

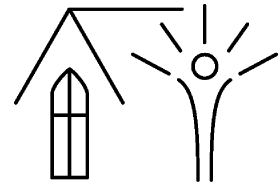


ROSELLE
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

206 S. Rush Street
Roselle, IL 60172
(630) 529-1309
www.RoselleUMC.org

Our Mission Statement:

*“To Know Christ,
To Grow in Christ,
To Show Others Christ”*



March 12, 2006

“Laughter is a Close Cousin To Faith”

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16, Mark 8:31-38

Reverend Thomas Kim

Jack Carey, of Watsonville, California visited a kindergarten class. He happily agreed to tell the children a story. Soon the nine eager students were listening intently to an animated description of the discovery of Mammoth Cave and the strange creatures that live there. Describing the blind fish, Carey explained to the children, “Although they have lost their sense of sight, some of their other senses have gotten stronger, such as their sense of . . .” Pausing for a response, he could hardly stifle his laughter when Katie called out, “Sense of humor!” (Wit and Wisdom @xc.org.)

I don't know if blind fish compensate by developing a sense of humor or not, but I do know that many people who have experienced heartbreaking and even life crushing situations have learned to cope through their sense of humor. And researchers are finding out more every day about the therapeutic benefits of laughter on our minds, souls, and body.

Norman Cousins, former editor of the *SATURDAY REVIEW*, was suffering from a painful collagen illness a disease of the connective tissues. Nodules had begun to appear on his body and at one point his jaws were almost totally locked.

The doctors told him he had only one chance in five hundred to live. Immediately Cousins embarked on a program of combining massive doses of Vitamin C with a program of daily laughter. He began with funny films shown on his own projector. Among them were “Candid Camera” and some Marx Brother's films. “I made the joyous discovery,” he relates, “that ten minutes of genuine belly laughter had an anesthetic effect and would give me two hours of pain free sleep.” He repeated the procedure as needed. Within months he was free from pain and able to return to his work.

This is not to say that disease need not ever be fatal. It is to say, however, that we are a wholistic and unitary being. You cannot separate your lifestyle from your general wellbeing. The best possible lifestyle is one in which you trust God and live responsibly in the light of God's love, that is a life of faith.

As we heard from Norman Cousins' healing story, the ability to laugh is a gift from God. Laughter has a spiritual meaning. Laughter itself is not faith, but it is closely related with your faith. Watch a group of deeply devoted people together. They laugh more. Even our worship and our fellowship events here at church would be drab indeed if we couldn't laugh from time to time. Jesus is certainly not opposed to laughter, particularly wholesome laughter, the laughter that comes from being in a proper relation with your neighbor and with God.

In today's lesson from Genesis, already an old man when he first hears God's call, Abraham obediently begins his long, wandering search for a home based on God's promise. Now, Sarah was ninety years old. Back bent, no teeth, and digestive problems when God promised Sarah and her “as good as dead husband,” Abraham that they would be parents of a great family.

Do you remember Sarah's response after she heard that they would be parents of a great family? She laughed, however, it was a cynical laughter of disbelief.

The Bible, three chapters later, says, “The Lord did for Sarah as he had promised,” and Isaac was born. And Sarah laughed. But this time her laughter was no longer the laughter of cold, cynical disbelief. Hers was the laughter of astonishment and amazement. Sarah says, “God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.” (Gen. 21:6)

When the cynical laughter of disbelief becomes the astonished laughter that comes from the unexpected intrusions of a loving, living God, and when the promises of God come true, we laugh, and even though we are deep in the dark days of Lent, it's Easter. Laughter is a close cousin to faith, a humble recognition that the fate of the world, the significance of our lives, is not entirely up to us.

We come to hard times hoping for hope. The War in Iraq, Terrorism, the Economic Crisis with the National double deficits in trade and budget, and political scandals. Worry seems to have become the national pastime.

Why is it that the times we are convinced will be the best often turn out to be the very worst?

How many big family get-togethers -- Christmas, Thanksgiving, July Fourth -- start out fun, then turn into fiascos? Cousin Jim still won't talk to Uncle Frank, and the stains from Aunt Margaret's pie will never come out of the carpet. Weddings are another time when bombs of both tiny and titanic proportion are regularly detonated. The number of things that go wrong on wedding days -- cakes dropped, rings lost, blazing heat, torrential rain, flowers delivered to another planet -- is about equal to the number of people who wish they had just eloped.

Sometimes it seems that whenever we expect the best of times, we get the worst of times instead. Thankfully, the reverse is also true.

Today's reading from Genesis, the story of Sarah and Abraham is a reversed story that shows that faith brings laughter after all. Despite all the evidence to the *contrary*, Abraham's faith enables him to "hope against hope." And out of the worst conditions -- extreme old age and barrenness -- God brings the best to Abraham and Sarah, their son Isaac. That's why they named their son, Isaac, which means laughter. Hope is not so much certainty that things are going to work out as it is a certainty. Rather, "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." (Hebrews 11:1)

The owner of a photographic studio tells the story of a college boy who came in with a framed picture of his girl friend. He wanted the picture duplicated. Therefore it had to be removed from the frame. In doing this, the studio owner noticed the inscription on the back of the photograph. It was written by the girlfriend: "My dearest Tommy: I love you with all my heart -- I love you more and more each day -- I will love you forever and ever. I am yours for all eternity." It was signed "Dianne" and contained a P.S.: "If we should ever break up, I want this picture back." (Charles Krieg, St. Joseph's Seminary, Princeton, NJ) That's what the world says to us. The world wants certainty or optimism. What the girl wrote on the picture was an expression of a mere optimism which has humanity as its foundation. But what we need is faith in God. Though the world says optimism, God tells us about hope.

When I was arrested by the military government in S. Korea in 1983 for my activities there, it wasn't an optimistic situation. But I had faith that someday there would be a democratic government in S. Korea. 22 years later, last May, I received a letter from the S. Korean Government that honored and recognized my contribution to the democracy movement in S. Korea, and I laughed. Can I say that laughter is a close cousin to faith?

Ruben Alvez says, "*Hope is hearing the melody of the future and dancing to it today.*" I rephrase it this way: Faith is hearing the melody of God's promise and dancing to it today. Even though today is full of failure, sadness, and despair, and everything seems to go against you, still you can hope because of God, and you hear the melody of the future from God, and you dance with faith. And faith gives hope life. Faith is hearing God's promises today. Faith helps us to hold your hope steadfast, and helps us get through today's problems. If you have faith, after all you can laugh since laughter is a close cousin to faith.

A man looked on in desperation as he saw fire engulfing his house. The flames prevented him from entering. He saw his son in the bedroom window and he yelled, "Jump, Son, Jump!"

In desperation the father called back again, "Jump, Son! Daddy will catch you."

Trembling with fear, the boy stood poised on the window. Then he jumped. He couldn't see; he was frightened out of his wits but he made the leap into his father's arms. He did so because of the faith and trust he had in his father.

Faith is like that- a blind leap into the arms of God. Sometimes faith is obedience, sometimes it is death, but it brings ultimate laughter. Faith is not a theory for us; neither is it a dogma. It means receiving God himself. Faith helps us to find trust again and again when, from a human point of view, the foundations of trust have been destroyed. Faith gives us the vision to perceive what is essential and eternal. That's why laughter is a close cousin to faith, a humble recognition that the fate of the world, the significance of our lives, is not left entirely up to us. God is busy working for us and with us, so we are not permitted to give up hope for ourselves or for the world. This is the promise of the gospel. All of us, even and especially at our very worst, are promised that God can do the best with us. It is that promise that enables us to live on in faith continually "hoping against hope," and we can laugh since laughter is a close cousin to faith.

Let us end this morning with an ancient message, spoken in a variety of languages.

In Latin, the words are Sursum Corda. Repeat after me: Sursum Corda.

In Hebrew, the words are Hazak v'ematz. Repeat after me: Hazak v'ematz.

In King James English, the words are these: "Be strong and of good courage."

Repeat after me: "Be strong and of good courage." We have a great God, and we laugh. Laughter is a close cousin to faith.