

“God’s Tell” Acts 10: 34-43

Do you have a poker face? Have you ever known anyone that has a poker face? Poker faces, in case you might have forgotten, are those who can keep their expressions from revealing their true emotions. The term “poker face” originates from the card game, where bluffing, or not revealing the contents of one’s hand, is essential for winning. Another essential ability in being successful at poker is the talent of reading a player’s emotions, no matter how well they are hidden. That is the art of reading a “tell,” as in the title of my message this morning.

All great poker players know that everyone has a tell – a consistent characteristic, verbal or physical, that reveals what the player is really feeling. One of the reasons I never play poker is because my tells are so easy to read. If I draw a straight or a flush, I may as well throw confetti, set off fireworks. I have often envied those who are able, in the most emotional circumstances, to veil their true feelings, which can sometimes work not only to their advantage, but to ours as well.

Several months ago, I saw the film “Sully” starring Tom Hanks. I had also heard the actual cockpit voice recording of Captain Sullinger and his co-pilot when a bird strike flamed out their engines in the crucial moments of takeoff from Lagaardia. As their passenger jet starts free falling from 4000 ft., the pilots start discussing, I repeat, discussing, what they should do. In the final moments before they crash into the Hudson, you can hear the voice of Sullinger calmly asking his co-pilot, “Got any ideas?” to which Jeff Skiles replies, “Actually not.” The pilots sound like they are discussing the weather rather than the fact that they are about to attempt a powerless water landing with a loaded

Airbus A320. That is exactly the way we want our pilots to behave, because if they are calm and confident, it helps us to be calm.

More often, however, we yearn to know what others are truly feeling, and we encourage that kind of truth in our most significant relationships. That is especially true for those in whom we place our faith and our trust. In recalling the events following 9/11 the American people were witness to two vastly different reactions from two very different persons. When President Bush was told of the attack, he was being filmed as he read aloud a children's book, the infamous "My Pet Goat," to an elementary classroom.

Bush's reaction has historically received severe criticism as he stared momentarily after receiving the news, then went back to reading the book. Many described his almost expressionless face as looking like a deer caught in the headlights. On the other hand, Mayor Giuliani, a much more expressive person, clearly reflected the anger that Americans were feeling with his barely controlled words and his body language, which was angry, but determined. If Giuliani is remembered for anything, it is how he revealed his own raw emotions at a time when the nation needed a leader to relate to the raw emotions we were feeling.

We want to know, we need to know, the true nature of those in whom we place our greatest trust, and this is no less true for God than it is for any other of our relationships. In reflecting upon the nature of God, the religion of Ancient Israel struggled to discover God's tell, the true essence of God's nature. Israel had the law and the rituals of their religion, but they evolved into monoliths of judgement and autocracy, which made God even more unreachable and unknowable.

Over against Israel's religion stood the prophets, who constantly implied that there were things about God much deeper and meaningful than the nuances of the law or the dictates of the priesthood, but their words were consistently rejected, even as the prophets themselves were constantly marginalized and persecuted. The religious leaders of Israel tried to do the same to Jesus of Nazareth, but soon realized that they were dealing with something never seen in any other person – one who manifested both divine power and a total disregard for their own power.

The established authorities of Rome and Jerusalem never understood the true nature of Jesus's life, but his followers did, and after Christ's resurrection and ascension, they proclaimed to all the world that they had discovered God's tell: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation, anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all...They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

In the Book of Acts Peter makes clear what we still believe over 2000 years later – that Jesus Christ is God's tell, a tell which destroys the power of those who proclaim a God of hatred, division, and intolerance. In Christ, we see a God who shows no partiality, a God who preaches peace, and a God who offers mercy, forgiveness, and restoration instead of judgement and destruction. Jesus is the sign and seal of a God who loves creation and the

creature, for no reason other than for the sake of love itself. And that is why we gather at the table to share this sign – for the sake of love itself.

Christian cleric and author Richard John Neuhaus characterizes our own response in discovering a God who loves us and yearns for communion with us: “For paradise we long. For perfection we were made...This longing is the source of the hunger and dissatisfaction that mark our lives...This longing makes our loves and friendships possible, and so very unsatisfactory. The hunger is for...nothing less than perfect communion with the...one in whom all the fragments of our scattered existence come together...we must not stifle this longing. It is a holy dissatisfaction. Such dissatisfaction is not a sickness to be healed, but the seed of a promise to be fulfilled...The only death to fear is the death of settling for something less.”

At the table of Christ, we need not settle for something less, because there is nothing less than the fullness of God’s presence. As expressed so beautifully in the words of that great, old Scottish hymn, “Here, O Our Lord, We See You Face to Face,” and it is not a poker face, but the face of one who knows us, and loves us, and never lets us go. Isn’t that just what we need this morning? Isn’t this just what the world needs? Amen.

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