

“And Be Radiant” / Psalm 34:1-8 / 12 August 2012

“Look to God and be radiant,” the psalmist says, “so your face shall never be ashamed.” Speaking of faces, let me finally talk about FaceBook. I make casual reference to FaceBook pretty frequently in sermons. Our church has a FaceBook page that I’m always encouraging people to join—only 41 so far. And yet there are folks out there who don’t really know what FaceBook is or why people do it. So, if you are a FaceBook user, bear with me; there will be some review. If you are not a FaceBook user, and you’ve wondered what it is and why people do it, then let me tell you. It is an addiction, and that is why people do it. Sometime back in the bleakest days of the winter, three years ago, my wife started talking about a thing she called FaceBook. One day, she was just writing regular, old-fashioned emails to keep in touch with faraway friends, and the next day, her social life was completely revolutionized by a free Internet service called Facebook. If you sign up for Facebook, you get your own little site on the Internet. It’s all about you. You publish pictures of yourself and your family. They have you answer a few questions about your politics, religion, favorite movies, things like that. You put up a few of your favorite quotes, if you want. You tell them what schools you attended, when you graduated, and voila! You’re on Facebook. Once you’re on Facebook, all your “Facebook friends” can write things about themselves on their sites, and it will appear on your site, along with a little picture of their face. Say, for example, that I’m a Facebook friend with Jessica our music director and Emily our secretary. I could get up one day and decide to tell the world that I’m in a bad mood. I might write on my Facebook page, “Brian is feeling villainous today.” My remark would appear on both Jessica’s and Emily’s FaceBook pages, with a charming little photo of me. If Jessica or Emily wanted to reply, they could. Or else they could just keep that bit of knowledge to themselves and try to stay on my less villainous side. It’s a good way to share pictures with loved ones in a faraway place, and to keep them informed about your day-to-day life. The church’s FaceBook page has great photos of our Haiti Fund Run.

But here’s the fun thing about FaceBook. As soon as FaceBook finds out where you’ve lived and what schools you attended, it starts telling you about other people in its database whom you might know. Say you graduated from Mt. Lebanon High School in 1975. FaceBook will come back to you and say, “Here’s someone who graduated from the same school in the same year.” And it will ask, “Do you want to invite this person to be your FaceBook friend?” And so, FaceBook reconnects you with people you haven’t heard from or even thought about in years, sometimes decades.

Now, on a side note, a “FaceBook friend” is not the same thing as a real life friend. (And let’s not even discuss the great trauma of modern life: discovering that someone has “unfriended” you on FaceBook!) A FaceBook friend could be a real friend or just an acquaintance. You might discover someone on FaceBook who was a minor character in your life long ago, the school lunch lady or your cousin’s neighbor. Maybe you never spoke much to the person in real life, but this isn’t real life; this is FaceBook! Even near strangers become your “FaceBook friend.” So suddenly you’re hearing from your cousin’s neighbor on a daily basis, all thanks to FaceBook. It’s sometimes strange to see people from two widely divergent parts of your life interacting with each other via your FaceBook page...your mother talking politics with your ex-girlfriend.

Well, I scoffed at Michelle and her FaceBook habit for a long time. “Checking Facebook” became a regular part of her morning rituals. I vowed that I would never get

FaceBook. I thought it was a practice in self-absorption. Besides, I said, nobody wants to see my face these twenty years later. But I admit that it was kind of fun to hear Michelle talking about all the faraway people we both knew back in Pittsburgh and New York. Michelle was even hearing from members of my family who hadn't been in touch with me for years. So after a few months making fun of Michelle's FaceBook addiction, pointing out how our children had become ragged little hobos since their mother discovered FaceBook, I finally ended up...joining FaceBook.

Yes, I know. Sorry, kids, you're on your own. I can't deal with you today because my cousin's neighbor is talking on FaceBook about the latest Batman movie. But let me tell you what I like most about FaceBook. Oh, of course, it's a strange wonder to be in contact with people from the past. But what I like most is the thing it's named for: the faces. Faces I haven't seen for twenty years! Faces that have changed so much, people my own age who look so old! People who, in my mind's eye, are forever teenagers or twenty-somethings, suddenly I see their faces again, but they look as old as the face I shave every morning. And most of them haven't really changed. They've aged, had children, gotten married and divorced. A lot of them are coming up on their midlife crises. But when I look at their faces staring back at me from across cyberspace, I see the same mischief in this one, the same fear in that one. I see the same anger in this person that he had when he was young. And that one still walks around like Eeyore, the donkey on Winnie the Pooh. Their faces are older, less comely, but most still tell the same story as before.

How is that? With all the gains and losses of twenty years! How do our faces remain essentially the same when some of us have lost loved ones, others have taken on addictions, others have seen their dreams come and go? Some have fallen terribly ill. Others went out into the Big World to seek our place, and a few came crawling back, having learned the hard way where "our place" was not. Still the faces tell the same stories that they were telling two decades ago. After all of that experience and even loss, how can we still be wearing pretty much the same facial expressions through life?

Well, it's simple. The outlooks and attitudes expressed in those faces ended up creating an approach to life that has confirmed all their most basic hopes and fears. The teenager with the curious eyes went through life with inquisitiveness: curious. Her eyes remain curious because she always found things to explore and learn. The kid with the angry face went through life looking for someone to blame: angry. His face still shows it because he has always dwelt on it. The child with fear in his eyes went through life cowering and hiding: afraid. It shows on his face because it's his default position, even when nobody's looking: fear. The one with the mischievous face went through life looking for humor in every situation, and so on. Look to worry and be worrisome. Look to uncertainty and be doubtful. Look to hatred and be hateful. Look to discord and be troublesome. That's why psalmist offers this bit of advice, "Look to God and be radiant." We change only little throughout the course of our life because we choose very early what things we will dwell on, and then that choice turns around and claims us and makes many of our subsequent choices for us. "Look to God and be radiant." Think. What most basic, quintessential quality still shows on your face after all these years?

Don't get me wrong. I believe that deep and real change is largely what faith is about: change for the better, change in our world, change in ourselves. But instead this morning, let's think about how the things we "look to" shape our lives and our faces.

Each of us has just a handful of thoughts that we entertain pretty much all the time, and they make us into the personalities that we are. I know a man who was going through a divorce several years ago. He was a childhood friend. Growing up, his father was constantly telling him that he was an idiot. The verbal abuse from his father was endless. And now, when this grown man talks about the pain his divorce, he finishes by saying, “I’m just an idiot.” It’s as native to him as the color of his eyes; it’s a dominant chord in the song of his life, one of just a handful of ideas that combine to make him into the person he is. After all these years, that despicable, destructive word is still sitting exactly where it was planted, just waiting to spring into action. Each of us has five or six favorite little thoughts that run through our heads much of the time. None of them are all that deep. In fact, core beliefs are three or four word sentences. And these habitual thoughts have nothing to do with your intelligence or education. They’re just your most basic beliefs, the ones that occur to you over and over, maybe even hundreds of times a day. “Family is everything. I’m alone. God is love. I don’t matter. Good people share.” If you pay attention, you could probably discover the five or six thoughts that recur to you hundreds of times a day. Of course, you can change your thoughts, with about 21 days of intensive catch-and-release efforts. But for today, think, what ideas do you entertain all your life long? Whatever they are, they show! They show in your voice, your demeanor, in your face.

“Look to God and be radiant.” The question is, how do you peel yourself away from the worst of those habitual thoughts to train your mind on higher things? Whatever six thoughts you breathe like air: You too have had encounters with the Sacred, moments when you’ve brushed up against Eternity. Such encounters usually take you by surprise. They happen unexpectedly while you’re going about your daily grind. They come in a random moment when a calm settles on you out of nowhere, giving you the sure and certain hope that everything’s going to be all right, even if nothing turns out the way you hoped. They come, sometimes, when you open your mouth to speak, and the words that come out are too timely and wise to be your own. They come without warning, then they’re gone. Standing at the kitchen sink, or sitting behind the wheel, or folding the laundry, or listening the beeping of the hospital machines, attached to someone you love: a spare moment of otherworldly peace descends on you briefly, a time of transcendence, otherness, grace. These experiences of God come from outside of you; they can’t be explained. They settle like the dew, redeeming everything they touch, taking hold like a drug, making you see the world anew. Your face has radiated with the light of another world, if only for a moment. But, alas, nobody caught the moment on film. Then you’ve walked away from those rare, sacred experiences and returned to the same five or six thoughts with their same habitual chorus—some good, some bad.

Would that all of life could be soaked in an awareness of the wonder and the beauty of God’s grace, the fullness of God’s life living in each moment. The trick to a satisfying life of faith is to cultivate those wild, occasional encounters with God so that they happen each day, and each day they give you the strength and the peace, the calm and the grace needed just for that day. It can be done. Your face, too, can radiate again with the light of another world, but only you know how to make room in your life for that to happen regularly. Our faces, or lives, our relationships will display the things that we dwell on. “Look to God, and be radiant.” Amen.