



Sarah Laughing (detail from Angel Appears to Sarah)
Tiepolo, Giovanni Battista, 1696-1770, Fresco, Udine, Italy

Proper 6A

Sunday, June 18, 2023

The Rev. Linda McConnell

THE SERMON: THE MAGIC SAUCE

So last week, I gave you one of my own guiding verses. It's from the third chapter of Ephesians: "Glory to God, whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. Glory to God from generation to generation in the church and in Christ Jesus."

Glory to God - whose power working in us... One time when I was discouraged that we were not growing by leaps and bounds, Gerrie and I were standing in front of the church, by the lavender, and she said something along the lines of, "but you know none of this isn't ours. It's all God's. We do what we can. But it is God's will what happens."

And my shoulders relaxed - because what our resident saint said was absolutely true. God is working a myriad of miracles all the time - and sometimes we just have to use a different frame or lens, or look in different directions. Our only duty really is to enjoy the working out of God's purposes and to give God the glory - not bend ourselves into knots trying to work the miracles ourselves!

How very much I have learned from you all!

As I prepare to hand this congregation into the hands of new leadership, I am being asked many questions. The most potent question I have been asked thus far is to describe the magic sauce, the cultural DNA of Good Shepherd - which predates my time, but that I have intentionally over time sought to nurture and grow.

I LOVE that question - and the best way I can answer is to quote one of the earliest hymns of the church, found in the second chapter of Paul's letter to the Philippians. (*Philippians 2: 1-8*)

"Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, **2** then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. **3** Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, **4** not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others."

5 In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

6 Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;
7 rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.

8 And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!

Paul goes on to proclaim Christ raised up and exalted - not by himself - but by the God who called him.

So to the best of my ability to describe it - the secret sauce is humility, genuine humility - which means that we as people and as a congregation encourage one another to speak up and speak out, boldly, and vulnerably but without insisting that we are right, or that there are no other right ways, or right answers.

Humility grows as we learn to observe our own actions with as much objectivity as possible - not trying to change or judging - but simply to observe with curiosity. What is the quality of the energy that we are bringing to the task, to the relationship? What is our motivation? Is it life-giving? Is it power hungry?

And as we observe our inevitable mixed motives with the compassion of Jesus, we begin to purify. Become more single-hearted. We begin to love in a way that doesn't seek to uplift ourselves without also uplifting others. We begin to catch on to the wisdom of what the Franciscan friar Richard Rohr calls "falling upward." Love that is willing to serve without taking honors for doing so.

Marty Vonnegut, one of our parishioners who you will mostly see at our BBQ's and parties, was part of the crew that took the Apollo 11 mission to the moon. You probably wouldn't know that if you hadn't had a pretty comprehensive conversation with him. It was years before I was aware of this. He just quietly supports our Scout troop and the Rotary and lends his humor and goodwill to virtually any gathering.

This congregation is filled with people like this. Filled with folks who are highly accomplished, whether it is in their professions, or in their ability to deal with devastating illnesses, or difficult family backgrounds, who have given their successes and their challenges into the hands of God, and ceased to use them to make others bend to their will. They serve at the altar, on the flower guild, on our Vestry, make the coffee, sing in the choir, fix the electrical wiring, watch over our financial health, teach the Sunday school,

and look towards the good of the whole, rather than any personal agenda.

I think of what Judy Bryant, of blessed Flower Guild memory, taught me that sums all of this up. This elderly Japanese woman taught me that the most important principle for the Japanese art of flower arranging, called Ikebana, was the clean up - not the flower arranging - but afterwards - the part that no one would ever notice - getting everything ready for the person who would come after you. I think she taught me this after I had left some rocks in the sanctuary - part of a children's time I had done!

But this is what Richard Rohr characterizes as a spirituality for the second half of life, when we truly seek to grow in wisdom and understanding rather than occupy ourselves wholly with making a name or a fortune for ourselves.

And even though Rohr calls this the spirituality of the second half of life - it is not about age. Some young people embark upon this journey - mostly because they have suffered in some deep way, personally, or have become aware of the dire effect of climate change for instance, or have seen through the pointlessness of collecting more and more stuff. Likewise, just because we inevitably grow old in years, does not mean that we inevitably grow in the wisdom of Christ.

So it's not about age - It is about the mystery of grace that causes some of us, at some point, young, old, middle-age, to look at the ladder we have been so busy climbing and begin wondering if it is leaning against the wrong wall! Or to reach the top of that ladder - and have to begin all over again, because it's only then that we see we've actually gotten it wrong.

This doesn't mean that we don't bend ourselves wholeheartedly towards success in our fields, towards straight A's, towards building our portfolios, towards growing our church - but it does mean that we don't confuse what really matters with what is passing. It does mean that we can bend and sway with what life hands us, rather than holding ourselves rigid with our own plans and perspectives and purity codes and rules.

Whatever the reason, it is Grace, pure grace that leads or pushes us out on this very counter-cultural journey of divesting ourselves of our own importance, and seeking over and above all else, the good of the whole in Christ.

And the result is almost always a kind of lighthearted joy - as we observe our own faults and failings and find ourselves embedded in a life that is so much greater than ourselves. I mean get us together on pretty much any project, and you are guaranteed to hear a lot of very good hearted laughter, along with the work getting done. If someone invites you to a work party or some other project - like the Art show, or the Vestry, or the buildings and grounds committee, say yes. Or volunteer. Your endorphins will say thank you.

I think Sarah, in her old age, had grown into this kind of understanding. She was a barren woman who had suffered terribly at a time that measured a woman's worth by her ability to bear children. So when Sarah heard the angels declare that she was going to become pregnant - She broke out in laughter. Not cynical laughter but genuine laughter at God's divine upside downness, at this falling upward way of wisdom. And when the boy was born - she named him Isaac - Laughter.

Turning to the gospel, when Jesus sent those twelve guys out with no training, no financial backing, no real instructions other than to heal the sick and raise the dead, they didn't say no way, we're going to look like fools. I think they just humored Jesus and laughed a lot going down the road. I mean, as long as we don't take ourselves too seriously, God's divine humor is seriously funny. So there they went - zero resources other than each other and their teacher's blessing - and they came back falling all over themselves to tell Jesus the stories about what happened when they simply let God's power work in and through them.

The simple truth is that the mission Jesus sent those guys on was never about them. Likewise - It is never about us. It is purely and totally about God's life giving power.

So do nothing, my friends, out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. **And** In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant.

That's the magic sauce. That's the cultural DNA.