

June 18, Ordinary 11A (Genesis 18:1-15)

The prankster is God, through whom all things are possible.

by [Kirk Byron Jones](#) in the [June 2023](#) issue

I once daydreamed about God having a problem. In my imagination, God's problem was not the devil or sin. God had effectively addressed both these problems at Calvary. The divine problem, suggested the dream, was instead religion.

The problem with religion was layered. First, religion typically created a vast chasm between God and humanity. God tended to be distant and remote. Second, religion had its picks and chooses, often presenting God, if accessible at all, only to the truly holy: the righteous few who believed and behaved as such. Finally, religion had a way of turning belief into something awfully burdensome, making faith feel far too heavy.

The last layer was what bothered God the most. When I asked why this was so, God answered immediately and clearly: "Even if you accept that I am near and welcoming of all, if your experience with me feels overbearing, I may as well be removed and reachable only to a faithful few."

Genesis 18 offers up an image of how lighthearted God can be. God's joke makes Sarah laugh to herself. It's a wonder she didn't break out in sidesplitting, knee-slapping, almost-about-to-faint laughter. Who could blame her? What the stranger in the story says is so silly it is funny. He forecasts that Sarah, 90, and Abraham, 100, are about to become parents. Sarah can hardly believe her ears. A baby! Now!

So Sarah laughs. And the stranger, who perhaps has had a little too much to drink, hears her. Soon it becomes apparent that what is so funny is not just the biology-defying fact of it all, but the holy whimsical force behind it. The prankster is God, through whom all things are possible.

There is a brand of religiosity that builds too big a divide between divinity and delight. They are like the characters in the movie *Patch Adams* who wish to dismiss

the young, unorthodox physician from medical school. The grounds for his dismissal: “excessive happiness.”

In *Sacrifice and Delight: Spirituality for Ministry*, Alan Jones indicts the church for trying to hold back laughter: “The church looks as if it has arranged things precisely to see to it that the Spirit is kept in check, to see that nothing happens, least of all, the breaking out of delight.” Is it possible to be so focused on order, ritual, and tradition that we fail to fully notice and appreciate God’s great appetite for divine lunacy and sacred surprise?

Let me tell you about another dream I had. This time I was actually asleep. I was at a celebration of Nelson Mandela’s release from prison. Mandela’s liberation and ascent to the presidency of South Africa was one of the truly great events of the past century, if not all of history. A global, joyful occasion—yet at this festive celebration in my dream I was not joyful.

At one point, I turned my attention to an altercation between two men. I watched until they somehow came to a resolution. That’s when I woke up. I wondered, with all the joy of the moment, how I could become so joyless. As I reflected on it, I realized that the choice to turn away from joy was my own.

We have the choice to turn away from joy and laughter. It’s understandable that we often make that choice, given the troubles of this world. But those troubles will have their complete way with us if we do not reserve lavish spaces and places for laughter and joy.

I remember a dear friend’s graduation day from college as a middle-aged adult. She gleamed as she marched in the procession—in gold-colored shoes—and received her diploma. She shouted like a child on Christmas morning as we walked to the car to take her to dinner. She ordered her meal and then proclaimed to the server, “I just graduated!”

While waiting for ice cream in the back seat of the car, my friend appeared to be basking in the glory of the day. She reflected aloud that because she had not been able to graduate with her high school class, this was her first real graduation. She said she now knew that God had not forgotten her. She sat at our kitchen table at the close of the day, looking out the window, seemingly gazing out upon the glory of her brighter future.

Dario Fo won the 1997 Nobel Prize in Literature. Informed of this, the great Italian playwright and clown thought it was a big joke. Assured and reassured that it was not, that he really was the recipient of the great global honor, Fo exclaimed, "God is a clown! God is a clown!"