

Sermon for the 4th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper

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In my family, we are huge fans of Monty Python; we even went to see *Spamalot* when it toured the west coast. One of my husband's favorite bits is set during something resembling the years of the Black Plague in the Middle Ages, when a "large man" wheels in a cart with an apparently dead body. The Broadway musical version, which takes the silliness to a quantum level higher, brings in a whole cartful of bodies. One says, "I'm not dead". And the "Dead Collector" replies, "Ere, he says he's not dead."

Large Man with Dead Body: Yes he is. **The Dead Body That Claims It Isn't:** I'm not.

The Dead Collector: He isn't. **Large Man with Dead Body:** Well, he will be soon, he's very ill.

The Dead Body That Claims It Isn't: I'm getting better.

Large Man with Dead Body: No you're not, you'll be stone dead in a moment.

The Dead Collector: Well, I can't take him like that. It's against regulations."

Well, in the musical version, the bodies rise up and do a Busby Berkeley style song & dance number, before they get whacked on the head and killed so they can be properly carted away. This kind of dark humor is not everyone's cup of tea, but my daughter and I spent most of the intermission standing in line so we could buy an overpriced black T-shirt with white letters saying "I'm not dead yet" for my husband. I think it's one of his favorites, although it doesn't make the Weyerhaeuser dress code. [Is there a connection between the Weyerhaeuser dress code, using humor in sermons, and the Pharisee's purity codes?]

Humor is subjective, but it is no stranger to the Bible. Sarah's son was named "laughter" (Isaac). She laughed at the idea that she and Abraham, who Paul calls "as good as dead" would bring into the world new life. So God had the last laugh there, and Sarah and Abraham have become archetypes of parenthood. The Hebrew word "*toledot*," which recurs in the Book of Genesis, means "generations" or "descendants" or "chronicles" or "story." Our family stories, passed down through the generations, help tell us who we are. This story, from some time between the 18th and 6th centuries B.C.E., is one of our oldest.

In today's reading from Genesis, God calls Abraham and Sarah. Through their story, he calls *us* to journey from the known to the unknown, to become strangers in a strange land, to leave behind our very human comfort zones with a familiar sense of being in control and moving to a realization of our profound impotence, turning to a profound reliance on God's mercy, choosing exile in obedience to "chesed" God's mercy & steadfast love.

In the lectionary, the epistle reading for today continues, using Abraham as the model patriarch, the archetype of faithfulness. "[Abraham] did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead" Paul looks to the story of Abraham to tell the Gentiles that before Moses, before the "law," there was a model of radical inclusiveness. "And in you *all* the families of the earth shall be blessed." In God's overwhelming abundant generosity, God makes the one who is "as good as dead" the father of many nations.

We get the punchline, we understand what Paul is saying because he tells his story using a kind of exaggerated, hit us over the head, extreme comedy that isn't so far from the Flying Circus techniques of the giant cartoon hand entering the photographed world. He even spells it out for us, saying the story of Abraham was "written not for his sake alone, but for ours also."

In today's gospel, Jesus calls the tax collector, an outcast, a traitor, a bully, a violator of the purity code, an untouchable – he calls Matthew to follow him, and even sits at table with him. Even without using words, Jesus is telling the Pharisees, his disciples and us, "This is *chesed*, this is how you show God's loving-kindness and mercy; embrace the stranger, share a meal with the outcasts" Do you think the Pharisees laughed when they heard Jesus use their word for themselves "The Just" when he tells them he came for sinners? It's only funny if we know that we are ALL separated from God, and we are only "justified" by God's merciful grace, "*chesed*".

Just in case we didn't get that example, the next story brings a woman who is so outside the bounds of normal society that no one in a crowd even notices her. For many years, this woman has lived on the fringe, bleeding and rejected, a non-person, and now Jesus turns to her and calls her "daughter!" Her

faith, her steadfast love, her *chesed*, has made her whole. She doesn't need to say a word, her life bears witness to God's healing presence in the world.

Okay, a tax collector becomes a disciple, a bleeding woman is made whole, but Matthew wants to be sure we get it; "we're not dead yet!" From the woman Jesus calls "daughter" he turns to the daughter of a synagogue leader and says, "*The girl is not dead, but sleeping.*" "You're not that dead." Wake up! Get up! Follow! Live!

We are hearing this same call at St. Stephen's.

Sunday School? Faith Formation? "We're not dead yet!"

Liturgical worship that speaks to a new generation? "We're not dead yet!"

Outreach welcoming a wider community? "We're not dead yet!"

Stewardship that can astonish us with God's abundance? "We're not dead yet!"

There are so many ways in which our community of faith is alive and well, but a close examination of the pews reveals a distinct scarcity of under-forty-somethings. Perhaps, like a certain parrot, (in another Monty Python sketch) they are just resting. Perhaps they just need to have their cage rattled. Perhaps like the Norwegian Blue Parrot, they are "pining, simply pining for the fjords."

'E's not pinin'! 'E's passed on! This parrot is no more! He has ceased to be! 'E's expired and gone to meet 'is maker! 'E's a stiff! Bereft of life, 'e rests in peace! If you hadn't nailed 'im to the perch 'e'd be pushing up the daisies! 'Is metabolic processes are now 'istory! 'E's off the twig! 'E's kicked the bucket, 'e's shuffled off 'is mortal coil, run down the curtain and joined the bleedin' choir invisible!! THIS IS AN EX-PARROT!!

No, we are not going to revive our programs for youth and younger adults by nailing them to a perch, or beating them on the pet shop counter, hoping that sheer repetition of unsuccessful efforts will suddenly bring them to life. We are ready for a miracle! We are ready to move to a new place! We are ready to reach out to those in the wider community who feel they have been ignored or rejected or even that their faith is dead. We are ready to say, "You're not dead yet!"

Next fall we will begin to step outside our comfortable boundaries, and try a new way of doing faith formation on Wednesday nights. We will try a new way of contemplative worship on Sunday evenings. Some of us will try out new ministries, as teachers, leaders in prayer, exploring new ways of expressing God's joy and creativity. We are going to "put our money where our mouth is" and invest in our future. "Hoping against hope" we believe in the "Presence of God ... who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist."

Like Abraham and Sarah, like Matthew, like the woman, like the daughter, it's time to follow God's call, and let our lives bear witness to new life.

"We're not dead yet!"