

## Are You Ready?

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on April 7, 2024

Friendship Presbyterian Church

*After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will go with you." They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.*

*Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No." He said to them, "Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So, they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the lake. But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off.*

*When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, "Who are you?" because they knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.*

(John 21:1-14, NRSV)

What a morning we've had so far! And why *shouldn't* we? It's the first Sunday after Easter Sunday – a day when we celebrated the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. We celebrated the victory of his way of love and compassion over those who reject his way of love and compassion. We celebrated the victory of Life over Death, of Hope over Despair, and so in a way, the victory of Comedy over Tragedy, of Laughter over Tears.

And so, *of course*, it's appropriate – on this first Sunday after such a celebration – to celebrate the laughter and joy that are at the heart of true, heartfelt faith. We call today *Holy Humor Sunday*, but it's also known as Laughter Sunday, Hilarity Sunday, Bright Sunday, or my personal favorite, Holy Fools Sunday. *Whatever* we call it, it has its roots in a number of different, very ancient traditions, for Christians of all times and places have known that when the Gospel is expressed faithfully, and heard as it is meant to be heard, it brings *Life*. The Gospel is, after all, the glad news of one who has come back from the dead, of one who has come alive again. It is glad news that seeks us out, calling us forth from our own tombs of quiet desperation to surprise us with Joy. Are you ready?

But for all this talk of Jesus, it doesn't just start with him! The whole story of the Bible is the story of a *people* being surprised into life! It begins with Abraham and Sarah and an unlikely promise. Abraham was nearly a hundred years old, and his wife Sarah was ninety, when God showed up and promised to give them a child ... in fact, more children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren than all the stars in the sky. And when Abraham heard this, it nearly knocked him out. As the story says, he fell on his face, laughing. Later, in another chapter, Sarah is hiding behind the tent, eavesdropping, and when she hears God's promise, she starts laughing too!

So why did Abraham and Sarah laugh? Author Frederick Buechner answered this question in a most memorable way:

*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 maternity ward. 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. They laughed because laughing felt better than crying. They laughed because if by some crazy chance it just happened to come true, they would REALLY have something to laugh about, and in the meantime, it helped keep them going.*

The best part of it all is that God doesn't seem at all upset by Abraham and Sarah's laughter. You might think laughing in God's face would be a major no-no, but God gets in on the joke, telling them, when their son is finally born, they should call him *Isaac*, which in Hebrew means "laughter."

But of course, the joke was really on Abraham and Sarah. Isaac wasn't born until about *15 years* after God first made the promise. And that meant for about 15 years, Abraham and Sarah had to carry that promise around. It also meant that for about 15 years Abraham and Sarah had to endure not only their own laughter, but everyone else's. But the day did finally come, and the promise was kept, and Isaac, the son of laughter, was born. Then Abraham and Sarah really had something to laugh about.

So, what are we to make of all this silliness, where the father and mother of our faith laugh it up? Could there be a connection between laughter and genuine faith? Oh, I certainly think so – I *know* so! Laughter shows a kind of humility. It's an acknowledgement that we don't have all the answers, that we don't really know what's going on, that we're not in control. Laughter shows a kind of surrender, a surrender to God, a surrender to the surprises that life throws our way. To be able to laugh in the face of life's uncertainty shows a deep level of trust in something greater than ourselves. Are *you* ready to let go and laugh? Are you ready to trust?

And so it is with so much of the rest of the Bible! The hilarious back and forth of the call of Moses ... the *entire book* of Jonah ... all the wondrous surprises that arise when a wayward

people and a God with an unappreciated sense of humor are bound together in a unique relationship that gives new meaning to the old phrase, the “Odd Couple.”

And so it continues with the life and mission of Jesus. I understand that we don’t want to draw wrong conclusions from this, but isn’t it meaningful – at least a little bit – that Jesus’ first miracle recorded for us in the gospels is him turning water into wine at a wedding party? Surely that must mean something good!

Many of us grew up with an image of God as a caring but *stern* father, very concerned about righteousness ... a very *serious* God who wants us to be very *serious*. But this story – and so many others in the Bible, going back to those beginnings in Genesis – invite us to see a God who is just as concerned about *joy* as righteousness, a God who desires blessing and celebration as much as obedience. And this story, in particular, points to a God of *extravagance*, a God who wants the new wine, *the good stuff*, to flow freely through all creation so that the celebration of life can continue!

The joy and the abundance continues in our gospel reading for this morning. The scene is the disciples *back home*, having returned to their former lives, still seemingly confused about how to move forward. Suddenly, Jesus appears on the shore, but in their inertia, they can’t see that it’s him.

“Have you caught any fish?” he calls out.

“No,” they answer, though they had been at it all night.

“Cast on the other side of the boat and you’ll find some,” Jesus responds. They do so and are overloaded with fish! 153, in fact! This then triggers a sacred memory ... the memory of being out on the fishing boat and being overwhelmed with a catch of fish ... so much, in fact, that the boat almost sank! Remember that? It was the day that those disciples met Jesus for the first time!

“IT IS THE LORD!” John suddenly sees. At that word, Peter immediately throws on some clothes and jumps into the sea, in his excitement! I suppose he figures he can get to Jesus by swimming, faster than the boat can get to the shore! But the rest do come along too, and they all enjoy a delicious and transforming fish fry on the shore. It’s a story driven by surprise and the magnificently unexpected, and ends in laughter and joy!

And I think that when we have some good clean fun, even or *especially* in worship, we are living out this truth. We are carrying on this very biblical heritage. And, in a very special and sacred way, we thereby show ourselves truly to be *God’s children*, for as the Affirmation of Faith coming soon so rightly puts it, we are created in God’s own image and that “we live, we love, we *laugh* because we are like Him.”

Let that sink in. We laugh *because* we are like Him. Our joy and our laughter is a mark of who we are – and *whose* we are. And so, I ask you: Are you ready? Are you ready to open your eyes and see? Are you ready to laugh? Are you ready to live – to the Glory of God?! Amen.