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May 25, 2008

Matthew 6:24-34

All Smiles?

Over the years I have heard many comment on what they perceive as a perpetual smile across my face. Apparently, some may feel I embody the scriptural instruction not to worry, or as the Bobby McFerrin song says, "Don't Worry, Be Happy." There are times when the beauty around me is remarkable and I can't keep from smiling. When I meet a new person it is a joyous event, for it is good to build relationships. When the first flakes of snow begin to fall each year I leap inside with joy. There are so many moments that excite me about life. The scriptures proclaim the beauty in creation, in relationships, and in life. Isaiah writes "How lovely on the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news." And psalms remind us that "the heavens declare the glory of God" and beckon us to "sing to Lord a New Song" and "come into His presence with thanksgiving." With joy we greet new life, with smiles we welcome friends. Our mouths and eyes speak when our words do not. In conversations one cannot always be the talker; it is in the time of listening that our eyes, mouths and bodies can respond showing that we are attentive to the other. When was the last time you could help but smile?

There is much joy, much to smile about. Many blessings from which we proclaim God's goodness. But, is there a mixed message in the words of McFerrin's song? "Don't worry, be happy?" Is it all that simple? Just smile and everything will work out? In case anyone has ever wondered, there are times I do not smile. My smile is part of me, but it is not always there. There are plenty of times I do not feel like smiling. I'm not sure about each one of you but there are even times I worry. When my girls were younger I worried about their safety. My husband walks around with half a heart. It is amazing, and yet there are moments when I wonder what the future holds. When I hear of destruction in China and Myanmar I worry, wondering how we will respond effectively, and why there is so much devastation. It is challenging and maybe not possible to embody the words of the Christian band Glad, in a song that goes "In these days of confused situations, in these nights of restless remorse, when the heart and the soul of the nation, lay wounded and cold as a corpse, ... Be Ye Glad." Can we be glad when devastation and worries abound? My girls are older yet I still wonder about the future and there are moments when this mom worries. Many 'what if's' come to mind.

What do we worry about?

- Finances when we were early married and counted our change, it was not extra, but necessary money for our budget.
- What will tomorrow bring?
- Health
- Family relationships, strained, broken,
- Friendships, tried by _____
- For students, maybe stressed by exams, assignment deadlines, living up to others expectations
- For children, maybe worried about more than we realize
- Worry about what might happen
- War
- Economy
- Getting through the ordination process
- Finishing the work before us
- Living up to others expectations
- Living up to our own expectations
- Hitting one note perfectly
- Being somewhere on time
- Our children's safety

Does this passage from the Sermon on the Mount show us that trust is a simple choice? Is it as simple as "Smile, Jesus Loves you" or "trust in the Lord?" Can a smile be transformative? I would argue yes, but there is more. An authentic smile can be transformative, for self and others, but smiling as a way of life is only part of the story. The larger, tougher story comes in the midst of struggle and doubt. It is okay to admit that we worry. When we bring our authentic beings into relationship we might find that others have found ways through situations they never thought possible. We can grow as a community when we celebrate together, but also as we hear one another in their struggles. We present our whole beings when are willing to show (even if just occasionally) that we are not always happy. In the ten months since I came, you have seen my smiles, and you have allowed me the flexibility to do the best I could, even when my best was less than I wished it was. Through the month of February, while Scott was in the hospital, there was such grace shown to me by this community of faith.

On this Memorial Day, do we worry about memorializing those who have impacted our lives and how we can live up to expectations that we may feel because of all that was done by those who came before us? When we think of loved ones who are no longer living we might find happy memories interspersed with unresolved relationships. What can we do for the things left undone? Can we say "Don't worry, Be Happy, Now"? Simply 'moving on' could it work, maybe. But there may be something in naming that which continues to feel unresolved. We might even find we are not alone. I spent a lot of time with my grandparents when I was a child, but as they aged I moved away. Distance changed the relationships. My children do not know their great grandparents in the way I knew mine. There was and is a gap. This weekend we can remember and name those who have touched our lives. We could worry that we will never live up to previous generations, or we can choose to live knowing that our worries need not be secrets holding us from participation in community. It doesn't seem to be as simple as just not worrying, does it? Perhaps we could try to let other see the gaps. After all, whether we worry or not, things do not always come out as planned.

Even some of the lilies of the field die without our involvement, some will flourish without our involvement, and some will flourish and die with our involvement. Some birds make their homes in branches which will fall to the ground in a windstorm. Some baby squirrels are eaten by the birds of prey that fly near our home. All butterflies do not emerge from cocoons able to fly free. Some water their lawns while others wait for the rain to fall. We are incapable of balancing the ecology of the planet alone. Some things thrive, others things wither and die. We are called to move from apathy to find ways we can respond to the devastating forecast. In the gap we can meet God and witness creation emerging once again. Trees nourished, baby goslings taking their first swim, prayers of individuals offering support when we do not know what tomorrow may bring.

As a child I was excited that much of our electricity came from hydro-electric power. In fact my I loved my eighth grade science project where we had to create an energy-efficient house. I remember sitting on the back deck with my friend Lorrie adding the soil to the top and back of our model house. You see I had learned that there is less need for heating and cooling if one's house is underground. Yet, we did not realize what impact our home might have on the environment as we in essence created a hill changing the topography of the land, just as the engineers who dammed the Columbia River to provide electricity did not understand the long-term impact of changing the water level. I celebrated the fact that we used what I thought was clean energy, and loved visiting the fish hatchery near the dam and hearing how experts had made ways for the fish to be able to swim upstream despite the dam. Years later we are realizing that this energy source was not as perfect as once thought, and the region is seeking to repair the damage caused by the shift in water levels. Once a solution to our perceived need for electricity is now a situation where we realize we did not see the whole picture.

Some of my personal worries are my own struggles with my expectations of self. I like to be able to do everything, and do it well, but sometimes I cannot. So for me this passage serves as a reminder that I do not have to do everything. I will not understand everything. God will meet us in the gaps.

Sometimes you may notice when I am unable to do what I want I will smile and laugh as a way to say "I don't know." There is much I don't know, and that is okay. That does not mean that I can just say I don't care to learn more, or seek more. It doesn't mean that I have the answer to how to stop worrying. We do worry and we do not always allow our facial muscles to relax into a smile.

Last week I was given a number of family Bibles including a New Testament that my Great Grandpa carried during WWI. I wonder if it was at times of uncertainty during the war when he would turn to Matthew 6 and find the words "Ye of little faith." Are there situations that we do not have all the answers, when our expressions show there might even be much we do not grasp? In the gap is room for God's grace; by acknowledging that we cannot do it all we open space for others to help. Even God. Not everything seems to work out the way we want, but when we look back, and how appropriate for this Memorial Day weekend, we can find places where grace has brought us through.

When my facial expression turns from being proud of what I can do, to frustration about what I cannot do, to joy about what we can do together, and finally to an expression of release that all may not get done according to our plans, I believe I have caught the essence of the scripture. Though not all goes as we want or expect, God will still love us. We can assess where to use our gifts and resources not out of fear or a desire to crowd out worry, but out of our relationship with God and neighbor.

The little Engine that could used that mantra "I think I can, I think I can, I think I can." I wonder what might happen if we tried the mantra "I can do my part, God will meet me in the gaps." From the musical Godspell "we plow the fields and scatter the good things on the land, but it is fed and watered by God's almighty hand." There are actions for us, and room for God. In relationship with God and one another we can know that small authentic moments of faith can support us in uncertain times. Looking back we can proclaim the glory of the one who has seen us through celebrations and tough times. Our God is a God of the gaps. In the worry, in the doubt, in receiving our praise, and in our simple smiles, Jesus does indeed love us. Amen.