

Genesis 18:1-15  
John 20:19-30

### Doubt and Laughter

Since it is Joy and Laughter Sunday, I need to begin my Sermon with a Joke. I'll let you be the judge on how funny it is. Here we go: Since you all attend Ark and Dove Presbyterian Church; you must by definition agree with everything I say from the pulpit.

How funny is that huh?

Ok, the laughter doesn't seem to be that rigorous. Let me change the punch line. It might help. If any of you have attended Ark and Dove Presbyterian Church for a long time; then you really must agree with everything I say from the pulpit or why else would you still be attending?

Okay so how funny is that?

The top religious story of the last two weeks, even in the face of two billion people celebrating Easter around the world, has been Barack Obama's church attendance at Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago; where before his recent retirement, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright was pastor for a good solid 36 year period.

The Media Meisters and the republican and democratic Politicos not in the Barack Obama camp have made a rule. Their rule

is that if you attend a church, you must agree with everything your pastor says from the pulpit or you will make a bad senator or President. Apparently freedom of religion has been cancelled. These self appointed watch dogs of religion and morality have declared it so – so sayeth the Lord.

Even though the United Church of Christ is a Reformed Church and a sister church to the Presbyterian Church USA, with essentially similar theology; I am not sure of where their polity comes down on this subject. Aside from the fact that their governance is congregational and ours is connectional and based on a representative election model; I think I am safe to say that the principles behind the Polity in the United Church of Christ are somewhat similar to the principles behind the Polity in the Presbyterian Church, our denomination.

We Presbyterians are very clear on this matter. Chapter One in the Book Of Order which is Part Two of our Constitution, makes it very clear that God Alone Is Lord of the Conscience. “God alone is Lord of the Conscience and hath left it free from the doctrines of humanity which are in anything contrary to his Word or beside it, in matters of faith and worship.” B “therefore we consider the rights of

private judgment, in all matters that respect religion, as universal and unalienable: We do not even wish to see any religious constitution aided by the civil power, further than may be necessary for protection and security.”<sup>1</sup> Let me skip four paragraphs and read you this: .... “we also believe that there are truths and forms with respect to which people of good characters and principles may differ. And in all these we think it the duty both of private Christians and societies to exercise mutual forbearance toward each other.”<sup>2</sup> God alone is Lord of the conscience. You are entitled to and encouraged to have your own opinion. You are implored to respect the opinions of people in your church whose are different than your own. This is the heart of Presbyterianism.

When I read the Historic Principles of Church order from the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church USA, which have been a part of our tradition in this form for 100 years and a part of our way of thinking for several hundred more; I literally feel fire in my belly and I get a lump in my throat. We Presbyterians, better than any other denomination, or at least as good as any other denomination, stand for, at our very deepest core, true freedom of religion and faith. I

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<sup>1</sup> Constitution of the Presbyterian Church USA Part II Book of Order, From of Government, G1.0301

<sup>2</sup> Ibid G 1.0305

believe that this almost perfect blend of patriotism and religion has molded and formed deeply thinking Presbyterian members and elders and led to the election of huge numbers of Presbyterians to the Congress of our nation over our 219 year history.

These principles, these hallowed words are rooted in scripture and one of the many reasons I am fiercely proud to be a Presbyterian Elder and Pastor.

And if you don't agree with me and you plan to run for the Presidency of the United States of America, then you better quit this church; because who knows?.... twenty years from now some moron or some pack of morons, may download my sermons from the web and attack you for some outrageously silly comments I may have made or will make on some off Sunday, when like today, I have taken leave of my senses and tell pirate jokes in worship and have the audacity to preach with fervor what I at my very core believe.

Barack Obama, Hilary Clinton and John McCain should not and cannot be held responsible for the content of the sermons their pastors have preached. A sermon is a work of art, a literary construct, a deliberate delivery, a still picture in a certain moment of context both for the pastor who conveys and for the congregation

which receives. In the Protestant Tradition, the sermon moment is the intimate center of worship where a congregation and pastor dare to approach and plumb the depths of the holy. A sermon is preached to inspire, to comfort, to challenge, cajole and massage the faith journeys of those who receive and deliver it. A sermon is preached to raise questions, examine angles, begin discussion and dialogue. A sermon is not a dictatorial decree, a tyrannical testimony or rules from a warden to a prisoner. A Preacher is not a god and a congregation is not a captive audience with blank slates for hearts and minds. Churches are not cults and the difference between a cult and a religion is a brain and true freedom.

A sermon is a story, a short novel and to quote tiny pieces of sermon out of the context of the relevant whole, to lend proof to an unjust conclusion of a small mind, is a common trick and dirty one. A sound bite from a taped sermon that excludes highly relevant expressions before and after the bite; says much more about the manipulative intentions of the editors, than it does about the preacher.<sup>3</sup> I have met Jeremiah Wright. I have heard him preach. I have shook his hand and far from being a demon, he is prophetic.

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<sup>3</sup> For a more in depth presentation of some of Rev. Wright's sermons and his life see Wikipedia

Rev. Wright has used language in extemporaneous preaching that is both regrettable and language I would avoid in the pulpit; but he has indeed successfully ignited soul searching and reflection in his congregation and that is the purpose of a good sermon.

When three messengers from God appear in the heat of the day at the tent of Abraham and Sarah, Father Abraham and Mother Sarah have no idea who is visiting; but they go out of their way to provide a gracious hospitality. Something wonderful bubbles up inside of them. They go well beyond what is expected in the ancient world, which would be to provide ample water and a simple meal. They teach us that you never know to whom you might be talking, so that you should treat all people like children of God. Sometimes God's angels do show up at our doorstep and it would be good, it would be very good indeed, if we did not chase them away with unwelcoming behavior. You gotta think about how what you say and how you act will be received. But when one of the three suggests to Abraham that his old post menopause wife would soon give birth to a child; this ridiculous notion is too much to bear and Sarah laughs. Sarah laughs. She laughs at God's messenger. She laughs at God's promise. She laughs like you and I would laugh.

When Jesus appears before the disciples for an additional time, this time in front of the disciple Thomas for his first time; Thomas is incredulous. He has living breathing proof in front of him and yet his mind cannot accept what his eyes are conveying. He cannot believe he says, unless he can place his hands in the crevices of the scars left by the crucifixion. He doubts, he questions, he reasons. Like Sarah before him he debates the merits of God's promises. They both doubt the life and the new life that come from believing in the promises of God.

Christianity is a foolish religion. (What would happen if you took this quote out of context and sent it to the media?) Christianity is a foolish religion. We proclaim a Gospel that denies the wisdom of the world. We preach a message that is in fact contradictory to the values of our society and the standards of all the other cultures on our globe. We have this ridiculous belief that God would stoop low enough to spend some serious time with the finite creatures, which he formed with his hands and which he breathed into with his holy life giving vapor. We have an additionally ludicrous reliance upon his word which states that he loves all people and is loving us into loving him, that he values every part of his creation and that he is working

through us to see that all creation including all people is treated fairly. We get way out there on a limb because we unabashedly proclaim that this God who came to be with us, walked the extra mile and suffered for our world upon the cross. Our God suffered so that we might live. The Apostle Paul put it as best as anyone can say it. "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."

A sermon that does not sound like foolishness is a flop. A sermon that does make you shift in your seat or bristle up the back of your neck is baby formula. A sermon that does not make you think or rethink is a pitiful waste of holy time. Every sermon ought to have a smidgeon maybe even strong dose of comfort and delight, but the Gospel of Jesus Christ was never preached as a lullaby. You don't have to agree; God alone is Lord of the Conscience: You only are implored to think.

If you want to attend the Church of the Holy Milk Toast and the Saint Precious Parish of the Get Along and Go Along or the Igelsia Institution of the Insipid; you have plenty of options out there in world. A lot of churches are just joking around. As for my Presidential Candidates, I hope that senators McCain and Clinton are

as crazy committed as Rev Governor Mike Huckabee and have enough fire in their bellies to attend churches that have as much backbone and faith as Barack Obama's Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago Illinois.