

John 1:1-18

"In Him there was life, and that life was the light of all peoples."

When does a baby first smile?

Did you know that babies smile in the womb, even before they are born?

With modern sonogram technology we see babies en utero, trying out their 43 separate muscles that control our facial expressions.

Maybe we could see a smile on Thomas and Megan's baby's sonogram...she's waving "Hi!"

Yes, I know, these are not "real" smiles.

They're called reflexive smiles and you can see them on the sonogram and after a baby is born, usually when they're sleeping.

I remember seeing the first smile of my firstborn,

Probably a week old.

My mother was there...."Look!! I said. "She's SMILING!!"

My mother said, "That's gas."

But you know what happens around a month and a half...
When mom is worn out from sleepless nights and noisy days;
Bone tired and wondering just what she has gotten herself into...

She lays her baby on the bed, freshly diapered....she's had her bath...a onesie....tummy's full.

Momma leans over her baby...and talks to her:

"You feel better?"

"Oh, you look SO PRETTY!"

"You're such a pretty girl."

"Who loves you? "

"Momma loves you."

Momma's tired....she's needing something.

"You're so precious....can you smile?"

Can you smile for momma?"

And then 43 facial muscles go to work to produce a miracle....

A smile, not because of reflex, or gas, or indigestion or digestion, but a light of life and love."

In that miracle moment, the life in momma's heart is received by her baby.

She receives that belonging and returns it in kind.

Love is sealed with a bond far tighter than Gorilla Glue.

John says,
"In the Word was life, and his life was a light to us."

You hear what this text says to us?

There is one who leans over you....you are his creation, John says...he leans over you, his face, his heart so full of joy....loving you, longing for YOU...

He wants you to know his life, to be filled with it to overflowing.

He waits for your heart to smile back at him, as a sign that you know how much you are loved.

And that is, in all simplicity, the message of Christmas...of the whole Bible....

This is why the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, why he was born, lived and died for us.

So that we could see his face, bending over us, lighted up with love....

If you are one who has seen that face, you know.

There is no joy like the joy that comes from knowing that the God of the universe delights in you.

If you have not seen it, then you will be eternally restless until you do, for it is for that you were created.

Susan Thomas was restless, and like some restless people, did a crazy thing.

43 years old, mother of three, wrung out by three years of panic attacks, triggered by the specter of financial ruin...

She knew that she needed to do something different...something crazy...lest she go crazy.

What she did was leave her children with her husband for a week and drive by herself from Brooklyn, NY to the Jesuit Center in the reclusive hills outside of Wernersville, PA,

To spend five nights in a silent retreat.

It was crazy.
How crazy?

She was not Catholic.
She was not Christian.
She was not even nebulously "spiritual".

She was desperate, and she chose it because it was cheap.

\$560 bucks for a week, including room, board, and a daily hour-long conversation with a spiritual director.

It was cheap...and it was something else, too...what was it?

Crazy. She did not know how crazy.

She drove up to the huge, dark, looming building in a fierce November storm that made the 1920's pre-Halloween architecture even scarier.

Because she was an hour and a half late, no one was there to meet her...she walked into a dark lobby...found there a list of names and room numbers tacked to a corkboard.

She pulled her suitcase down the building's dark spooky hallway, found her assigned room number and pushed open the unlocked, creaky door.

The room was tiny, austere, bed, desk, little else.

But there was a large crucifix propped on her pillow.

Now I would have found this comforting....but Susan Thomas's main encounter with a crucifix was watching the Exorcist.

She says that she had to try hard to suppress the feeling that blood was going to start running down the walls of her room.

She sat on her bed in the musty dark silence, a zillion bazillion miles away from home.

She thought, "I'm crazy."

What makes someone crazy like that?

Crazy like Abraham setting out from Haran to the promised land with his long past menopausal wife and the crazy idea that they were going to become parents of a great nation?

Or crazy like Noah, building a big boat in the middle of a desert? Or David, the shepherd boy thinking he could whip a giant, or fishermen leaving their boats on the sand of Galilee to take a crazy road trip following an itinerant preacher?

Why it could be the same voice is whispering to you the crazy idea that after all your years of living, all your experiences, achievements and accomplishments, there is more to life than the life you have been living.

What is this craziness that two drinks won't satiate and two cars won't satisfy and two houses won't hush?

Could it be that the whole point of your life is to look up, to see Someone leaning over you, whispering love, waiting for you to love in return?

Susan Thomas would tell you, "Yes"...

She found this Someone at the spooky Jesuit retreat center.

On the first full day of her stay at 1:15 pm she came into the tiny, sunlit office of Sister Barbara, an upbeat, grandmotherly woman with a crown of lovely white hair.

She calmly invited Susan Thomas to sit down and tell her what had brought her there

Susan told her about the stress related illnesses that had hospitalized her twice that year, her difficult children, watching her father die in front of her, about her divorce, her remarriage, about financial hard times, the fall into poverty, her husband's unemployment, her fears of the future. She told her about her life...she poured it all out.

Sister Barbara did not ask her to process her relationship with her mother or tell her that she should "own her feelings."

She said simply, "Susan, it sounds to me like you feel alone." She opened her Bible to Matthew 3 and read the story of Jesus' baptism, when the heavens opened and a voice proclaimed, "This is my Son, my beloved. My favor rests on him."

"How would it be, she asked, "to personalize this passage...to pray with the words,

"You are my beloved daughter, Susie. My favor rests on you."?

"How would it feel to know that God loves you as you love your own children?"

Susan Thomas wept...tried to speak...couldn't....then cleared her throat and managed a croak...
"It would feel pretty good."

Sister Barbara told her to go outside and take a walk in the center's 250 acres of wilderness....."Go....walk....pray this....and we'll see what God says."

She didn't bring a Bible, or prayer book, but a pack of cigarettes and a paper cup of coffee with hazelnut non-dairy creamer.

She walked and walked, and at last she sat on top of a hill....rolling over and over those words in her mind...."Susie, you are my beloved."

That night she sat in the chapel a long time.

In her NY Times article about that night she said that it would be "awkward to report on what happened there...implausible."

But what she heard was, "I am everything you need." And for the first time in her life she believed it.

Leaving the safety of the monastery, she turned on her cell phone for the first time in a week.

She was bombarded with the bing bong of emails, texts, voicemails, life going on and on, pressing her again with all its pressures and problems.

But driving home, she smiled.

She had seen his smile and was smiling in return.

Things were the same, but she was smiling because she knew she was different....because she was coming to know the only One who can make us different.

“In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was the same as God. He was in the beginning with God, and through him all things came to be....not a single thing was created without him. All that came alive was alive with his life.”

Have you come alive yet with his life?

Here, at the table, the One who made you, who loves you as if he had no one else in the universe to love, leans over, smiling upon you”Look at you, you are so beautiful.....I love you.....you’re so precious to me.

I wonder if your 43 face muscles will show him that you finally get it?

When does a baby first smile?

Maybe today.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.