

From Black-and-White to Color

A Sermon for Every Sunday, Pentecost 2A

Genesis 12:1-9; Romans 4:13-25; Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

Some people are born under a wandering star, and I have always imagined Abram as that kind of person. I picture him walking out to the edge of the pasture when the evening chores were done, stepping up on the bottom rail of the fence and looking out toward the horizon, wondering what was out there. Yes, he had inherited his father's farm, and yes his life was comfortable, but that's all it was. He couldn't help thinking there must be more to it than that. And so the word of the Lord that came to him may have been the sweetest word he could hear. "Go," it said. "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:1-3, NRSV).

Do you remember that story about a man named Jed, "a poor mountaineer barely kept his family fed? But then one day he was shooting at some food and up through the ground come a bubbling crude. Oil, that is. Black gold. Texas tea." For some reason when I read this part of Abram's story I always picture Jed Clampett, running back to that little cabin where he lived, telling Granny the good news, grabbing her hands and whirling around the room. I can see Abram doing the same thing, and I can see him the next morning, sitting up high on the seat of a wagon with Sarai beside him and his nephew Lot sitting on the load in the back as Abram slaps the reins and jerks

away from the house, the morning sunlight on his cheeks and a look of absolute joy on his face, as if he were fully alive for the first time ever, as if overnight his world had gone from black-and-white to color.

Was it like that for Matthew, the tax-collector? Was he sitting there at his booth feeling the resentment of every Israelite who slapped down a hard-earned coin to pay Roman taxes when Jesus stepped up? And did Matthew, who had learned to avoid eye contact, finally look up only to see Jesus looking down with eyes that knew him through and through and loved him anyway? “Follow me,” Jesus said, and for reasons that even he didn’t understand, Matthew did. He got up from his collector’s booth and followed, leaving the coins on the table. And something happened as he did. He felt a freedom he had never felt before, as if the invisible chains he had been wearing had just fallen from his wrists and ankles, as if the prison door had swung open on its rusty hinges, and he stepped out into a brand new world, a world that had gone from black-and-white to color in an instant, in the time it took him to get up out of his chair and follow.

I’m having to fill in some blanks here. I don’t know how Abram felt about his call, or how Matthew felt about his, but I know how I felt about mine. I know what can happen to your life when you open the door to let God in, how light can fill up the dark corners and color can flood the room. As I read the Gospel lesson last week I could picture Jesus moving across the stage of this drama, lighting up one life after another. He called Matthew to follow him, he ate a meal with sinners and tax collectors, he healed a woman who had been hemorrhaging for 12 years, and he raised a man’s dead daughter. It was all in a day’s work for him, but in his work he brought people back to

life and health, he brought them back into relationship with God and each other. It was as if, everywhere he went, the world changed from black-and-white to color behind him, and swirling rainbows followed in his wake.

But not everybody was happy about that. The Pharisees, for instance, seemed to prefer a world where everything was black-and-white. When they saw Jesus eating with the wrong crowd they asked his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” In their black-and-white world it just wasn’t done. The world was divided into those who were sinners and those who righteous and the two had nothing to do with each other. So for Jesus, who was apparently some kind of holy man, to sit down and eat with the obviously unholy was inconceivable. Why did he do it? Didn’t he know that God wanted his people to be holy, even as he was holy? Didn’t he know that true holiness required separating oneself from all that was unclean? That’s what the word *Pharisee* meant, “to separate,” and that’s why the Pharisees wore it like a badge of honor.

But Jesus wasn’t separating himself at all. He was in there mixing it up with the tax collectors and sinners as if he had no fear of contamination. “Why does your teacher eat with those people?” they asked his disciples. But Jesus overheard them and said to the Pharisees what they were always saying to others: “Go and learn what this means.” The Pharisees would usually follow that phrase with some quotation from Scripture, some passage about holiness, about purity, about keeping oneself unstained by the world. But Jesus said, “Go and learn what this means,” and then he quoted from the prophet Hosea, the one who had married a prostitute as a way of showing God’s

unconditional love for an unfaithful people. “Go and learn what this means,” he said again: ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice.’ For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”

I want you to imagine how hard this was for the Pharisees to hear, and maybe you can imagine it, because in the church, too, we often put a lot of emphasis on purity. We insist that being a Christian means living a certain kind of life, a life free from the evil influences of a sinful world. It stands to reason then that those who are the “best” Christians among us are those who do the best job of keeping themselves free from those influences, the ones who don’t cuss, or smoke, or drink, or chew, just to name a few. But do you see how quickly Christianity can become a religion of rule-keeping? Pretty soon we’ve forgotten that we were saved by grace, and all we can do is keep score. “I’m a better Christian than she is because I not only come to church, I teach a children’s Sunday school class.” “Well, I’m a better Christian than he is, because I have a chrome decal of a fish on my car’s bumper.” “Well, I’m a better Christian than she is, because I’ve memorized the entire 13th chapter of 1 Corinthians, the one about love.” “Well, I’m a better Christian than he is. You won’t see my cutting *my* grass on Sunday.”

Can you imagine how all of that would make Jesus want to jump off the pinnacle of the temple? “Listen,” he says. “I didn’t come to pat you on the back for being good Christians, for keeping yourself free from the sins of the world. The truth is people all around you are drowning in sin and you won’t even stick out a hand to save them! You’re afraid you might get dirty.” Where did we learn that kind of behavior? From the Pharisees, the ones who were so concerned about keeping the rules of righteousness,

about keeping themselves separated from a sinful world. And what did Jesus say to them? “Go and learn what this means: I desire mercy and not sacrifice.” In other words, “I want you to look on the suffering of a sinful world and feel the pain of its people. I want that pain to become your pain until you have to do something about it, until you have to shuck off the robes of righteousness and dive into that dirty water to see if you can save somebody. That’s what I’ve done,” Jesus might say. “I’ve come not for the righteous, who are standing on the riverbank, clucking their tongues and saying ‘I told you so,’ but for the sinners who are going down for the third time, gulping for air, who need all the help they can get.”

And then he shows us what that kind of mercy looks like.

While he is sitting there eating with tax collectors and sinners a man comes to Jesus begging for his help. His daughter has died and he thinks Jesus may have the power to bring her back to life again. In Mark’s version of the story this man is a leader of the synagogue, and if it’s the same man in Matthew’s story it is remarkable that he comes to Jesus while he is in the home of a tax collector. The tax collectors were considered sinners, and sinners weren’t allowed in the synagogue, but the leader of the synagogue goes into the house of a sinner because he is desperate, and if you are desperate enough you will do anything. In a moment like that none of your so-called righteousness seems as important as getting your little girl back. Can you understand that that’s just how God feels about the world, and can you see that he is determined not to let the rules of righteousness stand in his way? He sends his son Jesus, who seems perfectly willing to break the law for the sake of love.

As Jesus goes he is approached by a woman who has been hemorrhaging for twelve years. According to Leviticus 15 she was ceremonially unclean; she couldn't enter the synagogue as long as her impurity continued, and anyone who touched her or anything she had touched would be considered unclean. And so she sneaked up behind Jesus thinking, "If I can only touch his cloak I will be healed, and he won't have to know about it." But he did know about it, and instead of saying, "What have you done to me, you sinful woman? You've made me unclean!" He turned to her and said, "Take heart, daughter, your faith has made you well." And just like that she was healed, and her world changed in an instant from black-and-white to color, and Jesus went on his way, rainbows swirling in his wake.

When Jesus came to the leader's house the professional mourners were already there, wailing away, with the flute players playing their mournful dirges. Somebody had died, and they wanted everyone to know it. But Jesus said, "Go away. She isn't dead; she's only sleeping." And they laughed at him. But he ignored them. He went on into the house and sent everybody else away until it was just him and the body of that poor girl. She lay there on the bed like a black-and-white drawing, a shadow of what she had been before. And Jesus, looking on, was moved with compassion. According to Numbers 19 anyone who touched a dead body would be unclean for seven days. Jesus knew that, but it didn't stop him from reaching out to take this girl's hand. If anyone had been there they might have seen the life coming back into her body like flame creeping up a piece of newspaper, they might have seen the color rushing back into her pale cheeks. They might have seen her eyes flutter open and the look on her face when

she saw Jesus. And they might have seen that as far as he was concerned even this one life was more important than all the rules in the world.

Strange things can happen when you let God into your life. Things that once seemed so important to you might not seem so important anymore. You might give up the family farm, pack up all your belongings, and head out for an unknown country as Abram did. You might come to understand that it's grace, and not being circumcised or keeping the commandments that saves you, as Paul did. You might look up from your day job to find Jesus looking back at you with love and understanding, as Matthew did. You might discover as all these people did that when you let God into your life things change. His light reaches into all the dark and dusty corners, fills you with a sense of unlimited possibility, and sometimes even before the end of the sermon, you find that your world is changing...

...from black-and-white to color.

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