

The Child in Church

During my days in the newspaper business, one of my favorite writers, whose column we printed regularly in *The Cleveland Daily Banner*, was Erma Bombeck (1927 – 1996). A humorist who described suburban home life, she wrote more than 4,000 newspaper columns. And she had the ability to touch the heart in extraordinary fashion.

Here is one of my favorites of Bombeck's stories. It is about what happened one Sunday in church:

I was intent on a small child who was turning around and smiling at everyone. He wasn't gurgling, spitting, humming, kicking, tearing the hymnals, or rummaging through his mother's handbag. He was just smiling.

Finally, his mother jerked him about and in a stage whisper that could be heard in a little theater off Broadway said, "Stop that grinning! You're in church!" With that, she gave him a belt and, as the tears rolled down his cheek, she added, "That's better," and returned to her prayers.

We sing, make a joyful noise unto the Lord while our faces reflect the sadness of one who has just buried a rich aunt who left everything to her pregnant hamster.

Suddenly, I was angry. It occurred to me the entire world is in tears, and if you're not, then you'd better get with it. I wanted to grab this child with the tear-stained face, hold him close to me, and tell him about my God, the happy God, the smiling God, the God who had to have a sense of humor to have created the likes of us.

I wanted to tell him that our God is an understanding God, who understands little children who turn around and smile in church, and even curious little children who rummage through their mother's handbags. I wanted to tell that little child that I, too, have taken a few lumps for daring to smile in an otherwise solemn religious setting.

By tradition, I suppose, one wears faith with the solemnity of a mourner, the mask of tragedy. What a fool, I thought, this woman sitting next to the only sign of hope – the only miracle – left in our civilization. If that child couldn't smile in church, where was there left to go?

As believers in Christ, we should have happy faces because of His redeeming love and indwelling presence in our lives. We have blessings in abundance because of His grace.

And we ought to show it – particularly in church.

A glad heart makes a cheerful face, but by sorrow of heart the spirit is crushed (Proverbs 15:13).

– Beecher Hunter