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“Choose Joy”

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Psalm 98; Matthew 6:25-34

Botox cosmetic treatment is not just for erasing age lines anymore. Now it's also being used for planting a smile on your face, more or less permanently. The primary cosmetic use of Botox is still by people who want to look younger, but it has also become the treatment of choice for a whole host of people who want to appear serene or happy no matter what they might really be feeling. In the world of business or sales, letting your true emotion show can mean losing a sale, coming out on the short end of a negotiation, missing a job opportunity, or not prevailing when representing a client before a jury.

So 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. Those perpetually happy faces beam at arrogant bosses, annoying underlings, obstinate clients, resistant customers, skeptical juries and even sleepy congregations, even if the person behind the face is really feeling something quite different.

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 went to a plastic surgeon for Botox injections, and, with his new friendly face firmly in place, he landed a new job just two weeks later. This trend really 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. Yet it's no secret that smiles make us feel good. Just think about the last time you were waited on by a sales clerk who had a sour look. As long as the clerk was efficient and handled your checkout properly, you probably couldn't complain, but if a clerk is both efficient and smiling, it makes for a much more pleasant experience.

Someone has turned this feel-good aspect of smiles into a Blog. Called SmileMyDay.com, it's filled with engaging pictures of people flashing great

smiles. Some of the best are of babies, but it has people of many other colors, nationalities and ages as well. The creator of SmileMyDay.com is unidentified, but explains that the motivation for the site is to help people feel happier. The blog creator writes:

I am a happy blogger and I always smile. I also love to see other people's happy smiles on their faces. Every time I see someone smile, that makes me smile, too. It's magic. When I felt sad or upset, I try to smile to forget what was happening to me. A happy smile gives me energy and motivates me to overcome sadness. Seeing smiles on other people's faces makes me happier. The happy smiles motivate me to face my challenges and find a way to resolve the difficulties ... I want to make this blog a place to give people a bright future and have a happier life.

It almost makes you angry, doesn't it? As I read about this blog, I felt that the smiles this person is writing about are as disconnected from true joy as Botox-induced ones. There's nothing wrong with smiling as a technique to show hospitality to strangers or to give you energy, but that's not the same as a smile that arises from genuine joy.

And that brings us to Psalm 98, which begins, "O sing to the Lord a new song, for God has done marvelous things." It continues in tones of joy all the way through. The joy of the psalmist is so genuine that the Psalmist is not content to rejoice in God alone, but asks everyone else to join in. Even then, the Psalmist is not content, and asks 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."

But why is the Psalmist so happy? Because the author has found a joy rooted in the steadfast love and faithfulness of God — the psalmist says that very thing in verse 3 — and what he knows is that because God has done great things in the past, God will do them again in the future.

Although the psalmist does not specify what great things he's referring to, we can pretty well guess. Again and again in the Old Testament, writers point back to the exodus of the Hebrew people from Egypt as a mighty work of deliverance. And they attribute that deliverance not to the power of Moses or the weakness of Pharaoh, but to God. Since God did that in the past, nothing is impossible in the future. For if you believe that God did great things for you earlier, you've got a reason to at least lean toward optimism. If you believe God is in charge and will

bring something good out of something bad, you have every reason to smile. Psalm 98 never uses the word “smile”; it says to “sing to the Lord a new song,” but, of course, that’s essentially the same thought. And in case we don’t quite get it, the psalmist says it even plainer in verse 4: “Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth; break forth into joy and sing praises.” (Isaac Watts based his hymn “Joy to the World” on Psalm 98.)

Now lest you think this is all just naive overly simplistic optimism, the recommendation to choose joy is based upon harrowing life experience. Psalm 98 is included in Section IV of the book of Psalms, which includes Psalms 90 to 106. This Section of the Psalms are described by Biblical Scholar Clinton McCann as “...anguished questions that cry out for response.” (*New Interpreters Bible Commentary, Volume IV, p. 662*) They were “...shaped in part to respond to the crisis of exile and its aftermath.” In other words, this was not written for a celebration of a happy event; it was written for people in crisis, who were in the midst of very insecure and challenging times.

Well, how can that be? When we are in difficulty we don’t feel much like celebrating, singing or smiling. Yet the human hunger for joy is so persistent that it at least suggests that joy is waiting beyond our troubles, that joy is connected to the great secret God has imbedded in the universe. For only where there is sorrow can there be a hope of joy; only where there are graves are there resurrections.

John Ortberg, who is pastor of Menlo Park Presbyterian Church offers an illustration of this truth. He invites us to imagine that we have a 5-year-old daughter whom we love with all our heart. But the child becomes very sick and is so ill that we’re afraid she’s going to die. But then the doctor tells us that there’s an operation that will correct the problem, and she will be fine. We are then filled with relief ... and great joy.

The problem is, the child is scared to death of the operation and frightened of the surgeon. Even though you know she will be well, your reassurance doesn’t help because she cannot understand. Acting joyful in her presence only makes her think you don’t take her seriously and that you don’t care. So you have to meet her where she is, be appropriately empathetic and maintain a somber front. Deep down inside, you are smiling because you know all will be well.

The author of Psalm 98 is something like the parent in that scenario. Writing to people weighed down with troubles and uncertainty, but knowing that in the long run, everything will be all right. The book of Revelation says, “God will be with them and will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (Revelation 21:3-4). God knows this, but in the meantime God is a loving mother who takes our fears and worries seriously, but every so often, has to go outside and laugh, because she sees what we do not. This is good news, especially when we are confronted with things we find hard to accept or understand.

Joy is not something we acquire, or something we seek. It comes as a by product of faithful living. It comes from being a blessing to others, from choosing to give and serve and share, and from believing in the invisible so that we can do the impossible. Wrote William Blake: “He who binds to himself a joy, does the winged life destroy; But he who kisses the joy as it flies, lives in eternity’s sunrise.” We have to kiss the joy as it flies, and cling to the promise of something beyond the sorrows and struggles of this earthly life.

Over a century ago, G.K. Chesterton wrote about the hope that Jesus represents. He wrote that although Jesus often let his grief, sadness and anger show on his face, he had to restrain himself from smiling because he knew Christianity’s great secret — that the promise of the realm of heaven, the promise that Revelation speaks of, the promise of deliverance is all true. In order to meet us where we were, Jesus had to restrain himself from breaking out in joy. Or as Chesterton put it, “There was one thing that was too great for God to show us when he walked upon our earth; and I have sometimes fancied that it was his mirth.” (*Orthodoxy*, p. 294)

And yet it did show at times, if you have the eyes to see and ears to hear. This was a seriously neglected aspect of the life of Jesus, because his suffering was so profound. We consider our faith very serious business, therefore we have historically ignored or overlooked this aspect of his character, due to what Elton Trueblood calls a “...misguided piety.” (*The Humor of Christ*, p. 15) Trueblood believes that, “...we have often developed a false pattern of Christ’s character. We habitually think of him as mild in manner, endlessly patient, grave in speech and serious to the point of dourness.”

Yet this was not the case. Jesus used humorous paradox, figures of speech and irony in getting his point across. He teases people; he uses blunt language, surprising his listeners. Luke’s gospel tells us that “...they were surprised that such words should fall from his lips.” (Luke 4:22) The parables were funny

stories designed to enlighten and amuse, as well as teach and transform.

In our Scripture lesson from Matthew, Jesus tells his disciples that they are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. I can just imagine him grinning as he said that. He is telling them that they are to life what salt is to food—that which preserves and flavors and seasons. The Message says, “...to bring out the God flavors of this earth.” They are offered a way of life that makes everything better because it enriches, deepens, transforms. They are to show others those things which make for full and worthwhile living. And to show others that there is so much more to this earthly life than meets the eye. Jesus comes down solidly on the side of joy—his first miracle was turning water into wine at a wedding reception! And as for being the light of the world, the point of any light is to shine and be seen. Jesus teasingly asks, “You don’t think I would hide you under a bucket now, do you?” We are to bear witness to the light, to keep our hearts and minds open, as we season, flavor and shine in the darkness of this world.

Ultimately we will all encounter situations in this life that make us frown and cry, make us angry, make us feel forsaken and frustrated. But these things teach us the insufficiency of human power and human answers. If someone were to explain to you why you have to suffer, it would never really help or bring you comfort. No answers would ever be sufficient. But our faith invites us to see something beyond explanations, to trust that in spite of some evidence to the contrary, God is still good. The book of Psalms is punctuated throughout with these words: ‘The Lord is good,’ and there are no qualifiers. God is not good ‘if’; God is not good ‘when’; God is not good ‘as long as’; God is not good ‘until.’ God is just good. May we stubbornly cling to that goodness — even when things happen to us which are not very good at all.

Ours is a faith that invites us to choose joy. Not because we are blind to suffering, but we know that suffering is never ultimate. Not because we have false hope, but because we hope in Jesus Christ. The joy of a Christian is not a denial of tears, but a belief in something beyond than tears. Therefore, no matter what life sends our way we can choose joy and to smile a new smile — a real smile.