

Smile Unto the Lord A New Smile

Jim Benedict – Union Bridge Church of the Brethren
Sermon for Sunday, May 17, 2009 Psalm 98

Think you're pretty good at being able to tell when people are lying? You might just be a "Truth Wizard." These human lie detectors – about 1 out of every 400 people – have the uncanny ability to sense when someone is being dishonest. The key to their ability, according to experts, is their sensitivity to what are called microexpressions. A microexpression is a brief, involuntary facial expression shown when one is trying to conceal an emotion.

A microexpression lasts only a fraction of a second, but reveals one of six universal emotions: disgust, anger, fear, sadness, happiness, or surprise. Regular folks like you and me can't pick up the signals like the "Truth Wizards," but if we watch a video of someone replayed in slow motion, it becomes obvious. Law enforcement is using both "Truth Wizards" and slow-motion video these days to help solve crimes and catch criminals.

Our facial expressions, micro and otherwise, do provide a window into what we are feeling. And while a criminal's microexpression might lead to his or her conviction, an unpleasant expression in the business world (especially sales) can damage one's professional prospects. That's why an increasing number of people are taking serious steps to make sure they always meet the world with a smile.

And by serious, I mean medical. More specifically, I'm talking about Botox. Most people who use it are just trying to get rid of wrinkles, but a growing number are using it to plant a smile on their faces, more or less permanently. A growing number of lawyers, bankers, stockbrokers and salespeople are having Botox shots to shape their faces into poses of tranquility. With just a few injections, they are wiping away frowns, scowls and the appearance of weariness, and replacing them with effortless smiles.

And apparently it works. After losing his job as an investment banker, 39-year-old Christopher Marre went to interview after interview without landing another position. Finally, an executive recruiter told him the problem wasn't his résumé; it was his face. The deep lines in his forehead made him look angry, the recruiter said. So Marre found a plastic surgeon who gave him Botox injections, and, with his new friendly face firmly in place, he landed a new job just two weeks later. Botox gives a whole new meaning to the song "Put on a Happy Face." The problem, of course, is that the appearance of joy is not the same

thing as joy itself. Maybe in business you can “fake it to make it,” but God is never fooled. God is the ultimate “Truth Wizard.” That’s why we can always be honest with God about what we are feeling – after all, God already knows!

And God cares. We don’t have to put on a phony “happy face” for God. God accepts us, regardless of how we may be feeling. And that acceptance is healing. It’s much better than Botox. When we realize the love God has for us, we begin to get better. Soon enough, it isn’t a fake smile, but a real one, on our faces.

This brings us to Psalm 98. It begins, “O sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things,” and it continues in tones of joy all the way through. The joy of the psalmist is so overflowing that he’s not content to rejoice in the Lord by himself; he asks his audience to join him in the party. Even then, he’s not content, and thus invites creation itself to join in the glee: “Let the sea roar, and all that fills it; the world and those who live in it. Let the floods clap their hands; let the hills sing together for joy.”

This is someone who gets it – who understands that when life is bad, God is still good. The psalmist knows that God is faithful, and also knows how easy it is for us to lose sight of that fact. Most of us have had lives overflowing with blessings for years, but let a problem appear, and some are quick to demand, “Why, God? How long, O Lord?” In other words, “Thanks for all the blessings, but what have you done for me lately?” But it is possible, even in tough times, to remember the faithfulness of God and be joyful. In fact, scholars believe that this psalm – possibly the most joyful of all the psalms – was actually composed at the time when the Jews were in exile! Carried off from Jerusalem and humiliated by their captors in Babylon, the initial response of God’s people is captured in another psalm, Psalm 137: “By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept.”

Yet, after a season of sorrow, the essential optimism of God’s people re-emerged. They remembered God’s power and faithfulness. So, while still captives, they became joyful and encouraged one another to: “Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth, burst into jubilant song.”

Can you imagine how their captors responded? Captives are supposed to be miserable! If nearly everything you own is taken away from you, and then you are taken away from your home and forced to live in a foreign land and serve your oppressors, you are supposed to be miserable. But here were God’s people singing for joy! The Babylonians must have been baffled. Centuries later, the guards at the Solingen prison certainly were. A small group of Brethren men had been imprisoned there in the early 18th

century. At that time it was illegal to promote any form of Christianity in Europe other than Roman Catholicism, Lutheranism, or the Reformed tradition. These men had been preaching a simple message about following Jesus and being faithful to his teachings. Brought before a judge, they were sentenced to life in prison.

Their cell was dark, dank and cold. Their diet was meager. They were required to do forced labor. Even so, when they were allowed to be together they prayed and sang with joy. They expressed their faith in the faithfulness of God. Their jailers were astounded and impressed. Whether we're talking about the Jews in Babylon or the Solingen Brethren in their cells, we are talking about people whose attitude was not grounded merely in their circumstances. We are talking about people who were connected to a deep, unyielding source of joy.

Joy is God's gift. It isn't to be confused with happiness. Happiness depends on what happens to us or on what we have. I'm sure you have seen all sorts of descriptions of the source of happiness on bumper stickers. Just lately, I've seen, "Happiness is an adopted cat. Happiness is being in Costa Rica. Happiness is a hot tub. Happiness is having grandchildren. Happiness is a warm puppy." And, ironically, I've seen both "Happiness is being married" and "Happiness is being single." The source of happiness, it seems, (like beauty) is in the eye of the beholder. It is about getting something or having what you want. Joy, on the other hand, is about understanding what life is about and being connected to what matters. It is about coming to terms with our human limitations, about what we can control and what we can't. It is about recognizing that both the good and the bad in life come and go – but God is faithful. God's love is always at work in us and in our world, no matter how much we or the world resist or rebel against it. God is at work to set things right, and thus there is always hope. That's what the psalmist knew. That's what the Jews in exile knew. That's what the Solingen Brethren knew. And that is why they all had joy. That's why they all felt like singing even while they were confined by circumstance and controlled by captors.

The joy that they knew – and we can know – by remembering the faithfulness of God and trusting in God's promises is so much more than the happiness so many people spend their whole lives chasing. G. K. Chesterton, an early twentieth century Christian writer, once described the difference between happiness and joy as the difference between a mud puddle and the ocean. Both are technically bodies of water, but that's just about all they have in common. Yet how many of us are like the little boy, who having never seen the ocean, is afraid to leave his puddle and his mud pies?

The psalmist celebrated a victory that hadn't happened yet. "The Lord has made known his victory," he wrote. "He has revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations. He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel. All the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God." The psalmist dared imagine "the ocean." The psalmist dared to declare that God would triumph, and speak of it as something already accomplished.

Pastoral care expert Andy Lester calls that attitude having a positive "future story." We all think of our lives as a narrative, he says – a story, with a beginning (the past), a middle (the present) and an end (the future). People who believe in a positive ending have a positive future story. They may be struggling at present, they may have had a terrible past, they may even anticipate some future troubles. But if they have faith that their "story" will ultimately end well, they tend to be positive, hopeful, and confident.

As Christians, we believe our story will end well because of the promises and faithfulness of God. At the very center of our faith is the symbol of God's faithfulness and a promise kept – the resurrection of Jesus Christ. So we can lift our voice with the psalmist and praise God who is doing – and will continue to do – marvelous things.

Amen.