# **Sunday Message: “Tell him where the smile comes from”**

May 17, 2020 | [No Comments](http://auburnmethodist.org/2020/05/17/sunday-message-tell-him-where-the-smile-comes-from/#respond)

*Text: I Peter 3:13-22*

*Liturgist Text: John 14:15-21*

***Purpose:* the purpose of this message is to engage the congregation in an act of witness by affirming their God-given hope in the midst of pandemic and inviting them to voice with one other person the reason for that hope**

**When I first began preaching our series of pandemic-prompted messages, I spoke about the stages of grief in our common, global tangle with COVID-19. When we acknowledge what is happening and understand the reasons behind what we feel, our ability to cope improves exponentially. The situation may not change, but our emotional reaction certainly does.**

**I experienced this in a dramatic, personal way on the Saturday following Easter. While preparing my sermon, I began to have chest-pain. At first, I assumed it was indigestion and treated it accordingly. But the discomfort escalated, and with it, my anxiety grew. I knew, of course, that gallbladder and cardiac complications sometimes present similarly, but my symptoms didn’t seem typical for a gallbladder problem. By the time my wife drove me to the ER, I had convinced myself it was cardiac. It wasn’t, and a subsequent surgical procedure to remove the gallbladder resolved the issue.**

**Regardless of diagnosis, the pain was real, but if I had known the pain was related to gallbladder, my ability to cope emotionally with it would have been much improved. Naming the problem is an important component of healing strategy. I offer this observation, because my cultural reading of the United States’ response to the pandemic suggests that we are moving beyond the denial stage of grief into anger, bargaining and depression.**

**At first, we weren’t convinced there was a problem. Then, we were doubtful of the scope of the problem. When ‘stay-at-home‘ restrictions were issued, we tightened our belts, determined to ‘ride-it-out.’ But now we are fatigued: tired of unrelenting restrictions, fearful not only of contagion and mortality, but also of maneuvering with a dead economy. We are beginning to see that some of the repercussions are permanent, and we don’t want them to be. So we become angry, start to push back and seek to renegotiate the terms.**

**It is not really surprising that tempers are short, that regretful words are spoken without filter, that empathy is in short supply, and that there seems to be little consensus among the ‘experts.’ It is a stage of the grieving process, and like it or not, we all feel it to one degree or another. Understanding does not change the pain level even a tenth of a degree, but it does improve our emotional tolerance and ability to cope. This particular stage of the grief process is no fun, but it has come to pass rather than stay, and hope is on the horizon.**

**An unknown author puts it like this:**

*“Grief has its rhythm—first, the wild swift tide of dark despair; the time of bleak aloneness when even God seems not there. And then, the slow receding—till quiet calms the sea, and bare, unwashed sand everywhere where castles used to be. The gentle lapping of the waves upon the shore—and then, the pearl-lined shells of memories to help us smile again.”*

**Smile again. That’s what we want to do. That’s what we need to do. And as Christians, that is what we are redeemed to do. In the words of Jesus, “I have come that they may have life and have it with abundance.” Crucifixion Friday becomes Good Friday through the Easter smile of Son-rise. Death is swallowed up in victory, and life is worth the living, just because he lives! In this context, let us read from I Peter 3:13-22.**

**Perhaps you have heard the phrase, “No good deed goes unpunished.” One might think that everyone, particularly those who benefit, would celebrate a kindness done, but too often that is not the case. There is a cost to goodness, which the crucified Jesus knew from the inside out. Redeeming the human heart took all he had to give.**

**This is often the case. Let’s say you agree to help distribute gifts to families through the Christmas Giving Tree. You spend the morning distributing gifts, and then stay late to help clean-up. You realize some gifts have not been picked up, so you take it upon yourself to deliver them (lest a child go without on Christmas). Later that evening, you receive a call from someone who thought they were on the list, but received no notification. You note the gifts requested, scramble to purchase them, using your own money (since the program’s money has been spent), and once again find yourself delivering them, perhaps on Christmas Eve, while your family celebrates at home without you.**

**In his letter, Peter admits that this is part of Christian discipleship. Taking on someone else’s problems relieves them of the burden, but adds it to that of the kind-hearted Samaritan. In the parable Jesus told, the Samaritan is the one whose agenda is side-lined, whose donkey is ridden, and whose credit is put on the line. Yet through it all, he demonstrates the love of God with a smile on his face! That is where Christians can make a powerful difference in a pandemic world when so many are paralyzed by anger, bargaining or depression.**

**“Happy are you,” Peter writes, “even if you suffer because of righteousness! Don’t be terrified or upset by them. Instead, regard Christ as holy in your hearts. Whenever anyone asks you to speak of your hope, be ready to defend it!” When people see you smiling, though all around are losing it, be ready to give the reason for the hope you have.**

**John Wesley experienced this while crossing the Atlantic to and from the Colony of Georgia before his Aldersgate ‘heart-warming’ renewal. A storm arose and those on board were sure the ship would sink, including Wesley who was commissioned to be the ship’s chaplain. Yet throughout the storm, Wesley noticed a group of Moravian Christians who remained steadfast in their prayers and trust in God. Possessed with an unworldly, Easter confidence, they trusted that God would see them through. Wesley was so impressed with their faith, that he asked them about it, and the ensuing conversation led him to Aldersgate renewal, a lifetime of renewal ministry and the Methodist movement as we know it today.**

**There are so many in our culture right now who are desperately looking for something, anything, someone, anyone, to hold on to. They are scared, tired, angry and fearful. No doubt, some of us feel that way, too. But we are not alone. God has not left the building. God is not ‘sheltering-in-place’ somewhere beyond the orbit of Pluto. God is here, with us, now. What is it the scriptures say? “The Spirit of God, who raised Christ Jesus from the dead lives in you. And just as God raised Christ Jesus from the dead, he will give life to your mortal bodies by this same Spirit living within you.” (Romans 6:10-11)**

**During my teen years, I often added a sticker to the back of every card, note or letter I sent out. The sticker said, “Smile, God loves you!” It was true then, and it is still true. Isn’t the unfailing love of God something worth smiling about? And if we are caught smiling, are we ready to give the reason for the hope we have? Before this day is out, I encourage you to tell someone what you have to smile about.**