

*The Force of Grace, the Power of Hope,
and the Wisdom of Shaking the Dust off Your Feet*

Second Sunday After Pentecost

June 18, 2017

Jill R. Russell

Texts: Genesis 18.1-15;
 Psalm 116. 1-2, 12-19;
 Romans 5.1-8;
 Matthew 9.35-10.23

I think most of us in this room have lived long enough to know that life on any given day is a bit of a mixed bag. Beauty and depravity live side by side with every gradation in between. We work hard in our family to look for the beauty...gathering up all the treasures of our day before our prayers each night. But it's hard to do in a week where a congressman was shot, and another acquittal leads to protests of injustice, and the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America (the national gathering of our denomination) ends with another statement about marriage that excludes the relationships of the LGBTQ community among us.

I feel like this was a week where the political and racial and religious divisions among us were stoked like fuel on a fire. I confess that I came to these texts with a heavy heart and a rather dim view of the balance of beauty and depravity in the world. As the week wore on these texts wove their way into my heavy heart and spoke some truth that I want to share with you today.

I want to start and spend most of our time with the story of Abraham and Sarah. It is in some ways a delightful story with these mysterious visitors and a curious exchange about Sarah's laughter. You have to remember it was 25 years before when the promise of a child was first made. Let's be clear it was an absurd promise to make to some 75 year olds and now they are approaching 100 years of age. I suspect it wasn't just the biological barriers that made Sarah laugh at the suggestion of it. Of course she laughed. The whole idea on so many levels was simply unbelievable.

Have you ever noticed that just about every story we have about a time when God forges new life within the scriptures that it includes some fantastical element at the beginning of it? The birth of God's covenant people coming from a couple who are 100 years old. An exodus to freedom when those people become enslaved that takes them straight through the middle of the Red Sea. Or the birth of God's Messiah, God-with-us, being born of a virgin. There was a time when the believability of those fantastical elements was a bit of a stumbling block for me. Do we have to believe these facts as literally true? I'm no longer interested in those questions; they are beside the point.

Because what matters about this story is the way that it tells us the truth about the God we are invited to trust. If Abraham and Sarah had children in the typical timing of things; if they had moved from Haran to the promised land in a straight line; if they had settled with ease into that place and built a dynasty that grew into a great nation, they could have claimed that it was their effort, their ingenuity, their planning and execution that brought that nation to fruition. These stories of impossible beginnings and miraculous interventions become a moment to project writ large what is true but can go unnoticed in the ordinary course of things. Which is that God's grace is a prevailing force in this world that will not ultimately be resisted no matter how many barriers we throw in its way.

By God's grace I mean God's desire to bring delight and joy and abundance not because we deserve it or we are worthy of it but simply because God loves us! The book of Romans speaks of God's grace as "free gift."

And when you find yourself as Sarah did longing for something for so long with no clear way forward and someone comes along and casually says "You know that deepest longing in your heart? That ache that keeps you awake at night and reduces you to tears when you least expect it? It's yours! In less than a year you will hold that dream in your hands!"

What else can you do but laugh because according to every human calculation that ship has sailed. I love this exchange where Sarah gets called out for laughing and tries to say "I didn't laugh" and God shoots

back “Oh, you laughed!” If you didn’t think before that this extended story was an amplification of God’s grace just listen to God’s response to her jaded and bitter laughter...chapter 21 “The Lord dealt with Sarah (not as she deserved – not as she expected but) as the Lord had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as had been promised. Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age....”¹ As you track this story through the book of Genesis it is a winding road filled with deceit and betrayal and desperate ploys. Through every twist and turn, God’s grace prevailed. That’s easy to say when you know how it all turns out. Much more difficult to see in the middle of the mess.

This story and there are so many stories like it began shouting to me in the middle of this week where the tragedy seemed to be consuming the beauty. For well over a year now I’ve been part of a private Facebook page of people within the RCA who support the full inclusion of the LGBTQ community in the life of the church. It’s a group that has been focused on the actions at the national level of our denomination on these questions of inclusion. As the General Synod went on this last week and the initial hope began to fade that we might just make it through this Synod without a painful, polarizing statement of exclusion...and as the divisions within our body came into stark and painful view on Monday.....stories began to emerge on that Facebook page. Stories about the impact of God’s grace working through our local ministries. When suddenly the name of the Facebook page changed. It had been something pedestrian like *Human Sexuality and the RCA* but is now called *RCA Force of Grace*. I told them I would give credit for the sermon title today.

I began to recognize in these stories showing up on this page the power of hope as it is described in the book of Romans today: that we not only hope for the future when we will share in the glory of God and all of the tragedy and depravity of the world gets swallowed up by the beauty that God intends for us. But we can even find hope here and now in the middle of this mixed bag that is our life. Because in the middle of the mess the force of God’s grace can pull us through suffering giving to us an endurance that allows us to become a part of that force of grace in the world.

¹ Genesis 21.1-2a, NRSV

Those stories this week became a powerful source of hope even when some among us were wondering aloud if the time had come to shake the dust off their feet and move on from the RCA. I have always subscribed and still do to the “I am not leaving – if they want me out here – they will have to kick me out” school of thought. Jesus articulates today within the gospel the wisdom of shaking the dust off your feet when you have put yourself forward to share the good news as you understand it and find yourself rejected. Now there is more going on in this text than I can address in this sermon. I want to say something about the wisdom of that particular part of the text and it has to do with trusting the force of grace.

Jesus does not say: “if anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words – become obsessed with them because you personally are their last hope – focus all of your energy on their rejection of you – stay in that place with all of your anger and your fury until you can coerce them to agree with you.” No. Shake the dust off. Keep moving. Keep following God’s grace wherever it leads.

There are lots of stories of grace and I want share a piece of just one of them that has been fueling my hope in this long and difficult week. It comes from an elder who is gay and is pursuing ordination as a minister in the RCA. He opened his post with these words: “Those who know me well know that I'm not one who naturally sees the bright side of anything, but I have to tell you that I experienced so much grace and love in Holland. Grieved as I may have been, I left GS encouraged, even hopeful. Why?” Then he goes to list a long litany of the places he experienced God’s grace through the Synod. Then he ended with these words: “There are many, many more names I could list and acts of love and grace I could testify to, but this is already too long. My point: The Spirit is still working on us, and I don't want you to lose heart. I saw in you all the body of Christ in action at GS, using the varied, beautifully diverse gifts you have, from freakish knowledge of polity (which means how we govern ourselves) to the ability to laugh at it all to the much-needed ministry of perfectly timed hugs. Of course Synod sucked in a lot of ways. I left Holland no more sure that ordination will be a viable option for me. But in the long run, what bigotry, ignorance, and hate exists in our denomination is no match for love – God's

and yours. Though I grieve what damage may be done in the meantime, all these things – all of you – give me such hope.”

The question before us today and on any day when the beauty of the world is being consumed by the depravity of the world....the question is this: Is anything too wonderful, too impossible for the Lord?

Thankfully even on those days when we cannot stifle our derisive laughter – on those days when we have to just shake the dust off our feet and keep on walkin’ – the force of God’s goes before us and circles back behind us and will not let us go.

Thanks be to God!