

## Belonging IV: Welcoming Grace

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[Genesis 18:1-15](#)

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We continue with our Easter season sermon series on belonging. As Todd put it, this series is concerned with these questions: how do we find belonging? What needs to be in place so that we can offer it, receive it, and trust that we have it? How can we be a church that stretches the circle of belonging?

Throughout this series, we've been in conversation with Brené Brown, and one thing I appreciate about her is that she encourages us to practice thoughtfulness and intentionality, and to resist some of our fear-based instincts about ourselves and others.

I also know that one thing that most creates a sense of belonging, for me, is the thing that we can least control or arrange: grace.

Grace is a word we throw around a lot around here, but one that Brown doesn't use a lot in work. (I checked.)

One of my favorite definitions comes from the theologian Frederick Buechner, who said this: "The grace of God means something like: Here is your life. You might never have been, but you are, because the party wouldn't have been complete without you. Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid. I am with you. Nothing can ever separate us. It's for you I created the universe. I love you."

I think of grace as those holy, unexpected moments when we somehow feel, sometimes in spite of the evidence, that it's going to be OK. Grace can't be scheduled. Grace can't be earned, or measured, or easily explained. I also think that grace almost always comes in an unexpected package. If the Good News arrives in the way we thought or hoped it would, I don't think that's quite grace. Grace is not exactly a "wish come true." You might call a wish come true a "blessing," but it's not really the same thing as grace.

Let's consider this story of Abraham and Sarah. Abraham, you will remember, is the patriarch of the three Abrahamic faiths: Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. The great drama of the Book of Genesis is the covenant that Abraham makes with God. God blesses Abraham and his descendants in exchange for their fidelity and worship.

This all sounds very legalistic and contractual, but one thing I love about these ancient stories is that there are so many messy, human moments in them that still ring true to me, to us, thousands of years later. For example, Sarah's laughter.

We've all done it—laughed when think we're not supposed to laugh. Laughter is a spontaneous release of energy that could mean so many things: shock, disbelief, relief, derision, surprise, joy.

Which of these motivated Sarah's laughter, when she heard the stranger say she would have a son? Probably all of the above. Picture it: Abraham, Sarah, and the servant have just put all this energy into welcoming these mysterious guests. The text's description of their preparations is brief, but vivid: Sarah making those cakes, with the choicest flour and precise measurements. Abraham selecting the best calf from the herd, the servant hastening to prepare it so that Abraham can present the meal.

As many of you know, it's a lot of work to be a gracious host! But good hospitality is a basic biblical principle. It is respectful; it is welcoming; it is the right and decent thing to do. Good hospitality sets up clear expectations for everyone involved, so no one feels lost or excluded or left in the dust.

But then God goes and does something really unexpected, and Sarah—tired, vulnerable, anxious to please—can't help but laugh.

Now, she has a right to be surprised. As the New Revised Standard translation puts it, Sarah is "advanced in age," and "it had ceased to be with her after the manner of women." What an amazing phrase that is! It captures something so fundamental about this miracle, the way God just alters the natural order of things. How wonderful, but how confusing too—and how destabilizing.

See, when God enters into Abraham and Sarah's world, God doesn't just change the direction of their lives; God changes their names (they were formerly called Abram and Sarai). But more than that, God changes their very *bodies*. Anybody who has gone through puberty or lived with illness or had a baby knows that bodily transformation is no small matter—it is seismic.

So when God declares changes to Sarah's very body, it is only right that her body responds—naturally, with its own language. She doesn't smile politely. She laughs. And then she is afraid, because it seems that God has misread her laughter as doubt. She tries to deny it, but the God who changes your body *knows* when you laugh. "Oh yes, you did laugh," God says.

If we kept reading the story, we would hear how God's promise is fulfilled, and Sarah has her little baby, whom she gives the most joyful name: Isaac, meaning "he will laugh," so that everyone who meets Isaac will laugh just as she did. With a name like that, it's hard to believe that God disapproved of Sarah's laughter. On the contrary, the text affirms her laughter, makes it sacred, intrinsic to the relationship between this people and their God.

What a complex covenant God established! It demands careful preparation, gracious hospitality, reverence, and service. But it also makes room for laughter, for spontaneity, and for genuine, uncensored gut reactions.

There is a tension here between, on the one hand, doing everything you possibly can to get ready for God, to do the right thing, to offer up the very best of yourself—and, on the other hand, just letting go and letting God, and being available to receive whatever the moment throws at you.

I think there's wisdom here for anyone who want to create an environment of belonging, especially in this time, when the world around us is so harsh, so ready to pounce on nonconformity and imperfection with with suspicion and judgement. To help create a different kind of space, one that is gentler, more forgiving, more open to to the comings and goings of real, messy human experience, I think we are called to balance intentionality and spontaneity in what we do. We are called to be givers and receivers of grace in worship, in faith formation, in meetings of teams and committees, in the work of the whole church.

This means we set the table to the best of our ability, and then allow ourselves to laugh if the bread falls on the floor and the cup spills, because fumbling doesn't have to be profane. It can be as sacred as anything we do.

I'll end with a quick story that some of you have heard.

Incidentally, the last time I preached on this story of Abraham and Sarah and Sarah's laughter was almost exactly ten years ago. It was in the first church that I ever served: Old South Church in Boston, a big, formal, historic, high-steeple church in the heart of the city. I was an intern there while I was in divinity school, and it was so intimidating! I felt out of place, awkward, like I really didn't fit there. I particularly struggled with what the staff called "worship choreography," in which we carefully planned out every single moment of the service. I couldn't seem to relax into it, to find an authentic voice in the pulpit.

It turned out that no amount of preparation could prevent the enormous liturgical malfunction that I committed on Christmas Eve that year, when I lit my own hair on fire in front of about 800 people, including the Governor of Massachusetts. Don't worry, I was OK.

But I was deeply mortified. For about 24 hours.

Until I realized how funny it was. And then I couldn't stop laughing. And here's the thing I learned: I couldn't have done something to endear myself to that church more. I was theirs after that. And once you light your own hair on fire in worship, there's really nowhere to go but up. I found my footing and my voice, and I left that internship far more confident than I began it.

Belonging. It came to me. Not in a way I ever would've planned, but in a way that felt absolutely right.

That's grace.

Is anything too hard for God? Amen.