity, no phone, and for that matter no passable roads. And there was no ferry service either. Louds Island was that proverbial place in Maine where it was true to say, "You can't get there from here."

We didn't understand all this at first. Our instructions read, "The island is quite primitive. You will meet Cecil Prior at the Round Pound Harbor and he will run you over in his lobster boat." We didn't really grasp the full meaning of the word 'primitive.' The first clue that we had of that fact was the look on Cecil's face when he surveyed our Plymouth Reliant, the rear dragging from the load, piled high with bicycles, baseball equipment, and, yes, my golf clubs. Cecil bore an expression between laughter and tears, and I had an inkling that we were fulfilling all the local stereotypes of Boston city slickers.

I wish I had pictures of us rolling bicycles and carrying golf clubs up over the rocky terrain of Louds Island, over the one mile of mud-holes that even a jeep had difficulty traversing. It was an inauspicious beginning. And it got some worse before it got better. I could tell you about the old propane refrigerator that didn't work and spoiled all our groceries, and there was no store on the island and no way to get to the mainland. I could tell you about mosquitoes so thick that you could literally catch them by the thousands with the sweep of a butterfly net. I could tell you about catching rain water for cooking, and showers made of black plastic bags whose only warmth came from sitting them in the sun. I could tell you of no TV, no stores, no movies, no place to do the laundry, and of pitch dark nights when if it weren't for the insects there would have been no noise at all. And I could tell you of paths that were more like running streams, of wet shoes and muddy pants, and all of this with three children under seven years old.

So, this was family vacation. The best approach to such a plight it seemed was humor. So, we bought a small used open boat with 6 ½ horsepower motor so that we could go back and forth to the mainland to get groceries and do the laundry. We bought the beat up old boat from Bobby Ives at the Carpenter's Boatshop, and we christened her the "Laughing Sarah."

We named her the "Laughing Sarah" ostensibly because I always have loved this story we read this morning of old Sarah in the tent laughing at God's outrageous prediction. I had had a similar reaction when I heard God call me to the ministry. But I found out God, in fact, seems to specialize in the outrageous.

But there was another reason I named our little boat the “Laughing Sarah.” Sarah and Abraham had been promised a child aeons ago. God had told them that they would be the beginning of God’s chosen people. God had told them that their descendants would number like the stars in the sky and the sands in the sea. And for a lifetime Abraham and Sarah had waited and longed and prayed for that moment when they would have a child who would start the next generation.

It is perhaps not too much of a fantasy to imagine that Abraham and Sarah also had a more personal yearning for a family. Is it not likely that they would have dreamed of little children running through their campsite and bouncing on their knees? Is it not likely that they thought lovingly of the idea of passing on their work and their holdings to sons and daughters who would follow in their footsteps? Is it not quite probable that they even thought of the day grandchildren would run among them, even as the elders, now walking more slowly and their eyes dimmed somewhat, looked upon them with a sigh of satisfaction? That is, don’t you think Abraham and Sarah were looking forward to having a family?

Now, I know that not everyone wants a family. But many do. And even those who prefer to have no children of their own, and as we will see, they may be the wisest among us, even those who prefer to have no children often have their hearts warmed by nieces and nephews or neighbors children. From our many perspectives, I’m betting that we can imagine, even if with some reservations, how Abraham and Sarah felt about having their family.

But like many others who have wanted a family, it was not happening with Abraham and Sarah. They were about a hundred and it still hadn’t happened. Sarah’s biological clock had run out, the text says. So when these angels of the Lord posing as nomads came by with their prediction of the birth of a son, Sarah laughed heartily at the preposterousness of it all. But Sarah also laughed because, as preposterous as it was, if the prediction were accurate, it was her dream come true. And, of course, we who know the end of the story, know that sure enough Isaac was born to the old couple.

This brings me back to Louds Island with three children under seven. If someone had told me just how much my life would change when I had children, I probably would have rolled my eyes and indulged their war stories. But that was before endless nights up with babies crying. That was before a hundred thousand diapers. That was before mealtimes that looked far more like food fights than family supper. That was before car trips on which we heard, “Are we there yet?” before we had even gotten out of town. That was before 45 minute marathons to get dressed to go out in the winter, and before the very predictable sentence that followed zipping the last zipper on the snowsuit – “Daddy, I have to go to the bathroom.” That was before signs posted on bedroom doors which said, “If you come in here I will killed you,” which left me choosing between addressing the violence or addressing the grammar. That was before peace-making family meetings where Emma countered reason with, “I don’t care what you say, he’s a roach,” meaning her little brother. And it was certainly before the lunacy of taking three children under seven to an island in Maine with no water, TV, toilet, electricity, and no roads.

When I named our little boat the “Laughing Sarah,” it was because I knew that God got the last laugh in the story of Abraham and Sarah. They spent a lifetime waiting and praying for Isaac. They even laughed at the improbability of his birth at the end. And they probably laughed in joy when they comprehended that it might come true. But in the end, after sleepless nights,

sibling fights, and a few family vacations, they undoubtedly realized that the joke was on them. As Abraham and Sarah drove down the highway on vacation, God was behind the flap of some cosmic tent laughing his head off even harder than Sarah had.

\*\*\* Children are far from the fantasy. They are hard work, tiring work, frustrating work. And so it must be with a certain raised eyebrow that any parent reads Jesus' words regarding children. "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven," Jesus said. What children is Jesus talking about? Certainly not mine it would seem. Is the kingdom of heaven supposed to be filled with uncountable toddlers fighting over toys and pooping their britches? Is Jesus saying that unless we become little self-involved tyrants we cannot make it to the kingdom? Is Jesus, whom I can't help but remind you was not a parent himself, is Jesus simply overcome with the sentimentality of one who deals with children in fifteen minute increments?

Actually, that may be part of it. For in the midst of the frustration and tiredness that inevitably accompanies raising children, there exists also the miracle. And the miracle looks a lot like the romanticized version. For all the handful they really were, I marveled and delighted in my children. I will treasure forever the summers on Lounds Island. I will always remember teaching them to steer the "Laughing Sarah," and how their personalities showed in the boatmanship. Glon really wanted it to go straight, but just tried too hard to make it happen. And so the "Laughing Sarah" proceeded drunkenly across the sea, while Glon made large over-corrections in large angular movements. Emma just pulled the motor tight to the left and sent the boat racing in a tight and perfect circle, while she howled laughter as uncontrollably as she steered the boat. And Wes, the youngest and hardly able to see over the bow, instinctively picked out a point on the horizon and with a light and easy touch steered the "Laughing Sarah" as if he had been born in the stern.

This could get really self-indulgent very quickly. I could revel in memories of my children for a long time this morning. I could even bring out the pictures. I could become insufferably obnoxious all too easily. So I will stop with the memories and just say, yes, I'm sure Jesus meant to remind us of the precious treasure children are, even as they are a lot more work than we imagined.

But I don't imagine that was the main thing Jesus had in mind when he said, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." I think he was offering us something a little more counter-intuitive.

Part, a large part of raising children is preparing them to become adults. We want them to learn skills and values that will hold them in good stead as adults. We want them to become mature and responsible individuals. We want them to become steady and grounded.

But Jesus is aware that there is at least one danger here. Jesus understands that as we mature, as we develop values and points of view, Jesus understands that as we become adults, all too often we become brittle and rigid. Jesus understood that too often our ideas become fixed; we become dead certain of the things we believe; in short, our minds become closed and calcified. Michael Shermer has noted in a book with the intriguing title, "Why People Believe Weird Things," that scientists usually become less able to accept new theories the more experienced and studied they become. He notes that advances in science almost always come up from a younger generation of scientists, a younger generation that must often wait until the older

ones to retire, before their insights can gain a hearing.

Jesus spent his whole ministry struggling with those who were sure they knew the truth and were unwilling to entertain any need to change. The Pharisees and scribes on one end, and even his disciples on the other wanted Jesus to say what they already believed.

When Jesus told them, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven,” what he was trying to get them to see was that they needed the curiosity and the open-mindedness found in a child.

That first summer we showed up at Louds Island utterly unfit for the circumstances. As we traversed the island that very first day, the bugs biting, the bicycles nothing but excess baggage, and the golf clubs making me a laughing stock, I could not quite imagine how this month was going to be even possible to withstand. But my three young children never had such doubts. And soon we were trolling for mackerel, and walking to the north end of the island for picnics, and steaming lobsters and mussels and clams, and steering the “Laughing Sarah,” which the children fondly dubbed the “Sinking Sarah,” steering the “Laughing Sarah” among the pot buoys and the shoals of some of the most magnificent scenery in creation.

It was on those days that I knew the even bigger joke was really on me. The first joke may have been that my children were far more effort that could have possibly conceived. But the second and greater joke was that they reintroduced me to a world that had possibilities and wonder where I was too likely to see impossibility and commonplace.

Again the joke was on me. But this time, I imagine, God was behind the flap of the cosmic tent not so much laughing as smiling. For the joke was this: my children had taught me a thing or two and in the process had opened the door for me to the kingdom of heaven.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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