

Proper 8B – June 28, 2015
2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27; Psalm 130; 2 Corinthians 8:7-15; Mark 5:21-43
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Kinds of Laughter: as Faith in God and as Faith in No God

In our gospel we hear Jesus say to the crowd gathered at Jairus' house, "Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping. And they laughed at him." Laughter. Laughter is found in some rather unexpected places and perplexing situations in the Bible. You recall the story of Abraham and Sarah, when God told Abraham, who was one hundred years old at the time, that at the age of 90 his wife Sarah was going to have a baby, (and that that lineage would be the beginning of the people of Israel; and, as it turned out, would eventually include one Jesus of Nazareth). Abraham [Genesis 17:17] and Sarah [Genesis 18:9-15] each came close to knocking themselves out in laughter when they got that news! And the story goes on: remember when God asks Sarah about her reaction, she denies that she had laughed. "No, but you did laugh," God replies back. But far from holding their laughter against them, instead God tells them that their baby is going to be a boy, and that God wants them to name him Isaac. Recall "Isaac"—or *Itzhak* in the Hebrew is the word for "laughter." So why did they laugh? They laughed because, in the words of Frederick Buechner, "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."ⁱ They laughed in their perplexity. God says and does things that perplex and confuse even the most faithful.

This was the case in today's gospel for Jairus, the leader of the synagogue and his family, as well as his friends and neighbors. Their laughter was not just a result of confusion, but also the tragic loss of the daughter. Though, from here this can go in either of two directions. The first is to extend that perplexing and tragic laughter to a cynical, scornful or pathetic laughter of faith in no God. Some in the crowd may have been laughing like that as they laughed *at* Jesus. And so, for Jesus to continue on without their encouragement, he simply had to separate them and keep them outside in order to do what came next. Such laughter of faith in no God is exemplified in the French philosopher, Jean Paul Sartre's short story called "The Wall." In this story a man is threatened with death if he doesn't betray the whereabouts of his friend to the enemy. The man refuses to do this and sends the enemy on a wild goose chase to a place where he knows his friend is not. But just by chance it turns out to be the very place where his friend is. The friend is captured and executed, and the man who mistakenly revealed his whereabouts is set free. Sartre ends the story by saying that the man laughed until he cried.ⁱⁱ That is the laughter of faith in no God. It's a response to the absurdity of senseless situations.

Now, the other way to proceed from this laughter of perplexity is to extend it into a laughter of faith in God, again, like Abraham and Sarah. Included in their laughter was an attitude of healthy skepticism and astonishmentⁱⁱⁱ—along with an openness to God's possibilities—all essential elements of faith or at least the prelude to faith; with the moral, "When in doubt, laugh!" Such attitudes are choices we make to move forward in life in spite of difficult, perplexing or even overwhelming or tragic circumstances, and in spite of

more negative attitudes that often prevail in those situations. As theologian Reinhold Niebuhr wrote, “[Laughter] is concerned with the immediate incongruities of life and faith with the ultimate ones. [Laughter] is, in fact, a prelude to and a part of faith, and...the beginning of prayer. In the holy of holies, laughter is swallowed up in prayer and...is fulfilled by faith.”^{iv} Faith is “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen,” says the letter to the Hebrews (11:1). Faith is laughter at the promise of a child called “Laughter” (*Itzhak*, Isaac). Faith is laughter at the promise of God turning all things to good and enlisting us in that endeavor.

And Jesus knew how to make people laugh. At different times, Jesus employed some tongue-in-cheek metaphors, silly parables and other ironic or humorous twists to get across some serious points and to help people face into the absurd aspects of life. There’s a direct line between Jesus and Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert or Jimmy Fallon. Or, as G.K. Chesterton put it, “So far from it being irreverent to use silly metaphors on serious questions, it is one’s duty to use silly metaphors on serious questions. It is the test of one’s seriousness. It is the test of a responsible religion or theory whether it can take examples of pots and pans, and boots and butter-tubs. It is a test of a good philosophy whether you can defend it grotesquely. It is the test of a good religion whether you can joke about it.”^v

Yet, as Buechner also points out^{vi}, we also cry, because if we have the heart to see it, the world we see is in a thousand ways heartbreaking. Only the heartless can look at the world unmoved, and that is presumably why Jesus says in Luke’s gospel, “Woe to you that laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep,” referring to a laughter of callousness and indifference, yet another attitude along with the two I’ve been describing. We can laugh like that only if we turn our back on the suffering and need of the world; and then, the time for weeping comes when we see the suffering and need too late to do anything about them.

So what then of God’s laughter and all the unspeakable or tragic things—the loss of Jairus’ daughter, or the senseless and untimely death of someone we love; or the devastation we hear daily of violence and war; or earthquakes, drought and famine? Would I talk about God’s laughter to, say, a member of Emanuel AME Church in Charleston raw with grief, or the refugee still lost in the devastation of her war experience? No, of course not, but there are other things I wouldn’t talk about either. Anguish is not healed by crushing its victim under the weight of every truth you know. It is healed, or at least lessened, by listening, by time, and often by giving to the other the sense that you also have lived—and still live—without the answers. The silence of God, at first so hard to bear, can become the most satisfying answer, a gracious comfort. So, God does not laugh at our pain or tragedy. Rather, God’s laughter is its resolution.

And therefore Jesus also says in Luke’s gospel, “Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.” That means not just that you shall laugh when the time comes, but that you can laugh a little even now in the midst of the weeping, because you know that the time is coming. All appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, the ending will be a happy ending. God has the last laugh in raising Jairus’ daughter, and in the resurrection of

Jesus, and in the sure promise of the same for all of us. That is what the laughter is about. It is the laughter of hope and trust even when our worst fears have been realized. It is the laughter of faith. It is the *divine comedy*, as it were. Listen to what Dante Alighieri reported in his sublime poem *The Divine Comedy* written some 700 years ago. Dante wrote that after he had made the tortuous ascent from hell and had drawn close to the celestial sphere, he suddenly heard a sound he had never heard before. Stopping and listening, he writes, “It sounded like the laughter of the universe.”

So listen carefully, and you may hear a gentle murmur, ethereal yet earthly, angelic yet quite human. It may sound like the laughter of a twelve-year old girl, Jairus’ daughter, doing cartwheels; or an old woman, Sarah, who has overheard some astounding news. Such holy laughter is a gift of God. It is the Holy Spirit’s and the human spirit’s last best defense against evil, pointlessness and despair.

ⁱ They laughed, as Buechner puts it, “at the perplexing and absurd idea of being told they would have a child at their age. And they laughed because God expected them to believe it. They laughed because they half-believed it themselves. They laughed because laughing felt better than crying. And 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 meanwhile it helped keep them going.” Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking* (London: Collins, 1973), pp. 5, 24-25

ⁱⁱ See Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking* Ibid., p. 5.

ⁱⁱⁱ and an attitude of energy and courage, resilience and even enthusiasm that helped them get through a confusing and challenging moment.

^{iv} So, how then are we to respond to Jairus’ companions and their laughter at Jesus? On the one hand, where some solve the problem of evil and tragedy by saying they exist only as illusions in the minds of mortal humanity; OR where others solve the problem of evil and tragedy in terms of reincarnation and an inexorable law of cause and effect whereby the tragic illness of Jairus’ daughter was merely the reaping of the consequences of evil deeds she committed in another life; OR where some believe that life is absurd and death is only the final absurdity—the Christian response, on the other hand, to such tragic situations is to not offer any theoretical solution at all. It merely points to the God who lived and died as one of us, and to His Cross—and to an empty tomb—and says that, practically speaking, there is no evil or tragedy so dark or bleak but that God can and will turn it to good. Buechner adds, “If someone had come up to Jesus when he was on the cross and asked him if it hurt, he might have answered, like the man in the old joke, ‘Only when I laugh.’ But he wouldn’t have been joking. Faith dies, as it lives, laughing.” And lo and behold, it’s Jesus who has the last laugh, in the resurrection of Jairus’ daughter, and eventually his own resurrection. In this sense, God is a God who laughs.

^v G.K. Chesterton, in the chapter “Spiritualism” in *All Things Considered* (Mundus Publishing, 1969)

^{vi} Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), pp. 29-30