

The Face of Joy

I'm thinking about two faces: one belonging to an elderly woman, the other to a little girl.

Both radiate pure joy.

The woman's face appeared in a photograph taken during a fall concert tour of Ukraine by the Singing Men of Texas, a gifted ensemble of Texas Baptist music ministers, pastors and laymen. Their mission: "to glorify God and proclaim the gospel of Jesus"—and they do it all over the world. In recent years they've frequently visited the former Soviet republic of Ukraine, where a rich tradition of men's choral music draws large crowds to their performances.

Many Ukrainians have decided to follow Christ—or deepened their faith in Him—through the concerts. But the woman's face captured me. It was framed by her arms, reaching for heaven, palms raised upward in expectation of God. Her eyes shone from deeply lined cheeks. Her toothless smile was more beautiful than anything Hollywood can produce. Who knows what hardships she might have suffered during communist times, or since? All that faded as she lifted her face in worship.

The little girl's face appeared in a missionary's story. The missionary teaches women who offer palliative care to dying people in a part of Africa wracked by AIDS. One day, the missionary asked one of the women how her patients were doing.

"I need to go visit a little girl," the woman responded. "Would you like to go with me?"

The missionary describes the visit:

"She grabbed a baby doll that someone had given their palliative care group, and we started off. She told me this little 9-year-old girl had cancer, and she had promised to

bring her a baby doll. Who wouldn't want to be a part of that? We walked through the dirty compound a distance until we reached her small home.

"I'm not sure I was truly prepared for what I was to see. As soon as we walked in the home, this sweet little girl broke into a huge smile, even though her cheeks were shallow and her eyes dark. Her small frame was wrapped in a blanket except for the thin little arms, which sat motionless on top of the blanket. She was also paralyzed in both arms and legs.

"The lady I was with asked me to give the doll to the little girl. So I showed it to her, took it out of the package and laid it on her stomach, propped up against her little arm. She kept grinning. She said, 'I love you!'

"The woman taking care of the sick little girl [was] her aunt ... since both her parents had died; they probably were HIV-positive. As the aunt shared about the little girl's blood cancer and her chemo treatments, the girl just sat there, limp, staring down at her new doll."

But she was filled with joy. Her face showed it.

"I prayed for the little girl and her family, and we left," the missionary writes. "I thanked my friend for allowing me to go with her. She said, 'No need to thank me; it was all part of God's plan.' She is one woman, along with a few other palliative caregivers, who are trying to reach out to their community and help those who are sick. She is making a difference, one by one. ...

"Sometimes I get so overwhelmed when I go into the homes of these patients—seeing how they live, how little they have, the health care they are provided with, and yet they still manage to have a smile on their face. I get overwhelmed because I feel so helpless sometimes. I can't possibly help everyone I come into contact with. But I like what my friend said to me—that what we had done was all part of God's plan. I had no

idea this morning what my afternoon would look like, but God certainly did!”

Less than two weeks later, the little girl died. But the joy on her face—and the face of the elderly Ukrainian woman—came from a love more powerful than sickness, age, suffering and death.

Would they ever have known that love if faithful followers of Christ hadn’t pointed the way?

“I pray that God will let me be His light wherever I go and that I will influence the world around me, one day at a time,” says the missionary. “Please pray for my friend and the other palliative caregivers. They work in a huge area with a lot of hurting people. Pray that these men and women will be the light of Jesus to their community.”

And pray that you will be the light of Jesus in your own community. There’s nothing better than seeing the joy on the faces His light illuminates.

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