

Is the Church Too Difficult for God?

Preaching in a Time of Denominational Crisis

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Genesis 18:12-15. 12 So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?" 13 The LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' 14 Is anything too wonderful for the LORD? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son." 15 But Sarah denied, saying, "I did not laugh"; for she was afraid. He said, "Oh yes, you did laugh."

Genesis 21:1-7. 1 The LORD dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as he had promised. 2 Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him. 3 Abraham gave the name Isaac to his son whom Sarah bore him. 4 And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. 5 Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. 6 Now Sarah said, "God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me." 7 And she said, "Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age."

Matthew 16:16-18. 16 Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." 17 And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. 18 And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it."

The gates of Hades were palpable in Orlando, Florida, in June of 1993. The land of Disney may seem an unlikely candidate for such a grisly image. Yet Orlando can fairly be so described, not so much because the temperature exceeded 100 degrees on several days, but because the meeting of the 205th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) was held there. This meeting was faced with several pressing matters, any one of which had the potential to threaten the continued existence of this branch of the church. As such, it represents a case study of some major forms of American denominational life.

There was, of course, the matter of the reorganization of a national structure to cope with a seven million dollar budget reduction for 1994 *and* to cope with the diminished sense of partnership with the General Assembly felt among many congregations, presbyteries, and synods. A way had to be found for this denomination to live within its means and to begin the renewal of its connections, or face the dissolution of a church which came into being only ten years before.

But easily the most dramatic threat to the life of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) was that posed by the questions surrounding the matter of ordaining nonheterosexual persons to office in the church. In 1978 this denomination had stated a policy which declined to ordain homosexual persons who wished to make their sexual orientation an issue at the point of their ordination. But it also called upon congregations to

welcome gay and lesbian persons into their fellowship. Subsequently, that policy had been declared “definitive guidance” for all Presbyterians as they interpret their *Book of Order*, a major development inasmuch as the *Book of Order* makes no mention of sexual orientation in its identification of the gifts and qualifications of church officers (ministers, elders, and deacons).

A number of appeals had been made to this meeting of the General Assembly to have the “definitive guidance” declaration overturned. The chief point of several of these was that the *Book of Order* specifies that two inalienable rights of active members of Presbyterian churches are to vote and hold office. Since gay and lesbian persons are welcomed into active membership on the same basis as everyone else, profession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, these overtures argued that the categorical denial of possible calling to such persons to serve as officers creates a conflict within the constitution of the church.

The chief point argued by those opposed to these appeals is that the “definitive guidance” is based on a proper understanding of biblical teaching regarding this matter and that the *Book of Order* clearly gives the General Assembly the prerogative to offer “authoritative interpretation” of the constitution.

The sentiments expressed in the conversations and debates of this ecclesial gathering in Orlando were as powerful as they were disparate. The people of the church are not dispassionate about this issue. Rather they are intensely passionate. Some believe that any change of policy will sacrifice the commitment to the teachings of scripture as the basis of what Christians believe and do. Others believe that the existing policy fundamentally abandons the compassion of Jesus for all and denies the gifts of the Spirit freely distributed among all who call Christ their Lord and Savior. They experience the continuation of the existing policy as a dark, oppressive cloud which threatens to suffocate the vitality of life in the church. On both sides, the very life of the church is experienced as under siege.

All this is why Orlando in June can accurately be imagined as the “gates of Hades.” In Matthew the “gates of Hades” represent threats to the very existence of the church—things that can prevail against the continuation of its unified life and mission in service to God on behalf of the world. The Presbyterian example is (unhappily) illustrative of the plight of an important stretch of American denominational life. The crises within a number of denominations place special demands on preachers, but not only to help the faithful understand, address, and resolve the theological and relational issues which beset their communities. There is an even more fundamental need for preaching to address the issue of confidence: Will God find a continuing ministry for these churches or not, or is their day of service done?

I

Thus it is important for preachers to note that Matthew intends not a threat but a promise—the promise that “the gates of Hades” will *not* prevail against the church. And in presenting the promise, the text functions like those mysterious, more-than-human figures who appeared to Sarah and Abraham, promising that Sarah would soon have a son.

In Sarah’s case it was also a matter of whether the people of God would persist in the world to bear witness to and be instruments of God’s blessings for all people. For the promise made to Abraham and Sarah for the progeny that would make such a role possible—“descendants as numerous as the stars in the heavens”—had gone

unfulfilled. Now they were old, well past the years of childbearing (and, one might think, past the years of child rearing!). So it is not surprising that Sarah's response to the renewed promise was to laugh. In today's idiom, she not only laughed to herself, but uttered under her breath: *Not!*

But God challenges her pessimism. "Is anything too wonderful (or too difficult) for the Lord?" And reiterating the promise, "At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son," the scene ends with Sarah trying to deny that she had laughed cynically. Thus Sarah's story poses the question to denominations in crisis the question of how they will respond to their form of the promise, "the gates of Hades will not prevail against [the church]."

In light of the forces which threaten to untie the knots of unity and community in service to God through many American denominations, some voices have already begun to predict that the promise will fail. Like Sarah, they are unsentimental, pragmatic analysts of the situation. Just as surely as elderly people don't have children, voluntary communities with deep differences don't hang together. And anyone who promises anything to the contrary deserves to be laughed at!

II

Perhaps the fundamental task of preaching in this context is to press the question: what about the ending of Sarah's story? "...the Lord did for Sarah as he had promised. Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him" [Gen. 21:1-2]. Everything was at stake there. If Abraham and Sarah had no progeny, the promise God had made would be shown a lie and the blessing of God to all nations would founder. But "the Lord did for Sarah as he had promised."

And now laughter reappears—but it is transformed. The child is named Isaac, which means laughter. But it is no longer the laughter of cynical disbelief; instead, it is the laughter of wonderment. "Now Sarah said, 'God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me'" [Gen. 21:6]. As Walter Brueggemann remarks, "Laughter is a biblical way of receiving a newness which cannot be explained."¹

In the face of the promise that the "gates of Hades" will not prevail against the church, preachers have a role in shaping the character of the people's laughter. Preachers may play a major part in helping the church not to become mired in the first, cynical laughter of Sarah at the promise. They can instead help the church find its way toward her second, faithful laughter at the newness of God.

This can be accomplished in preaching without pretending that the serious issues described at the outset (or their effective counterparts in other denominations) have been or easily will be resolved. It can do so by identifying and celebrating other realities in the life of the churches, realities which do not represent the completion of God's promise but may in fact be hints that God is attending to the promise in and through the life of the very denominations whose lives are so full of controversy.

Attention may be drawn to mission activities around the world in which they have a part: in which hundreds of thousands of theological resources are furnished with resources to prepare them for ministry; in which myriad hospitals and clinics worldwide serve millions of people; in which the people of particular congregations covenant to take the plight of children in their communities seriously and fashion ministries of support to those most ignored and isolated; in which churches throughout this country have begun to make concerted responses (frequently in partnership

with others) to the challenge of homelessness by furnishing shelters, by providing transitional facilities, and by developing low cost housing; and in which the gospel is shared with simple folk all over the earth. Preachers do well to remind the people of the church that there are children of God all over the globe who are daily enabled by their ministries and would say clearly if given the chance: "Please thank the people of the church."

Conclusion

In a delightful little book entitled, *The Good News from North Haven*,² a real life minister tells a true to life tale about a fictional small town: North Haven, Minnesota. It offers illumination on the life of the American denominational crisis. The narrator describes the church he serves:

"I am the pastor of Second Presbyterian Church. There is no First Presbyterian in town and there hasn't been for years. More than a century ago, the newly founded First—and then only—Presbyterian Church enjoyed a fine church fight. Folks still tell the story of the Sunday in June when half the congregation walked out during the sermon and founded Second Presbyterian.

"All memories agree as to what the fight was about: whether young women ought to lead discussions at Christian Endeavor meetings or keep a low profile and ask questions when they got home, at St. Paul seems to have counseled. What memories do not agree on is who was on what side. Some people now say that the Second Presbyterian group that left was in favor of women speaking at meetings, some say they were against it. Whatever the truth, everyone agrees that Second Presbyterian Church was squarely established on the firm foundation of an important principle, even if no one is now quite sure what that principle was.

"First Church's building burned to the ground a few years after the split, and most people assumed that this was a sign. They had no fire insurance, not because they couldn't afford it, but because buying fire insurance for churches was seen by many in those days to be sure evidence of weak faith. If you truly trusted that God would guard and prosper His church, this reasoning went, you didn't second-guess Providence by wasting money on insurance against "acts of God." In fact some argued that buying insurance might even "tempt the Lord thy God" and actually cause fires. Most First Church folks switched over to Second Church after the fire. But a handful of stalwarts refused to yield on a matter of Presbyterian principle and became Methodists."

There are several lessons in this parable which address our denominational crises. One is that the principles of the moment, though passionately held and capable of producing schism, come to appear quaint with the passage of time. Another is that once a new consensus is established on disputed matters, the revisionist historian in everyone will try to claim the new consensus as their original position. And yet another is that despite all the ways Christians find to fracture their community as God's people, mysterious "acts of God" keep pushing them back together, renewing the promise that God still intends to make of the church a blessing.

NOTES

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 182.

² Michael L. Lindvall, *The Good News from North Haven* (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1991), 2-3.