

Several years ago Alisha and I went to DFW airport in Dallas to pick up her aunt who was returning on a flight from Mexico. We found out real quick that since we lived in Grapevine, five minutes from the airport, everyone in the family expected us to be the airport shuttle service. I actually didn't mind going to the airport. I like to people watch when we are out in public and what better place to people watch than an airport. This day was no different.

As we were waiting for Alisha's aunt to arrive I had this crazy thought run through my mind. I thought about a friend of mine named Mark Loewen. I hadn't seen Mark in two or three months and for some strange reason I thought about him. What was unusual was I had this eerie feeling that I would run into Mark at the airport that very day. I didn't say anything about it to Alisha because I didn't think it would matter. What were the odds of my friend Mark being at the same terminal at the airport. Remember, it wasn't just any terminal; it was the international terminal at that. Just at that moment I looked up and there was Mark! He was picking up a church group who went on a mission trip to China! I said, "Mark, you are not going to believe this, but I just thought about you and not only that, I had this feeling you would be here today." He and I always joked around so he thought I was just kidding, but I was serious. It was one of the few moments in my life where I was completely blown away.

I don't know what God was trying to do with me because there wasn't a great spiritual lesson to be learned. Mark didn't have a halo around his head and he didn't have some secret message to share with me. But the more I thought about it I realized what God was trying to say to me, "There is more to this world than meets the eye. Just when you think you have things figured out, think again." God is always up to something.

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In our story today we read that Abraham was sitting at the entrance of his tent. It was a hot day so perhaps he was sipping on lemonade or iced tea soaking in whatever breeze he could. Then out of the blue, like everything else that seemed to happen to Abraham, three men appear. We don't know their names or who they are, but we know that somehow God is present. Abraham obviously realized that these were not just three random guys passing by. These three men were special and they had something important to share with Abraham.

Before they could get to sharing the reason for their visit, Abraham showered them with hospitality. I think there is a lesson in this for all of us. Hospitality is not so much something we do, it's who we are. Last Sunday Alisha and I had some friends from Fort Worth come to visit us. They had never been to church here and for that matter, had never been to Mexia. They decided to come on Sunday morning so they could see both the church and the town. I was busy getting ready for the service so I was unable to walk with them into the sanctuary and as things turned out, I'm glad I didn't walk in with them.

After the service I asked Mark and Rhonda, "What did you think about the church?" That was another way of asking, "Did you feel welcome here? Did you feel like you belonged here?" I was not surprised by their answer. They loved our church. They were overwhelmed at how friendly you were. Mark said that four or five people welcomed him before he even made it into the main sanctuary. He said, "You know there is a difference in someone just saying hello and good morning out of obligation and someone saying hello and welcome because he or she means it. The people of your church meant it and if I lived here, there is no doubt that despite having you as a minister, I would join this church!"

You may or may not have noticed but we have some new signs around the church. We have two banners outside that read:

“Open Sundays: Come as You Are”, and two welcome mats inside our foyer that read: “The United Methodist Church – Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors”. In addition to those we now have two visitor parking spots. All of that is to say to the community: “We are expecting you and when you get here you will be made to feel at home.” I like our church because I believe we are not practicing false advertising. When we put up signs that say, “Come as you are” and “Welcome” we mean it. When we put up visitor parking we actually think that we are going to have visitors, whether they park in those spots or not is beside the point. The point is we have a visible reminder that guests are among us and how we treat those guests says a lot about who we are.

Based on our story today we know that Abraham was a gracious, hospitable person. Abraham hurriedly prepared a meal for the three men and stood beside them as they ate under a tree. During the meal they said to him, “Where is your wife Sarah?” Abraham replied, “There, in the tent.” Then one of the men said, “I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.” God had already given Abraham the heads up on this. Before all this took place God told Abraham that one day his wife Sarah would have a child. Abraham’s reaction was understandable, “Can a child be born to a man who is 100 years old? Can Sarah, who is 90 years old, bear a child!” In other words, “You are out of your mind God!”

Well, this time it was Sarah’s turn to hear the news. She was listening in on the conversation between Abraham and the three men when she heard she would be having a son. She laughed it off – literally. Apparently, God didn’t care too much for Sarah’s response. He said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh? Is there anything too wonderful for the Lord?” Then in one of the funniest exchanges in all of scripture, Sarah denied laughing – “I did not laugh!” God replied, “Oh yes, you did laugh.”

August 13, 2006

Have you ever laughed at God? Have you ever heard something so incredible and unbelievable that the only thing to do is laugh?

I heard the other day that Home Depot is building two stores in Mexia. One of the stores will be on the east side of town and the other on the west. In fact, if all goes well they are planning on adding two additional stores on the north and south side of town. That way all the residents in the Mexia area will have easy access. But that's nothing compared to this. I heard the other day that Donald Trump has bought some land in Limestone County and is developing the largest skyscraper in the world. He's marketing it as "Limestone Towers" and the building will be constructed entirely out of gold. Obviously, Home Depot is not going to build four stores in Mexia and Donald Trump is not going to build a skyscraper here either, not that we would want him to anyway! Some things are just plain unbelievable and the only appropriate thing to do when we hear them is to laugh.

However, as Sarah soon learned, sometimes the last thing we need to do is laugh, especially when God is involved. Whatever it is, as crazy as it may seem, don't ever, ever, ever say it can't happen. God loves to take the impossible and make it possible.

I thought it was interesting that the three men in this story had no problem believing the message they were sent to deliver. The only ones who seemed to have a problem believing that Sarah would have a son were Abraham and Sarah themselves. Sometimes we are the ones who get in the way of God's miracles. We think that somehow great things cannot possibly happen to us. We are just regular people with regular jobs and regular families who go to a regular church with other regular people who have learned to accept that survival is the name of the game and great things don't happen here. When we hear of something outlandish and grand we laugh. We laugh not so much because we don't

think God is capable of miracles. We laugh because somehow we believe we are exempt. We say to ourselves, “Those things just don’t happen to people like us.” Or do they?

Fred Craddock told a story about a time when he was the pastor of a small congregation in Custer City, Oklahoma:

In southwest Oklahoma there is a town named Custer City. My wife, Nettie, and I ministered there for three years. The population was about 450 on a good day. There were four churches: a Methodist church, a Baptist church, a Nazarene church, and a Christian church. Each had its share of the population, and on Wednesday nights and Sundays, each church had a small collection of young people. The attendance rose and fell according to the weather and whether it was time to harvest the wheat.

The best and most consistent attendance in town, however, was at the little café where all the pickup trucks were parked and all the men were inside discussing the weather and the cattle and the wheat bugs and the hail and the wind and whether we were going to have a crop, while their wives and sons and daughters were in one of those four churches. The churches had good attendance and poor attendance, but that café had consistently good attendance. Better attendance than some of the churches.

Once in a while they would lose a member there at the café because his wife finally got to him, or maybe his kids did. So you would see him go off sheepishly to one of the churches. But the men at the café still felt that they were the biggest and strongest group in town, and so they met on Wednesdays and Sundays and every other day. They were not bad men. Indeed, they were good men, family men, hard-working men. The patron saint of the group at the café was Frank. Frank was seventy-seven years old when I met him. He was a good man, a strong man, a pioneer, a rancher, a

farmer, and a cattleman. He had been born in a sod house, and he had prospered. He had his credentials, and all the men there at the café considered him their patron saint. “Ha ha,” they said. “Old Frank will never go to church.”

One day I met Frank on the street, and he knew I was a preacher. It has never been my custom to accost people in the name of Jesus, so I just shook hands and visited with Frank. Then he took the offensive. He said, “I work hard and try to take care of my family and I mind my own business.” He said that as far as he was concerned, everything else is fluff. He was telling me, “Leave me alone; I’m not a prospect.”

So I did not bother Frank. That is why I was surprised, indeed the church was surprised and the whole town was surprised and the men at the café church were absolutely bumfuzzled, when old Frank, seventy-seven years old, presented himself before me one Sunday morning to be baptized. I baptized Frank. Some in the community said that Frank must be sick, said he must be scared to meet his maker. Some said, “He’s got heart trouble, going up to be baptized. I never thought old Frank would do that, but I guess when you get scared...” There were all kinds of stories floating around town. But this is the way Frank told it to me. We were talking the day after his baptism and I said, “Frank, do you remember that little saying you used to give me so much? ‘I work hard, I take care of my family, and I mind my own business?’”

He said, “Yeah, I remember that. I said that a lot.” “Do you still say that?” I asked. “Yes,” he said. “Then what’s the difference?” He said, “I didn’t know then what my business was.”

I wonder, what’s your business and have you had a good laugh lately?