**First United Methodist Church**

**618 Eighth Street**

**Columbus, Indiana 47201**

**Rev. Howard E. Boles**

**June 23, 2024**

“Laugh with Me”

Text: Genesis 21:1-7

On most Sundays, you would expect me to begin the sermon with something lighthearted. But oddly enough, on Holy Humor Sunday, I am going to begin on the serious side.

Last spring and summer I met with many of the groups of the church. The small groups, women’s groups, and others. I went with no particular agenda. My main goal was to listen. I wanted to hear how people were feeling, both in their personal lives and in the life of the church. One of the questions I asked was what people would like to see happening in the church. There were some great discussions and I appreciate all that was shared.

Following those sessions, I reviewed the notes from the many conversations and tried to find common themes or concerns. One that was quite apparent did not come as a surprise. I don’t know if anyone phrased it this way because it would have required a significant amount of vulnerability on their part, but I heard a lot of statements about how disconnected we are from one another, how lonely people were feeling. They wanted activities beyond Sunday morning to bring us together in community. And so, we have developed events to address that need. The Brown Bag lunches are an example. The whole aim of these gatherings is to create an informal time when people can get together for fellowship and conversation, where we can deepen our relationships with one another.

Another common thread that emerged was around the issue of education. Folks were hungry for classes that would deepen their faith. On that basis, we began a weeknight Bible study and started an adult Sunday School class. There have been other learning opportunities throughout the year to help fill that void. Although these classes are on hiatus for the summer, I am already looking at resources for beginning them again in August.

Another point that emerged was shared was a feeling of loss and grief that many experience. There are a lot of hurts in our society. And where do we find support and help in those experiences? Looking back, I would say that we have attempted to address these needs, but we still have a lot of work to do, and I hope we will continue to address this need, both for those within our congregation, but on a broader level for our community.

I wanted these conversations to be as broad as possible, and one of the groups I met with was our youth. I’m not telling you anything you don’t already know, but we have some incredible youth in this church. They inspire me.

I had an enjoyable conversation with the youth and then I asked them, “what would you like to see in the future for our church?” There was a long silence, and I knew they were thinking hard. I waited. Finally, one of our youth said, “I don’t have any specifics of what I want to see our church doing, but whatever it is, it should be fun.” What a beautiful answer. It should be fun.

Church is about a lot of important, serious subjects. But if we are not having fun together, we are missing an opportunity. Jesus said that he came that we might have life and have it abundantly. We sell that abundance short if we don’t imagine a bit of laughter and playfulness in our life and in our community of faith. What we do in church and how we live is important and serious, but we should always leave room for a bit of laughter.

Today’s reading is a part of a familiar story. Abraham and Sarah are living in the wilderness when Abraham sees some travelers. He runs to them. Perhaps he’s lonely. But he insists that they come and stay with him. He promises generous hospitality and a place to rest. The travelers seem to desire to keep going, but Abraham is insistent. So, they stay. Together they enjoy good food and good conversation. At some point, the conversation turns to family. Abraham must have looked dejected. God had promised that he would be the father of a great nation, but it seems that God has forgotten that promise. But these travelers say to him, “when we come back in a year, you and Sarah will have a child.” Upon hearing that, Sarah does what any of us would do. She laughed.

But a promise is a promise. And not long thereafter, Sarah became pregnant. Against all odds, they were going to be parents. When that child was born, they named him Isaac. In the Hebrew, Isaac means, “He will laugh.” And in today’s reading, Sarah said, “God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.”

One important thing to note from that story is that God didn’t punish the laughter. God never said to Abraham and Sarah, because of your laughter, I will not keep my promise. I think God was smiling along with them, laughing as well.

Laughter and playfulness and joy are from God. One early theologian said, “the glory of God is human beings fully alive.” And that fullness is expressed in the broad range of human emotions, including our joy. God laughs along with us.

While he was a student at Concordia Seminary in Missouri, Martin Marty and his friends made up a fictional scholar they named Franz Bibfeldt. The name sounded like a great theological name but was the result of their imaginations. They then began quoting this fictional theologian in the student newspaper, the school’s library card catalog and even in the bibliographies of their term papers. If I recall correctly, Dr. Marty even included a reference to Franz Bibfeldt in his doctoral dissertation.

The dean of the school got wind of what they were doing and called Marty into his office. He told him that such frivolity could never been good for a Protestant scholar. That didn’t stop Dr. Marty and he continued throughout his life and studies to quote the supposed scholar Franz Bibfeldt adding, “I guess my who professional life was thanks to a prank!!”

I tell you that story in order to tell you this one. In the early years of my ministry, pastors were required to fill out an annual report indicating that we had completed sufficient continuing education. I love learning so this was never a problem for me. I always had more credits than was required.

On that form, we were also required to list the books that we had read that year. I was given twelve lines. As you know, I read a lot more books than that. So, I listed some of the more significant works, but then I wondered if anyone was reading those reports.

So, one year in my list of readings, I included the children’s book, “Moo, Baa, La La La” to see if anyone noticed. In the space next to the title, they asked why this book was important and I wrote, “Sometimes it isn’t what you read but who you read it with.” The Staff Parish committee got a good laugh about it, but I heard nothing from the folks I submitted the form to.

The next year, I made up the title of a book and listed the author as Franz Bibfeldt. Still nothing. So, the next year, among my readings was a book by the renowned moral philosopher at Princton University, Dr. Harry G. Frankfurt. His book, for the sake of keeping this sermon rated pg is entitled, “On B.S.” I laughed when I typed that title on the denominational report. I laughed when I hit the submit button. And then I waited. And waited. And no one ever said a word. That was when I came to the conclusion that no one reads those reports.

A few years ago, the church I was serving underwent a major construction project. The church had few parking spots to begin with and the construction decreased that number. I know there are churches that have reserved spots for the clergy, but this has never been important to me. I volunteered to park a few blocks away so that others could have the limited parking spots.

In that space where I had been parking, one of the preschool teachers began to park each day. Her husband was a priest at a Greek Orthodox church, and she had a sign on her windshield that read, “Orthodox Clergy.” My colleagues got a good laugh out of the fact that they knew it wasn’t mine because of this sign. But even better still, one day I walked to my car to find a sign had been placed on the outside of my windshield. It read, “Unorthodox Clergy.” I had the best laugh from that. And I kept that sign as a badge of honor.

I take my faith and my ministry seriously and I seek to do the very best at it. But sometimes I suppose I am a bit unorthodox, finding laughter and humor and joy in this wonderful vocation.

Once our youth had a weeklong Vacation Bible School where the theme was farm animals. I’m sure there was something biblical about that, although I have no idea what it was. But the week culminated in a Friday night gathering at the church in which we had cows, pigs, chickens, horses, llamas, and other assorted animals there for the children and families to pet.

Along with that, the event was a fundraiser. All of the funds raised would be donated to Heifer Project International. If you aren’t familiar with Heifer Project, it is a great organization that provides animals to communities around the world. You can purchase a cow or goat that will provide milk for a family in need. You can purchase chickens that produce eggs that will help feed the community. They are a great organization.

That final day, with all the farm animals there at church, was a fundraiser for Heifer Project. But the organizers must have thought people would need some incentive for the fundraising. So, they said, “every time we raise $500 one of the pastors will kiss one of the farm animals.” I am sure that I was not present for the meeting where this was decided. I’m not even sure I was aware of this arrangement.

But not long into the evening they raised the first $500. And the senior pastor had come and gone. I was the only pastor present. I was summoned to the area where the animals were and told that I had to kiss one of the animals. I picked the llama. And the children laughed. And then they raised another $500. And another $500. I don’t recall how many animals I kissed that evening, but I do recall there was a pig and a cow and a sheep to name a few. And yes, there were photos.

Several days later, I was at the grocery store when I came upon a young family in the church. The little boy called out, “I know you!” I assume he recognized me through my son who was in his classroom. I expected him to say, “You’re Desmond’s Dad.” Or perhaps I expected him to say, “You’re the person who wears that white robe on Sunday.” That is what I expected. Instead, what I got was, “You’re the guy who kissed a pig.” And there at the grocery store, we laughed together. Indeed, I was the guy who kissed a pig. But more than that, I was the guy who made a child laugh. And that made me exceedingly proud.

Sarah laughed at the notion that she would bear a child in her old age. And when that child was born, she named him, “he will laugh.” But I have always wondered about the reference for that pronoun. Who is she referring to? Is it Isaac? Or is it God? Or perhaps it is all of us. For Sarah invites us to laugh with her, to share her joy, to find reason to delight in moments of goodness.