

It's the Gift That Counts

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I am going to take a wild guess and say that there are very few of you who know the name, and/or the person behind the name of, Scott Fahlman. Now believe me this is no attempt to boast on my knowledge because I did not know the name or the person behind the name of Scott Fahlman until a few days ago when I started writing this sermon. Scott Fahlman, it is widely believed, is the creator of the first smiley emoticon and the first frowny emoticon. Now I am going to take another wild guess and imagine that they are many of you who do not know what an emoticon is. Lots and lots of you use them and read them – but we just didn't know that there was a word attached to it. An emoticon is an emotional icon. An emotional icon is a symbol that expresses emotion. If I were to draw a smiley face, or a frowny face – that would be an emoticon. A symbol, or image, that expresses one's emotion. In this hyper typographical world we are relying more and more upon emoticons. Typing symbols – often using punctuation marks – that express the emotion behind our words. In some text or email that we might send – especially when there is the chance that our words could be misread as expressing an unintended emotion – we will add an emoticon to try to convey the feeling behind the words. Emoticons have been around for a long time – long before we even ended our letters and notes with XXOO. We can trace them back to the days of Morris Code. But Scott Fahlman is the Carnegie Mellon computer scientist who came up with the idea of using a colon, a dash and a right parenthesis to represent a smiley face emoticon, and a colon, dash and left parentheses to represent a frowny face emoticon. And when did he come up with this? 1982!! Over thirty years ago.

Fast forward a few years to Mr. Bill Gates, Mr. Steve Jobs, Mr. Mark Zuckerberg, creators of Microsoft, Apple and Facebook – not to mention a host of others who have created all sorts of electronic media that we are depending more and more upon to communicate with one another – and we find ourselves in this world of hyper typography. We are people of the text. The text we compose in an email, the text we compose in a text, the text we read in a blog, the text we read on our Kindles. We are people of the word. And in being so we are not unlike the people of God from long ago who were people of the word, people of the text. The sacred texts. The Torah. The Prophets. The law and the prophets, Jesus called them. Israel was a nation of the text – the sacred text. A text long ago that was in the hands of only a very few. The scholars whose job it was to study the text and eek out of it every last drop of meaning and to discern the spirit inside the text. All this – imagine – without emoticons!! No smiley faces, or frowny faces in the Bible! Just the text.

And so the sacred text of today, Isaiah 42, imagines in the unfolding of God's great story -- a servant – a chosen one, one whose very being will host the spirit of God – who will bring justice. A quiet servant whose mission is to bear gently the will of God – to express quietly the will of God – to model faithfully the will of God – all for the nations to see. Now for hundreds of years when Israel read and studied that text – what they believed was that this servant was Israel herself. The people of Israel. That as a nation they were the servant of God to the world. But then in Matthew's Gospel – as he tells the story of Jesus – he looks into the text and sees something else. He connects the dots between the servant in Isaiah and the rabbi Jesus. It is Jesus who is the chosen one, it is Jesus whose very being hosts the spirit of God, it is Jesus who enfleshes the person of God, it is Jesus who will enact the justice of God. It is in Jesus that we see the servant who bears gently the will of God, expresses quietly the will of God, models faithfully the will of God – for all the world to see. And when you begin to get your heart and mind around this – that Jesus is the enfleshment of God we see something world changing happening – because now God has chosen to speak not just in text – but in flesh. Skipping the whole step of emoticon – happy, frowny, XXOO – God chooses not some punctuation

marks in the sky – rather God inhabits the text and inhabits the world – with flesh and blood. And the reason we might call this world changing – is that God is saying something about himself that he cannot say in text. He can't spell this out. God is saying about God – that his fullest expression cannot be done unless in person. Personality cannot be fully expressed except in person. God so loved the world that he didn't send a text. God so loved the world that he didn't send an email. God so loved the world that he didn't just say, Read the book. God so loved the world that He skipped the smiley face in the sky. God so loved the world that the personality of God showed up in person.

You see, it just has to be the case, don't you think, that the deep down reason why you and I get so drawn into the gravitational pull of Christmas and the story of Jesus' birth – is that there is something so right, so true, so rational about what happens in Bethlehem. If God is truly God well then he must show up in person. God so loved the world that he showed up. Personality shows up in person.

We know it deep down to be true. If you want to really show who you are – if you want to really express what is inside here – text is one thing, emoticons another – but it is when we show up, when we arrive in the flesh, when we let flesh touch flesh – that true personality is revealed.

It says something about me ... it says something about you ... doesn't it ... when we arrive in the flesh? I was visiting the hospital a while ago and I walked into the little eatery they have there and there was sitting there someone I knew. And she was sipping on some coffee and reading a book. I asked her what she was doing. And she told me she was there because her dear friend was upstairs keeping vigil over her dying mother. "I thought to myself," she said, "it wasn't enough for me to text. I felt I needed to be here for her. Every hour or so I go up and take her something just for her to know that somewhere in this building someone is here for her." Brad talked about Katrina and going there - showing up in the flesh - and being in relationship.

And so when we join the shepherds and make our way into the Bethlehem nativity and see the vulnerable little baby – what we see is God wanting to be in relationship with us. Real, live and in the flesh relationship. Because you see it is in this real, live and in the flesh relationship that God engages us in our deepest places ... and draws from us our deepest selves.

Flesh will do that to you ... you know? Think of the people closest to you, your deepest relationships, and think of how deeply they engage you, and how deeply they draw from you. Think of the potential of how deeply they can make you happy, how deeply they can make you sad, how deeply they can give you joy, how deeply they can make you disappointed, how deeply they can stir you, how deeply they can change you. No other gift does this to us than the flesh.

I was walking through the mall other day and two guys were standing there and watching the latest flat screen, digital, high definition, 10,000 inch television set and the expression on their faces said, "Now that's what I want for Christmas." Now I get it. The TV I have in my house is bigger than I could have ever imagined back thirty years ago. And it sure is nice to see every freckle on every face and to say, "Boy, looks like real life." But of course it isn't. There is no flesh. There is no soul. There is no touch. There is no breath. There is no stir inside our souls.

Do you remember that wonderful scene in the movie, *A Beautiful Mind*, the story of Nobel Prize winner John Nash's struggle with paranoid schizophrenia – in which he keeps hearing voices and seeing these people appear that don't really exist. And when he is finally at the end of his rope and not knowing really what is delusion and what is real ... his wife comes to him and says, "Do you want to know what's real?" And she takes his hand and puts it to her face ... and to her heart ... and she says, "This is real."

So God steps onto the scene – and takes our hand and places it to his face, to his heart, and says, "This is real." So when we see Jesus weeping at the tomb of his dear friend Lazarus – we imagine him sitting at our kitchen table weeping with us in our loss of a loved one. When we see Jesus red-faced and overturning tables in his effort to cleanse the temple – we imagine him red-faced

and “in our face”, angry over our choice to monetize the meaning of life. When we see Jesus sweating as of drops of blood in the Garden of Gethsemane – we imagine him sweating with us as we struggle with what we think to be a life and death decision. When we see Jesus place his hands upon the eyes of the blind man – we imagine him pressing his flesh to ours, to our hurts and wounds, and speaking the healing word. When we see Jesus breaking bread and pouring the cup, when we see Jesus breaking his body and pouring his blood, we imagine “what wondrous love is this that caused the Lord of bliss to bear the dreadful curse for my soul.”

Do you see, really, how much God does love us? Do you see the good news of what is behind what we call the incarnation? Do you see the outlandish event that Christians believe? That God became flesh and like an unsettled baby demands our attention? God became flesh and rings the front doorbell of our houses? And we can hide behind our screens and our phones and our keyboards and our texts but there is one who puts his hand upon us and says, “This is real.”

Undoubtedly you’ve seen on the news clips of children whose military mothers and fathers – months away in the theaters of war – return to surprise their children with a visit or a final homecoming. You’ve seen some of these. One is emblazed in my mind. It happens in a classroom. The boy who is sitting at his desk facing the board up at the front. And what he doesn’t know is that his father – a year away at war is standing at the back. Enough ruckus is made to cause the boy to turn. And there he is. In the flesh. And the expression. Oh my lord, the expression. And then the sprint. The sprint. And then the face buried in the daddy’s belly. And the sobs. No text, skype or emoticon can make that happen. Only the flesh.

The people of Scripture – you and me – know that God is mighty, know that God is loving, know that God is powerful. And then we hear that “The virgin will conceive and bear a son ... and she will call him Immanuel which means “God is walking in the back of the classroom.” For this is the gift that counts. That the God who breathed life into us is with us still to breathe life upon us each day. Every day. When we laugh, he laughs. When we cry, he cries. When we don’t know what to

do, when life gets too hard, he gently sits with us. When we hurt, he heals. When we sin, he forgives. And when we see him ascend we hear his last words, his very last words -- "I will be **with you.**"

In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God. The word became flesh. And the word slipped into the classroom full of grace and truth.