

# Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

June 18, 2017

Second Sunday after Pentecost

Genesis 18, 21:1-7:1-15

## Q: How Do You Make God laugh?

A: Tell God your plans!

Well, even though Sarah laughs when the Lord tells her that she (at age 90) will have a son, it is God who has the last laugh, when he fulfills his promise. This story is just a snippet from the longer story of Sarah and Abraham and if we were to read the whole thing, we'd find even more laughter.

Abraham laughs a couple chapters earlier when God tells him about a son with Sarah, and then when their son is born they name him Isaac, which means laughter. There's a lot of laughter going on!

While God himself doesn't laugh in this story (or anywhere in scripture to my knowledge), I do imagine that he does laugh, sort of an affectionate chuckle when he overhears my thoughts about this or that thing that I think is a good idea, which I'm sure he knows is a mistake.

So the question arises pretty quickly – If God knows what is best for us, some would say, “has a plan for our lives,” how do we as individuals or as a congregation figure out what God wants for us, so that we don't get stuck only pursuing what we want for ourselves? Because not everything I/we want is necessarily what God wants for us – and, in fact, what we want can even be the opposite of what God wants.

For me the first place I go is to the Bible – not because the Bible has step-by-step instructions for each situation:

This is how you should organize coffee hour,  
These are the best mission projects you should take on,  
This is the Confirmation program that's right for you,

Or

This is how you decide which school is best for the kids,  
This is how you should spend your tax refund,  
This is or is not the right time to move.

What the Bible does give us is an orientation toward God's ways and God's desires for us, our church and the world in which we live. And the story of Sarah and Abraham gives us a framework for understanding how God works.

Because there are times when we, like Abraham and Sarah, face dead ends in life - unable to see past the next week or day, or sometimes the next hour! There are the crippling effects of disrupted relationships, personal tragedies and failures, illness and death.

These times can become “barren times” when it seems like nothing is going right, and there seems no end to the stresses and challenges. But God says that endings are not endings at all, but the arena for new possibilities.

I'm not suggesting the easy promises of possibility thinking, that all we need is a change of attitude to create new beginnings from within ourselves and through our own determination. Some endings, some dead ends, some barrenness will not budge even with our best efforts.

We don't grant the promises that come from God, to each other or to ourselves, and so we need to admit that we cannot know or determine what God will do in our lives.

But we do know this: God is the one who brings newness into the dead ends of life, who can do for us, and with us, what we cannot do for ourselves, who can turn the laughter of our own doubts into the playful laughter of joy as we witness his newness springing forth. God is who we trust with our barrenness.

Writing about our relationship to God as we think about how He works in our lives, Marilynne Robinson says this:

*We do not know how God acts or what he intends, toward ourselves or toward others. We know only that his will precedes us, anticipates us, can never forget or look away from us. I think a sense of mystery, therefore reverence, is appropriate to all the questions at hand.*

I used to say that "sometimes, God does grant our hearts' desires." And I'd always say that after something had turned out the way I wanted it to – big things, like being called to each of the 3 churches as settled pastor, meeting the man who would be my husband, in my mid-thirties, being able to spend 2 sabbaticals at 2 places I'd dreamed about my whole adult life.

"Sometimes, God grants the desires of our hearts," I'd say.

But having studied this passage this week, I don't think that's quite right. I think it's more correct to say that "sometimes, my desires are in line with God's will."

If we look at Sarah and Abraham, at first glance we might say that God did grant Sarah's desire to have a son. But if we read the entire story, not just bits and pieces of it like we do on Sunday mornings, we'll notice that Sarah desires a son for years before God makes his promise to Abraham, that he will father a great nation. And then 10 more years pass before we come to the passage for today, when God makes the promise to them that Sarah will indeed bear a son.

God made a promise, which he would fulfill – that Abraham would father a great nation – that's the bigger promise; and Sarah's desires were in the service of God's bigger promise.

It might be a subtle distinction, but I think it's important for our faith – that we don't think we're telling God what to do and he's constantly (or not constantly) granting our wishes and desires. A deeper faith seeks to know God's will, and then to conform our lives to that. And as Marilynne Robinson says, allows God to remain mysterious.

I think this has to do with humility and knowing our proper place in relationship to God. It means we admit that we don't know it all.

Maybe we need to follow the advice of Michael Josephson, reflecting on speaking at a graduation for junior high kids as they finish the 8<sup>th</sup> grade and look to high school. Here's what he said:

*There's a tendency for kids that age to be overly confident in their opinions.*

*I'd learned that it helps to get such audiences actively involved, so I asked them to repeat after me: "I am moving on."*

*After talking about that for a while, I asked their parents to say with equal volume and vigor: "I am on your side."*

*Later I asked the graduates to say: "I am smarter than I ever was but not as smart as I will ever be."*

*Then I made this appeal: "For your own success and the sanity of your parents, please remember that as much as you know, there's still much you don't know. And as much as your parents don't know, there's much that they do know. And here's the biggie: Sometimes, what your parents know is some of the stuff you don't know."*

*“But even if you’re certain that you know what your parents don’t think you know and that your parents don’t know what they think they know, treat them kindly and with respect. They’re still learning.” (Charactercounts.org, Commentary, Middle School Commencement)*

We would do well to take the same advice – to realize that what we don’t know, God probably does!

Abraham and Sarah sure didn’t know what God had in store for them. And we don’t either.

Which is why we need prayer - and not just us talking to God, but listening, really listening to and for God to speak to us.

There is a great prayer in the Book of Common Prayer which is used by the Church of England and the Episcopal Churches here, which I’d like to close with. St. Chrysostom wrote this in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century:

*Almighty God, you have given us grace at this time with one accord to make our common supplication to you; and you have promised through your well-beloved Son that when two or three are gathered together in his Name you will be in the midst of them: Fulfill now, O Lord, our desires and petitions as may be best for us; granting us in this world knowledge of your truth, and in the age to come life everlasting. Amen.*

Amen!