



PROGRAM TRANSCRIPT

Program #5203

First broadcast October 19, 2008

WELCOME

Lydia Talbot: Welcome to “30 Good Minutes!” We’re happy you’ve joined us for this half-hour of reflection on faith. I’m Lydia Talbot.

Lillian Daniel: And I’m Lillian Daniel. Our guest today is Sherre Hirsch, author of a new book called “We Plan, God Laughs.” She’ll be talking with us about steps we can take to create a plan for our lives that is consistent with God’s divine plan.

Lydia Talbot: We also welcome back an old friend of the program, Dr. Martin Marty, who joins our regular roster of commentators and will be reflecting for us today on the meaning of “faithfulness.”

Lillian Daniel: And we begin with the story of a singer, songwriter and Roman Catholic priest from Ireland named Liam Lawton. He was recently in Chicago, at Old St. Patrick’s Church, where he performed some of his Celtic-inspired songs. Let’s watch.

SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Liam Lawton: Well, I grew up speaking English, but we also had Gaelic. It is very bound up in the spirituality of the people. There are many words which really refer to God and to heaven and to a blessing. When I decided then to go on for ministry, for the first seven years that’s solely all I did. I did very little music. It was at that stage I thought I shouldn’t be doing music. I’d left all that behind me. I was beginning to feel myself imploding because there wasn’t a creative force in my life and I wanted to be more creative.

I remember playing a piece of music. It was John Michael Talbot’s “Magnificat.” I’d always loved his voice and I found his music very prayerful. When I was sitting there, I started crying and I couldn’t stop. I’m crying and crying and crying. I think I was crying for a lost of creativity in my own life, but also for a feeling of helplessness. And then it suddenly struck me that if somebody like John Michael Talbot could write music that would touch my life and other people’s lives, surely I could try to do the same.

The very first time that I performed in public, I was very nervous about it. There was an old man sitting in the audience. He started crying. He was crying the whole way through the performance. So when it was over I made it my business to go to him. He said, “Whatever your music did, it touched my psyche.” And he said, “I have been able to cry for years.” So I realized then there is

in some way a ministry of healing because music is a divine gift. Nobody can persuade me otherwise.

[I am by your side] Everybody has been blessed with some gift. I'm told I have a gift of melody. For me, it's all bound up. This is me as one person, and that Liam the singer is drawing his inspiration from Liam the priest.

SPEAKER INTRODUCTION

Lydia Talbot: Liam Lawton's first CD sold over 2 million copies. I think you can tell why. For more information about him you can visit our website at www.30goodminutes.org. Our thanks to Liam for sharing his story. Now, let me tell you about today's speaker.

Sherre Hirsch is a conservative rabbi in the Jewish tradition and the author of a new book called "We Plan, God Laughs." Raised in Southern California, hers was a winding path to the ministry, beginning at Smith College, Northwestern University, and a detour through Asia, immersing herself in eastern philosophy. Sherre eventually found her way to The Jewish Theological Seminary in New York and in 1998 became the first woman rabbi at Sinai Temple in Los Angeles, the largest conservative Jewish congregation in the Western U.S.

In 2006 she stepped away from congregational ministry to concentrate on writing and speaking. Sherre first appeared on "30 Good Minutes" two seasons ago and we're delighted to have her back. Welcome, Sherre.

MESSAGE

Sherre Hirsch: Thank you, Lydia. I'm happy to be back.

I want you to remember when you were really young and used to dream about what your life would be like when you grew up. Where you would live, what you would do, when you used to dream so big. Reflect on that moment.

And now fast forward to today. Is your life similar to what you had imagined? Is it different? Were there unexpected turns that you could have never, ever imagined? I know for me the "happily ever after" that I planned is not exactly how it turned out. And as a rabbi I've heard countless people come to me and say the very same things. So here's what they said.

The first was that life had turned out so differently than they had imagined. There were the very tragic incidences. Someone had lost a child, had lost a parent at a young age; something that you never dream about when you're a child. And then there were the other incidences. It just turned out differently. I know when I dreamed of the house and the kids, I didn't dream of possibly getting a divorce and other people didn't either. And then there was a third category of people who would say to me, "It turned out exactly like I thought it would, except it feels totally different than I imagined." And for some reason those were in some ways the most sad because for those people, they couldn't even talk to their friends. People came to me and said, "Is God playing some joke on me? Is God laughing at me? I mean, this is not what I wanted in my life!" And what I learned is that God could not possibly be laughing at us.

How did I find this out? Well, I'm the mother of a six year old, a four year old, and a two year old. One day when I was saying prayers with my oldest—he was about four years old—he turned to me and I said, "What do you want to be when you grow up?"

"Mom, I know exactly what I want to be!" And here, a Jewish mom, I'm waiting and thinking a doctor, a lawyer!" A big pause. "A pirate!" My son wants to be a pirate. And I laughed!

In that moment I realized that's how God is laughing with us. It wasn't God laughing at me, mocking my life or testing me or punishing me or doing anything like that. It was God laughing with me, comforting me through sorrow, loving me through the pain, and weeping as I wept. It's an interesting thing because this notion of a God who cares deeply for us is not what I was taught as a child. It was the last thing I was taught. God was a man on high, up there, who cared very little for my life. And I took that into adulthood. I thought, "How can God care for me? There are people starving in Darfur, people in Africa. God is far too busy for me, little Sherre Hirsch!" But who was I to say what God's Blackberry should look like?

Then there were congregants, people who came to me and said that maybe God was punishing them. Maybe they deserved this pain because they had done something terrible in their youth, like they had stopped speaking to their parents. The last one that threw me the most was that God was testing them; that this was some sort of existential test and God was seeing if they could handle it. What I couldn't understand was when a mother stood before me and told me her child was dying of leukemia and that God was testing her. In my mind, I had to fire that God because any God that would test a mother like that doesn't deserve belief. I started to think about a new way of believing in God.

First, this is a God who needed us as much as we needed him. How do I know? Six days of creation and then the very final seconds, what does God do? He creates people—dysfunctional, imperfect, complicated humanity—because God was alone and God needed us just as much as we needed him.

The second thing I learned is that each one of us is made in the divine image. That phrase is thrown around, left and right. We're made in the divine image of God but there seemed to be something more. It's that each one of us is endowed with a divine spark and with it we can light up the world. And how do I know this? Moses says to God, "Show me how you are so I can go back to the Israelite people and sell you." And what does God say? "I am compassionate. I am kind. I am loving." But we know much better as does Moses, this is the God that turned Lot's wife into a pillar of salt. This is the God who argued with Abraham about Sodom and Gomorrah. This is the God who is vindictive and spiteful and angry. Yet God describes himself utterly differently. What God describes is the he is going to become: extraordinary. So that's what God wants from us, to be extraordinary. Not extraordinary in the way of being famous or powerful or affluent. God wants us to be extraordinary in our regular selves.

I want to tell you a quick story. When I was growing up I was latchkey kid because both my parents worked. And I used to stop at this woman's house, her name was Shirley Colodny. A group of us who all had parents that worked would stop there for these fabulous cookies called ruggalach, a Jewish dish. Everyday after school, she was our home, she was our serenity, she

was our peace. So twenty years later we're all at a wedding and I didn't think that much of it and everybody had gone on to do wonderful things with many degrees behind their names and articles published. And what are we all doing? We're talking about Shirley and the imprint she made in our lives. Here's the irony: she thought she was so regular. When we were younger she would talk about all the mothers and how extraordinary they are and how she's just a housewife. She was anything but. To her she was regular, to us she was extraordinary.

That's what God wants from us. God wants us to embrace who we truly are and bring it to the world. And then we will give all those around us tremendous meaning and we will find it ourselves. I think a lot about this and what I'm supposed to do in the world. There is a great story in that we are not supposed to be searching for happiness even though it's the buzzword of today: be happy, be happy. We're supposed to be searching for meaning because that's everlasting.

In the end of days, there is a great story in the Jewish tradition that we'll meet God at the pearly gates. And walking up there, God will have one question for us: Were you the best Sherre Hirsch you could possibly be? God will not ask me was I Moses, Mother Teresa, or even my mother. God will want to know if I was me—extraordinary, divine, authentic, regular me. Then in those moments I can say, God willing, “Yes!” and God and I will have a good laugh together!

CONVERSATION

Lillian Daniel: If you'd like a printed transcript, audio copy or DVD of the message you just heard from Sherre Hirsch, we'll tell you how to place an order at the end of the program. Or you can visit our website at 30goodminutes.org to watch the video or read the text anytime. Now, let's talk with Sherre.

Lillian Daniel: Thank you for that reminder that God is compassionate and doesn't test us with these horrible situations.

Sherre Hirsch: Well, you know, so often in Hebrew School I was taught that God was overbearing. God was this man on a throne judging and assessing everything I was supposed to be doing and I didn't need that God.

Lydia Talbot: You also got sent to the principal's office for denying that God was an anthropomorphic image, the long white beard and so on.

Sherre Hirsch: Well, a good Jewish kid is supposed to follow exactly the rules! But I'd get sent to the principal's office, Lydia, and you know what? My parents would come pick me up and continue the conversation. I want to say that to parents especially. When your child is sent to the principal's office for thinking outside of the box, nurture that.

Lillian Daniel: Speaking of thinking outside of the box, in your words with us today you talked about those difficult stories in Scripture where God is clearly not acting in a compassionate way. How do you wrestle with a story like Noah and the flood and a God who is angry?

Sherre Hirsch: Like God builds this world, destroys the entire world and then Noah is left there alone with all these animals. You can only imagine that stench and that smell in the ark! I always

think about that! But I think more than anything, God wants us to see God's own imperfections. That is a God we can actually relate to because if God were all-perfect, all-knowing, then how would we relate to that? I'm willing to sacrifice a God that is limited, a God that doesn't have control over everything, for a God that is willing to comfort me during difficult times.

Lydia Talbot: Getting back to the incident in Hebrew School, because this is all related, how did that become an inspiration for you to, as you say in the book, recreate the Creator?

Sherre Hirsch: Well, I think for me, Lydia, more than anything, was that my parents were incredible teachers and that they weren't afraid for me to think outside the box. But I knew that a man sitting on a throne judging my daily actions was not a God that I aspire to or believe in. I needed something much more personal and something much closer to my heart because I needed to tell God not just about the big things, I needed to tell God about the very small things: the boy I had a crush on and all the difficulties that you go through when you're a teenager. And I think now I need that same relationship.

Lillian Daniel: In some ways it's interesting to listen to you, coming from the conservative Jewish tradition, in that the God you're describing is in some ways very much a Protestant Christian God. Can you say more about how that worked into the congregation that you served.

Sherre Hirsch: Well, I made these sort of blasphemous statements! But I think that in the Judeo-Christian traditions we are all searching for a monotheistic God and the doorway is what's different. I think, for me, that doorway was influenced by Eastern faiths, by all my friends that went to CCD [Confraternity of Christian Doctrine] classes and I would go with them after school, and it was influenced by the Judaism of my uncle who was a great rabbi. All those things come together to create your pathway. I think that one of the things I want to share with people is you don't have to do it one way in order to believe in God.

Lydia Talbot: The title of your book, "We Plan, God Laughs" is a Yiddish proverb.

Sherre Hirsch: It is.

Lydia Talbot: You've dedicated the book so beautifully to your mother and we have the delightful experience of meeting your mother in our studio today. Her name is Barbara. Tell us how your mother, Barbara, is an example of that motif from the title that you have chosen for your book.

Sherre Hirsch: Well, her life was definitely not the life that she dreamt of as a little girl. I mean, especially in her era, while she is very young. You dream about, maybe you become a teacher but you become a mother and a wife and have 2.5 children and you have a house with a picket fence. And her life story did not unfold like that in any way. I think because of that, originally when I wrote the book, I really thought it was my father's story, of the man he became and the struggles that he went through. But as I uncovered and wrote more, it was her story. It was her story of courage and her story of working with God, as opposed to against God, and finding a God that really worked for her in her life. And I wish that for other people.

Lillian Daniel: One of the things that you are known for, Sherre, is your ability to relate the faith to the amazing calling of being a mother. And you've done a lot of work with trying to help busy parents figure out to have that sense of divinity in what they do. What are some tips you would give to mothers who are absolutely at the end of their rope and overwhelmed?

Sherre Hirsch: First of all, what science shows now is that we're the unhappiest at this stage of life because we're taking care of our parents and we're over-saddled with these incredible responsibilities of parenting. We're running around like mad women and you don't even get time to breathe let alone be present in your own body. You're just running around crazy with the Blackberry and the car pool. What I say to people is there are 60 seconds of prayer throughout your day. When you are waiting in the car pool line and you're a mom, instead of gabbing about your friends, what the teacher did or did not do, close your windows and ask God for help.

Lydia Talbot: Let me assure you, the best is yet to come! In your book, one of the steps you refer to and nuance in developing a plan for one's life is the Hebrew word, it comes from the Hebrew word, *ashamah*, meaning blame.

Sherre Hirsch: Blame.

Lydia Talbot: Can you talk about that related to forgiveness?

Sherre Hirsch: Yes. I tell a story that when I was a kid, I stole a caramel from Safeway. Yes, I confess! And that little act has stayed with me my entire, whole life. That seemingly nothing, that my parents made me go back to the store and apologize and repay, is a micro-example of how guilt stays with us far longer than we ever imagine, and shame. If I can remember that day at Safeway like it was yesterday, how much more so things that really do matter stay with us? Part of what I instruct is at a certain point there is a statute of limitations. You let go of blame and you forgive yourself because you can't even begin to forgive others until you've forgiven yourself. So at a certain point you let the caramel be the caramel. And it's easy to stay with the caramel, but with other things, too. You forgive yourself for not talking to your mother for three months when you were younger.

Lydia Talbot: You cite the example of Jacob and Esau in that piece of the book, but you also end with this wonderful reference—and you pronounce it for me—that means “joy of the soul.”

Sherre Hirsch: *Shleimut*. It comes from the word *shalom*, peace, and it's that moment when you feel everything works. It's a moment of peace and it's effortless. We all have it. You just need to close your eyes in a quiet moment and remember a time that was just effortless.

Lillian Daniel: That's a great thing for us to take away. I have to ask you now for some personal advice.

Sherre Hirsch: Sure!

Lillian Daniel: You're known as the relationship rabbi, which is a wonderful title. So how do you get a sense of that peace when you are somebody like me with a fifteen year old son who's in drivers ed?

Sherre Hirsch: Oh, drivers ed. I don't know! But I've been with kids in drivers ed because some of them don't want to take their parents. They want to take their rabbi because they think somehow I'm going to be less judgmental. In the meantime, I'm the worst driver! But I think more than anything, in those moments you have to realize that this is a journey of your child and you're a witness to that journey and God gave you this gift to watch over. So in the moment of challenge, which I have many because I'm a mother of three, you have to go back to that place that this is your gift and your child is on loan to you. You want them to ultimately leave your home, become autonomous, become independent and raise their own families.

Lillian Daniel: It seems so much of what you're about is helping us to recognize in our ordinary and chaotic lives that we still have an opportunity to perceive the Divine and the Sacred.

Sherre Hirsch: And really to elevate the mundane things of our lives into the holy. Just saying a blessing before we eat, blessing your children on a Friday night, or at the stop sign saying I'm grateful.

Lydia Talbot: I love how you said in describing Abraham Heschel, one of your teachers, that the authentic individual is not the beginning or the end but the linkage between the two ages.

Sherre Hirsch: The past and the present. And I think that is what we are all striving for.

Lillian Daniel: Thank you so much for being with us.

Sherre Hirsch: Thank you for having me.

Lillian Daniel: It's been a blessing to have you.

REFLECTION INTRODUCTION

Lillian Daniel: We turn now to another in our series of closing reflections on the "Fruits of the Spirit." Today, Martin Marty, Professor Emeritus at the University of Chicago Divinity School, reflects on "faithfulness."

REFLECTION

Martin Marty: A theme I used when speaking at a family-member's wedding. I observed that a spouse who was "creatively creative" could be jumpy and irritating. A "faithfully faithful" one could be a boring drudge. When the apostle Paul spoke of the fruits of the Spirit and mentioned "faithfulness," I think he was celebrating "creative faithfulness."

The word "faith" tucked into "faithfulness" suggests that one trusts a worthy object of faith, who is God. Faithfulness, a product of that trust, becomes a part of life for a person of faith. You can count on her, thanks to the Spirit's gift and fruit. And, since she knows the source of the gift, she

can and will be creative in the way she relates to others, who therefore are receiving a gift as well, thanks to the Spirit.

CLOSING

Lillian Daniel: Thank you, Marty, and our thanks again to Sherre Hirsch, Liam Lawton, and you for being with us today on *30 Good Minutes*. I'm Lillian Daniel.

Lydia Talbot: And I'm Lydia Talbot. As we go, I encourage you to visit our website at 30GoodMinutes.org for more information about today's program and a wonderful collection of messages, reflections, and stories to deepen your faith. Now, from all of us at *30 Good Minutes*, may peace be with you in the week ahead.

