

It's Written All over Your Face

Exodus 34:29-35

September 13, 2009

(Ordinary Time)

**I will bless the Lord at all times;
his praise shall be always in my mouth.
My soul will glory in the Lord
that the poor may hear and be glad.
O Magnify the Lord with me,
and let us exalt his name together....
Look to God that you may be radiant with joy
and your faces may not blush for shame.**

Psalm 34 says that. “Turn to God. Be bright with joy,” it says in another translation. “Let not your faces be ashamed.” But let me see if I can tell you a little something about that this morning.

There was a young man -- a young soldier, in fact -- who got on a train with his commanding officer. And the thing was just packed. Like a big can of sardines on wheels, I suppose. And as it turns out, there were only two empty seats on the whole train. And they were right across from

a lovely young woman who was traveling with her grandmother. So, the two soldiers very politely asked if they might join them. And of course, the two women very politely said, “Yes. Please do.”²

So as the train rolled along “o’er hill and dale,” the four of them talked and laughed and just had a delightful time together on the train. And the young soldier and the woman -- the young woman, I mean -- were attracted to each other. You could see it written all over their faces -- all happy and smiling and glowing, the way young people do ... And all of a sudden the train went into a tunnel and the whole room (the whole passenger car, rather) got really, really dark. And in the darkness two sounds were heard. Two unmistakable sounds: the *smack* of a kiss and the *whack* of the slap of a hand across the face.

And immediately the older woman, the grandmother, thought, “I can’t believe he kissed my granddaughter! But I’m glad she gave him the slap He deserved it.” The commanding officer thought, “I don’t blame the boy for kissing the girl. But it’s a shame she missed his face and slapped mine instead!” And the lovely young woman thought, “Oh, I’m glad he kissed me ... I just wish my

grandmother hadn't slapped him for doing it." And as³ the train broke away into the sunlight, the soldier was just beaming. And he couldn't help it. He just could not wipe the proud smile off his face. Because he had just seized the opportunity to kiss a pretty girl and slap his commanding officer and **he'd gotten away with both!**

Radiant! I tell you, that young man was radiant with joy! You could see it written all over his face!

There was a preacher -- not I, mind you, but some other preacher -- whose face was all lit up one Sunday morning. He was fresh out of seminary, in the first few months or so at his first appointment. The first church he had ever served. And he was always impressed, in seminary, with the way Jesus used things -- unusual things -- to get the message across. Things like water -- walking on water, or riding a donkey of all things into Jerusalem. And he used sparrows and ravens and fishes to make a point. Oh, and a Camel, mind you! A big old, four-footed, frumpy-looking, foam-at-the-mouth kind of camel! Really! [Remember the eye of the needle?]

So he tried to do the same kind of thing (except for⁴ the water ... and the camel, of course) to help get the message across to the children there in the church. Live animals he used. Like a turtle. One Sunday he used a turtle in his children's sermon. Because turtles only go forward -- they only make progress -- if they dare to stick their necks out. A good lesson for Christians, he thought. So the next Sunday he stood at the front and called the children to come hear some good news. And as he held up one of the turtles, he tapped on its shell. And it ducked inside it. "This one's not going anywhere," said the preacher. "That's how people are when they forget that Jesus is walking along with them."

And just then, the turtle got a bad case of the nerves and wet himself -- or wet the preacher, I *should* say. Right there in front of the whole congregation! And the people just lost it. They did. And the poor man blushed, his cheeks red as two pickled beets. And he said something like, "Strange faces do funny things to shy turtles."

And he picked up the second turtle and tried it again. He tapped on the shell. And held it out there. And the turtle ducked inside its shell, and it held its... composure.

And from the expression on his face, you could see he⁵ was relieved. So he turned to the kids and said, “What happens to a turtle that won’t stick his neck out?” And a little girl raised her hand and said, “I know. It goes tinkle, tinkle!” Which brought the house down again, of course. And the poor preacher thought his ministry was over. It was just gone.

But it wasn’t, at all. For when he looked out over the pews he saw something wonderful. He saw people smiling. And he saw something else, I think. It was written all over their faces. And there’s a name for it, I think. It’s called acceptance. It’s called love.

**I will bless the Lord at all times;
praise shall be always in my mouth.
Turn to God. Be bright with joy.
Let not your faces be ashamed.**

I saw a face like that in a convent, once -- in a monastery for women. They have a little gift shop there full of candles and crosses and angels. And lots of things the sisters have made. Paintings and carvings and Benedictine bookmarks, they call them, with crosses and

beads. And they have CDs of their choir recorded right there in the abbey church. I was on my way home from a retreat in December. And I always stop to see what they have there. And that’s where I saw it -- this face, this strange and wonderful face that just seemed to glow, in a way.⁶

It wasn’t one of the sisters ... though sometimes their faces seem to glow, too. But it was a sculpture. A piece made from clay. And that’s all it was -- a face made of clay. And I picked it up and held it in my hands, and put it back where it was. And I walked away and looked at something else. But two or three minutes later, I was right back at the table looking at that face. For there was just something about it. It just seemed to glow, as if it had love and warmth written all over it.

And I picked it up again and noticed that there was a little card beneath it that was written by hand. It said, **See, there is a place by me where you shall stand ... and while my glory passes ... I will cover you with my hand,**” (Exodus 33:21). And it was signed, “Blessings, Sister Jayn.” And that’s what it was. It was the face of Moses as he

stood on the mountain in the presence of God, the glory⁷ of God written all over his face.

And that's what the people of Israel saw, not the first time he came down from the mountain. That was disappointment and anger and shame. Because you *know* what happened. While he was with God on the mountain, they were making their own god -- a calf, a little gold cow! And Moses took the commandments, the gift of the law which God had given him to give to the people, and he threw them down on the ground hard as he could. Which was pretty much what God wanted to do with his people when he saw what they were doing.

But he didn't. He didn't. And Moses went up on the mountain again. And he saw God's glory and was there in God's presence. And when he came down with the covenant laws in his hands, the people looked up. And Moses face was radiant! It was shining! And Moses didn't even know it. And what was written all over his face was not wrath and anger or even disappointment. But his face was aglow because he had been in the presence of God.

8

And that's how it was every time Moses went into the tabernacle, the big tent-church, mind you, to listen to God and be in his presence. God would speak his word to Moses. And when Moses came from the tabernacle, the people could see that he'd been with the Lord. And it reminded them again that God was with them on their journey. He was there to guide them not just through the wilderness, mind you, but in their life together -- in their relationships with each other and with him. Isn't that why he gave Moses the law? The **ten commandments** we call them? Only a God who cared deeply for them would do that, you know. Only a God who was with them and *for* them. And now they could see it in Moses. Because it was written all over his face. ✝

I wonder what people see when they look at *us*. Our neighbors? Our friends? Our own *families*, mind you? And our sisters and brothers in Christ ...

Tony Campolo preached at Duke Chapel just a few years ago. I wasn't there, mind you. But the chapel has a website. And you can visit the chapel and hear the organ and the choir and even make a donation while you're there (on the website). So I went to the website one

9
Sunday evening and watched the morning service. And it was wonderful ... and it really hit home, I think. Because Tony said he went to his ten-year class reunion. Which, of course, he insisted was not all that long ago. And it was great, he said, to see all his old friends from high school again and to meet their families and talk about the old days.

And then he said one of his old classmates pulled him aside -- a fellow named Jerry, he said. He was one of his closest friends when they were in high school. They played basketball together and ate lunch together at school every day. And Jerry told him that day that he'd had the most fantastic experience about a year earlier. He had become a Christian, he said. And he told him that his whole life had changed. "It's *still* changing," he said, "every day." Because he'd found new joy in his life and a sense of peace he'd longed for all his life. And he just went on and on about his new life as a Christian.

And when he finally paused long enough to catch a breath, Tony said, "Jerry, I'm so glad to hear this. You know, I'm a Christian, too!" And Jerry said, "When did you

10
become a Christian?" And Tony said, "It was when I was a little boy, I suppose."

And his friend looked at him and said, "You were a Christian, when we were in high school? I didn't know that. Why didn't you tell me? If you were a Christian why didn't you ever tell me about Jesus? Why didn't you want me to know that about that?" And Tony said, "I looked at him and I didn't know what to say." All those years, and one of his closest friends couldn't even tell that he was a Christian...

Ah, but what about you? Do your closest friends know you're a follower of Jesus? A disciple of Christ? But then again, how would they know that? If you've been in his presence, or if you've known his love, or felt him near, how would they know that? How could they tell?

Moses' face was all aglow. It was shining and bright. So it showed. Everyone knew he'd been in God's presence. Everyone knew that he'd gone to the mountain to listen to God. But chances are, when you've spent an hour with God in the evening, reading and listening to his word, or in prayer, or in worship, you still won't glow in the dark. And

when you have your quiet time in the morning or do your daily devotions, chances are people won't have to squint and hide their eyes when they see you.

But if you do those things. If you spend time with God, listening for what he wants to say to you, it will show. And if you take time to be with him and open your heart and your mind to him in prayer and in worship, it will show. And people *will* see it. Not on your face so much, but in the things you say and do. And in the way you are with other people -- with friends and family and people at church, and with people who've never even darkened the doors.

They'll see it in your honesty and in your integrity. They'll see it in the way you live your life. If you're "all about you" it will show (whether you want it to or not). People will see that. And if you're all about God and serving God's people, well that will show, too.

But you know that, don't you? You've seen it in other people. We all have, I think. In Sunday School teachers who taught us God's love through their love. And in Christian friends who have always been there -- even

when you were at your worst. And you've seen it in people who are always reaching out to other people -- people who love kindness, as the prophet Micah would say. And in people who tend the hurts of others even when *they're* hurting, too. You've seen it in other people. And other people have seen it in you. And they know, because of your kindness and grace, that you've been with the Lord -- that you follow him, even as he walks beside you.

God's people needed to see that, you know, when Moses came from the holy place. They needed to know that God was there, and that he had the grace and the power to sustain them on their journey. And all these years, all these centuries later, people still want to know that. And they can. They can. If you'll let them see it in you. ✠

I don't know when it happened, really. But some people saw a boy in old, ragged clothes near the projects (the housing projects) somewhere in New York City. And he had a small piece from a broken mirror in his hand. And he was holding it way up over his head. And he was moving the little mirror back and forth very slowly,

