

June 21, 2020   Fathers-Keep Covenants, Keep Laughing   Genesis 18:1-15   Rev. Ross Leckie

It is interesting that on this Father's Day, the Scripture reading is about Abraham, "exalted father" or the father of many nations. Abraham is that 'father' figure for Christians, Jews, and Muslims.

He was well on in years when we pick up the story this morning. Abraham and his wife Sarah were in their nineties. Abraham was a descendant of Noah. His ancestors had weathered some rough times. Abraham's father, Terah actually lived 205 years. They had started out in good relationship with God, but things had gone off the rails with most of the family. Abraham, however, had a strong sense of God's presence in his life.

Over the years God had said to Abraham and later to Sarah, I'm going to make of you a great nation. Your descendants will be so numerous, they will be as numerous as the dust of the earth. God made a covenant, a promise with Abraham, that if he remained faithful, he would be the father of many and he would be given land and possessions. God remained with Abraham and he was faithful to God throughout his long life.

But still there were no children. God took Abraham out under the stars of night, invited him to look toward heaven and count the stars. If he could count the stars, God told him, such would be the number of his offspring.

God invites men (fathers) to keep their covenants or promises and when they do so they will be a blessing to many.

A while ago, I heard about an apology from a father. It has become a familiar story that I've heard told in many different ways over the years. This time it was told by a woman I met at the funeral home. She had been married to a man who happened to be a Pentecostal minister. They had children together and lived for many years happily. His ministry and their ministry together appeared to be very successful. Her husband was serving in large churches after only a decade in ministry, much earlier than would be expected. He had a charisma which attracted people of all ages. But after 18 years of marriage he gave in to temptation and took up life with another woman.

The apology came about ten years later. There had been no communication between this couple for those ten years. The man who was now in poor health and wondered how much longer he would live, called his daughter and said, "I wonder if you would help me. I need to apologize to your mother, but when she hears my voice she may just hang up the phone immediately." So the daughter agreed that when her mother was next visiting she would arrange to make the phone connection.

Things proceeded as planned. The daughter said to her mother, "this call is for you. I want you to hear this person out and not hang up the phone until you have heard what he has to say." And so the conversation took place. The former husband was able to make his apology. The woman's response was to accept the apology but also to say to this father. "I have been able to make my way in life. It has been difficult and agonizing, you have hurt me deeply, but I have had a loving mother and a loving father to support me through this time. You need to reconcile what you have done with your children so that they can live on as responsible and loving adults, so that they can have loving relationships."

In June of 2008 in our Canadian House of Commons for the first time ever, a Prime Minister, Stephen Harper, like a father in a household, apologized on behalf of the government of Canada for the Indian residential school system which operated in this land from the late 1800s to 1996 through facilities owned and maintained by the mainline churches.

The system took 150,000 children from their homes. Many of those children were taken

great distances from their families and they were away from their parents and siblings 10 months of the year. We need to reconcile what has been done to these persons who are now elderly and to their children and their grandchildren who have been deprived of loving relationships.

In response to the apology from our Prime Minister of the day, the Assembly of First Nations Chief Phil Fontaine said this, "What happened today signifies a new dawn in the relationship between us and the rest of Canada. We are and always have been an indispensable part of the Canadian identity."

Living out our covenants, our promises is steady, hard work. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said this week that a disproportionate number of Indigenous peoples are subject to the use of force by police services including the RCMP as he promised "strong, bold" actions to address systemic racism in policing and elsewhere. Mr. Trudeau said data suggest Indigenous peoples are at a greater risk of being mistreated or experience greater use of force by police across the country. Solutions to patterns that have become habitual require innovative action.

Do you remember the Robin Williams' movie, Patch Adams, from a number of years ago? It is based on a true story about a doctor, Hunter 'Patch' Adams who was criticized in his official medical school record for "excessive happiness" and was once told by a faculty advisor, "If you want to be a clown, join the circus."

Into the quiet, sterile, rather sombre confines of a hospital corridor, comes a clown with giant shoes and an enormous red nose. Patients beware..laughter is contagious-that's the message Adams conveys.

'Patch' Adams became both a clown and a physician. His story includes both having been a patient and a doctor in a psychiatric hospital. He wears massively bright floral shirts and a tie that occasionally makes noise. He's an outrageous person, but also a passionate and dedicated doctor. He never wanted to be part of the system, he had to create a new system.

Though continuing to ruffle administrative feathers, Patch finds his niche in the children's ward, where his funny, outrageous style helps break through youngsters' fears.

Fighting conventional wisdom, allowing himself to be vulnerable, and embracing the idea that service to others is the best way to combat your own problems, Patch Adams begins to reach people

Today, the real, Dr Patch Adams of Arlington, Virginia, charges no money to see patients at the Gesundheit Institute, carries no malpractice insurance and lives with patients in a country farm setting. He leads a seminar each year bringing together people from diverse fields to work at changing the American medical system. The seminar is entitled, "Inside my heart but outside the box: Thinking, to change the medical box." The participants are invited to laugh, play, love and be joyful working to make what is outside the box a reality inside the box of their every day lives.

Joy, he says, is more important than any other drug. Dr Adams promotes his philosophy of health care and seeks donations through a stage show entitled, "The Wellness Show," in which he plays a 19th century snake-oil salesman. His 'products' include nutrition, exercise, wonder, curiosity and love.

"The best therapy is being happy," he says. "All the other things doctors can do are the best aids." "Health is typically defined as the absence of disease. To me, health is a happy, vibrant, exuberant life every single day of your life. Anything less is a certain amount of disease."

At the institute they do not think in terms of cure rates. That gives a false sense of security. Adams believes that people are always 'in process' until they die. You don't cure

depression. You help a person find happiness, according to their own definition, and hopefully you help them to perpetuate that.

The architect for the new fee-free hospital was asked to “make it silly,” with trap doors, eyeball-shaped examining rooms and chandeliers to swing on.

Well, have you a smirk on your face? Is that vision that ‘Patch Adams’ has, just that- a dream, a laughable one? Perhaps we are close to that smirk, that very beginning of a laugh that Sarah experienced, covering her face with a tent flap, holding-back a full belly-laugh from those men who arrived to talk to Abraham and deliver the message, that the next time they came by, in about nine months, Sarah would have given birth to a child-at the age of 90!

As it has been recalled, Abraham was the good host, just as a Bedouin shepherd would be a host for you today, if you approach their tent out on the plain. He offered his guests refreshing water to cleanse themselves, a chance to rest, and plenty of the kind of food he could offer.

Sarah, well beyond child-bearing possibility, laughed to herself and said, “Now that I am old and worn out, can I still enjoy sex? And besides, my husband is old too.”

Adams discovered that life had to be fun. He experienced life when all was serious. He had ulcers and at one time wanted to kill himself. That was him taking life too seriously. That was failure. Once in the medical field, he came to see great problems in the American health care system. He decided there had to be a better way.

Sarah didn’t believe God would come through. “Is anything too difficult for the Lord?” Yes, she thought, it was! She coaxed Abraham to take Hagar as a mistress and to have a child through her. He did that. But God was not finished with them yet. She and Abraham, would have their own child, Issac, which means “laughter”.

Laughter lightens moods. Laughter projects positive energy. Laughter draws people together. Laughter heals and maintains good emotional and physical health.

Today we know about endorphins and the importance of the mind in the healing process. That knowledge didn’t exist back in the ‘60s and ‘70s when Patch Adams was forming his philosophy. It was a radical concept then. He was really a pioneer in the discovery of the medicinal values of laughter and compassion.

The contemporaries of Abraham and Sarah did not understand the biological detail of childbirth. Sarah was blamed as the barren one.

This ancient tale was about the nature of God in the world. God is not bound by human possibility. If humankind could realize that God can always bring newness and open new possibilities, our perception of dead ends would be different. Our God can bring newness into the places where some see no hope. Dry bones can be brought to life! “If any one is in Christ, they are a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come.” (2 Cor. 5)

Sarah shared the laughter of impossibility. God placed her right in the center. Instead of passive accomplice she became the mother of all nations, numerous as the stars of night. Patch Adams really believes in the possibility to change attitudes, to bring healing, to reform the American health care system. Should we have any less hope? God brings newness in the face of human impossibility.

This story calls us to re-examine what we think God is about in our world. It calls us to stop and think about laughter in light of who God has revealed himself to be. It can call us to reevaluate what the power of God can do in the world and in our lives as we trust him to work. It is a call to a vision of new possibilities and renewal, not by human effort and determination, but solely by the grace and power of God to bring newness into the endings of our lives.

It's a hard thing to believe in a promise-to live by it, day after day, to see it in the night sky and hear it in your name and see it again in your lover's eyes. It's a hard thing to believe in a promise with no power in it to make it come true. Everything will happen, by and by, but in the meantime, how do I live now?

And yet what better way to live than in the grip of a promise? To wake in the possibility that today might be the day. To remain wide awake all day long, noticing everything-the shade of the olive tree, how the smell of the fields changes from green grass to yellow hay and the sun heats up overhead. To search the face of every stranger in case it turns out to be an angel of God. To take nothing for granted. Or to take everything as granted, though not yet grasped. To handle every moment of one's life as a seed of a promise and to plant it tenderly, never knowing if this moment, or the next, may be the one that grows.

To live in this way is to discover that God is always blessing us. It does come in the future if we only have the patience to wait. The blessing and the promises of God are now. It may not be fully realized or fully in hand, but we are called to live with a laughing hope in God's promise today.

Abraham and Sarah believed in God's promises and dared to hope.

We too, who have practised the faith throughout many years, will be called to launch out in new ways. Take a hearty laugh and keep right on birthing the new, keep your promises, watch for the unexpected. It is out of the box thinking! Thanks be to God. Amen.