

Sermon, June 14, 2026
"Is Anything Too Wonderful for God?"
Third Sunday after Pentecost
A sermon by Rev. John Balicki
St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Wilton, Maine

"A day without laughter is a day wasted," Charlie Chaplin.

"Laughter and tears are both responses to frustration and exhaustion. I myself prefer to laugh, since there is less cleaning up to do afterward," Kurt Vonnegut.

We have a marvelous example of laughter in our first lesson. Angels in the form of three travelers come to Abraham and tell him, "I will return to you at this time next year, and your wife Sarah shall have a son". We are told that Abraham and Sarah are both of advanced age, and that Sarah is long past menopause, and yet there is this announcement of the birth of their son. Sarah is eavesdropping, who wouldn't as travelers with news are not that common, and her response of laughter is the most natural a person might have. After all the years of barrenness, after all the difficulties she has experienced in her life, now in her nineties she is given this promise. What else is there to do in the face of such news but to laugh?

Her response was entirely human, and not really surprising. From a human perspective her disbelief was warranted, even appropriate. People don't procreate in old age. But her unbelief also elicited a rhetorical rebuke in the punch line of the narrative: "Is anything too difficult for the Lord?" But God's rebuke here didn't shame Sarah in a punitive manner. Quite the contrary. We read that "the Lord was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah what he had promised." What God was trying to do was to expand Sarah's faith, and to put that faith in a God more expansive, more active, more powerful than Sarah possibly imagined.

This lesson puts us squarely in Sarah's sandals and impels us to ask whether our faith in God needs to be more expansive, more active, more powerful? Sarah's faith could be termed "functional deism" which never denies the existence of God, but it also never expects God's decisive action in our personal affairs. It's a religious faith that has a firm and unwavering belief in a tame and innocuous divinity, faith that doesn't have any expectation that God will meddle in human affairs, intercede in your life, providentially guide human history, care for a loved one, heal the hurts we suffer, or — God forbid — do the impossible.

Which brings us to the St. Luke's Prayer list and our monthly healing prayers which are the focus of today's liturgy. Why do we do them and do they make any difference? Are we

functional deists thinking that's nice but it won't make any difference or are we actively expecting some change to occur – or perhaps somewhere in between?

First we should say that healing is in the forefront of Jesus' own ministry. We heard in today's gospel that Jesus traveled throughout the cities and villages curing every disease and every sickness. He realized that he was able to heal and touch so few with his healing ministry compared to the great crowds who sought him out. So he commissioned his twelve apostles (though in Luke it's expanded beyond these twelve) with the instructions to "Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons". The early Church took this commission seriously and we know from the Acts of the Apostles that healings were an integral part of the early mission of the Church.

But over the centuries it got lost or relegated to those with specific healing powers. Today we have restored the practice in a limited fashion. In the words of former Presiding Bishop Katherine Jefferts Schori:

Healing is the primary work of people of faith and the communities of which they are a part. Christians, as disciples of One who came to save (rescue, heal, make whole) the world and its inhabitants, seek to heal their relationships with one another and with all that is.

Episcopalians believe this is God's mission and we are its ministers or servants. We are meant to seek to repair what is breached and broken, to stitch up what is torn, to heal what is sick, to release what is imprisoned and oppressed, to comfort the dying, to encourage the ignored, forlorn, and grieving. Our life finds meaning in responding to the cries around us and within us, as individuals in community.

So our healing ministry at St. Luke's exists in three ways. We have a Prayer Ministry headed up by Brenda Holman who gets the word out to a small group if prayers are needed for an immediate situation such as an upcoming surgery or a serious injury. Next we have the Prayer List which we read out loud during the Prayers of the People every Sunday. Any of you can either put yourself on the list or ask to put on another person with their assent. There is no criteria regarding what we are praying or how serious it is. If you feel the situation has improved you can ask to be taken off the list. Today during the Prayers of the People we are going to stop at each person's name and ask the person who placed the name on the list to give us a short update. Knowing who the person is and why we are praying for them increases our compassion for each other.

Finally we have our healing prayers during the service which we try to do once per month. This is called the Laying on of Hands and the Anointing and comes straight out of the Book of Common Prayer. I lay my hands on the person's head and anoint with the Oil of the Sick. One can come forward for any reason: physical, emotional, spiritual. No questions asked. We have been doing this for at least two years now, maybe three. Some of you come forward freely and often, others occasionally and with great hesitation, while others would

rather sing a solo of “Ave Maria” in front of the altar than come forward. No right or wrong answers here. Healing is never quick or easy, it does not “fix” what has already happened, but it does begin to let hope grow again.

Jesus offered his healing powers to those who approached him though many didn’t and he was not able to heal everyone who needed it. Suffice to say that there is great mystery in healing. While there is much we can do to facilitate our own healing and open ourselves to receive it, we can’t force it. At the same time, to experience the presence of the Risen Christ, known to us in Spirit and in truth, in community and in quiet, through the sacraments and Scripture, the kindness of friend and stranger, has healing power. The healing of our broken bodies and wounded souls—whatever the cause—is central to a life in Christ, central to our relationship with Jesus.

Finally I invite us all to think where we most need healing in our own lives and to bring that Jesus whether you come forward here or not. Laughter as we know has many forms. There is the incredulous laughter of “That ain’t never going to happen” and the laughter of being surprised by joy, of having something happen we never expected. Perhaps today we move toward the latter, toward saying, “Is anything too wonderful for God?”