

“Laughing at the Lord’s Table”

Genesis 18:1-15

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Before Flora and I were engaged to be married, I steadfastly refused to discuss the possibility. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to get married, I just did not wish to negotiate a wedding. I would ask her when I was ready and she would accept when she was ready. It was a very simple formula. So it was quite a surprise for her when I pulled out the ring that Christmas morning and asked her to spend the rest of her life with me. I’m not sure if she was more shocked that I wanted to get married or that I had actually come up with a ring, she knowing me for the cheapskate that I am. You see, as I slipped my grandmother’s ring on her finger, my beautiful bride-to-be uttered three words I will never forget: “Is it real?”

Hard as it was to believe, especially coming from me, the ring was, in fact, real, and apparently quite a shock. I believe she was beginning to think I was not ever going to be interested in marrying her. And we had dated for only two years! So it is not too hard for me to understand why Sarah, the Patron Saint of late bloomers, let loose a laugh when she heard that after ninety years of waiting, she too would be blessed with a son to care for her in her old age, and of course, the ancient middle eastern versions of disgusting diapers and lost pacifiers.

This is an endearing story but I wonder if the way we usually read this story of Abraham's hospitality, Sarah's incredulous laugh, and God's promise of the coming of Isaac overshadows what might be the more important observation of the passage. Tucked in there in verse 14 is the real kicker: Is anything too difficult for the Lord? It reads like a rhetorical question, the kind we are not meant to answer, the kind that is meant to blunt any further conversation on the matter. In the context, of course, the implication is that if God can make Sarah fertile, God can do anything! And when we think about Sarah's womb compared to something like God creating the heavens and the earth, it seems like a no-brainer. Of course there is nothing beyond the power of God. But we human beings don't always think with our brains. Often, it is our hearts that rule both our minds and our tongues and we become prone to wondering, if, in fact, there actually is something that is too difficult for God to do, something in our lives, or in our world that God is really not up to the task of handling.

That understandable tendency is raised for us by Sarah's shock and by her laugh. I think it was not that Sarah didn't believe the pronouncement so much as she found it completely unexpected and confusing, a little ironic, and perhaps even somewhat cruel. "After I have grown old," she says, now "shall I have pleasure?" The best years of her life have passed in anguish, and maybe "better late than never" just doesn't sound like such a great consolation prize for so many years of waiting. Besides, consider the source: three strangers for whom she has

just had to make a meal on the spur of the moment, who she has to overhear to learn this! They don't even make the announcement to her directly. Despite being the primary agent in God's unfolding drama, Sarah is the last to know. I cannot begrudge Sarah a little chortle about this one; this one is a little hard to swallow whole.

Now if we put these two things together -- and I mean Sarah's situation and this rhetorical, but often asked, question about God -- mix them up a little, let the mixture settle for a while and take the lid off, I wonder if we don't find thirteen people sitting together in an upper room around the time of Passover, twelve of those people wondering if there is anything left that is too difficult for Jesus to do, a pronouncement by God that is a little hard to swallow whole, a whole lot of dropped jaws and maybe even a couple of nervous chuckles. The scene around the table at our Lord's last supper must have been a sight to behold.

The disciples have seen Jesus do everything from changing water into wine to moving the moneychangers out of the temple. From their perspective there is nothing he can't or won't do. Peter has identified Jesus as the Messiah. Jesus has come to Jerusalem to shake things up. They are now probably as close as they have ever been to truly understanding the rhetorical nature of the question, "Is there anything too difficult for the Lord?" And then Jesus drops his bomb of a statement as he prepares for his final meal with them, He says to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I tell you, I will

not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.” Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, “Take this and divide it among yourselves; for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.” Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.”

Now if you thought my wife was surprised by her cheapskate boyfriend! If you thought Sarah was surprised by three strangers stopping by the tent! The disciples have just been blindsided. Consider the source: their leader, who has been their teacher and companion, is really serious about getting ready to die. He was supposed to take his rightful place as God’s Anointed. Imagine the confusion, the irony, the cruelty. I cannot say I would begrudge any one of the disciples if they too had laughed, just as Sarah had done.

Today we celebrate the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper and in a few minutes I will repeat the words of Jesus telling you that this bread is the broken body of our savior and that this cup contains the shed blood of our friend. And I will ask you to take these elements in remembrance of Christ. And I will not begrudge a single one of you if you laugh. The body of Jesus? The blood of Christ? What an absurd notion! How confusing, how ironic, how cruel. But look around this room, see your brothers and sisters in Christ, listen to the Word of

God, sing to the Lord hymns and songs and spiritual songs— observe the church almost two thousand years after that last supper and ask yourself, “Is anything too difficult for the Lord?”

When I ask myself that question in my more human moments, I think of the engagement ring my wife is wearing. As I said, it belonged to my grandmother, my mother’s mother, who lived in Texas all her life, side by side with Mexicans whom she despised, and never failed to blame, along with blacks, for whatever problem she, and the city of San Antonio, might have been experiencing. I sincerely doubt she would have been able to distinguish between Ticos and Mexicans, and if she had been alive when I met Flora, my strong suspicion is that she would have had a very, very difficult time coming to terms with my marrying a Mexican, much less using her ring. There are many intractable issues in the world, but few more personal and influential than racism and discrimination. That in two short generations, a transformation like this could take place in my family, is, to me, nothing short of miraculous, and that helps me to remember on the rhetorical nature of that question and makes me chuckle as I picture my grandmother rolling over in her grave.

God has been doing the unexpected long before *we* got here. God does the unexpected in our lives and God will do the unexpected in the lives of our children and their children and theirs. And every generation will ponder “Is anything too difficult for the Lord,” with a few from each generation realizing

that actually answering that question means we don't quite get it. In this sacrament of Holy Communion, let us laugh at the unexpected and be in awe of the power and glory of the Lord. Lord, forgive us if we laugh too hard, for it is not that we do not believe that these elements are the body and blood of your son, it's just that you have surprised us once again with the immeasurability of your love for us.

Amen.