

## “Coloring Outside the Lines”

Sermon: Year C, Epiphany 4

Text: Luke 4:21–30

Preached: February 3, 2019 at Immanuel Lutheran Church, Evanston, Illinois

Oh God who knew us before you formed us in the womb, make yourself known to us now. AMEN

“Teacher, she’s coloring outside the lines!” Oh, yeah, I was totally that kid...not the one coloring outside the lines—I was the one waving my hand and making sure the teacher knew the *other* kid was coloring outside the lines. I was the kind of kid that the teacher would leave in charge of the reading groups so she could go down the hall to the teachers’ lounge for a quick break ... the kind of kid who stayed after school to help the teacher straighten the chairs and grade the other kids’ papers. Boy, I knew those teachers loved me. Even at age 6, I was an insider. There was this one girl in my first-grade class, Martha...Martha was different in a lot of ways, and we all knew it. Martha was the kind of kid who would proudly announce that her family ate dog food, and liked it. Martha was the kind of kid who not only colored outside the lines, when it came to her Crayola choices, she would go for the ones like “cornflower” and “goldenrod” and “fuchsia,” instead of good ol’ blue and yellow and red. And being children—correction, being human—the other kids and I saw Martha herself as being outside the lines, and so, I’m ashamed to say, we excluded her. Her family moved away from town after second grade, and I sometimes wonder what became of her. I somehow picture her today as an artist somewhere, making art out of found objects or something, wearing interesting clothes, still coloring outside the lines. And I realize now that Martha is somebody I would really like.

We love having lines to color within, I think—big, bold, black lines like those on coloring book pages. Lines are reassuring. Lines show us where the edges are in a very confusing world. Lines are like little walls that make us feel safe, because they allow us to predict and order and control the events in our lives—or so we think. We know what and who belongs inside the lines. Lines allow us to say who is in and who is out, who is good and who is bad, who is one of us, and who isn’t. And so we eagerly draw lines all around us, lines that include some folks, while excluding others—and don’t you dare cross that line, especially with your cornflower blue or your fuchsia. We church folks can be particularly fond of lines. We draw them all the time, often without even realizing we’ve drawn them ... lines to tell us what words we can say in worship, what music is appropriate, lines to tell us whether we can laugh or clap, even what clothes we can wear. You might be surprised how often I am asked the question whether it’s OK to wear jeans to church. My quick answer is always “of course,” and I think most of us these days would agree...but the very fact people ask that question tells me that church folks somehow have drawn a line there that people are aware of and that they’re afraid to cross ... but it’s a line that can keep people out. Our lines silently speak of who is truly welcome here and who is not. And so we draw our lines, and then we declare them to be God’s own lines—because we want God to be predictable and safe, too.

Now, you may be saying, “Pastor, where in the world are you getting this from these scripture readings?” Well, actually, the gospel reading today is all about the lines we draw. It’s unfortunate that the folks who plan the lectionary have split the story up the way they did. We got the first half of the story last week, and this week’s reading plops us right down in the middle of the same story without reminding us what has come before. In last week’s reading, we had Jesus who has come back to his hometown, Nazareth ... hometown boy making good, the good kid who always stayed to help straighten up the synagogue after worship, now come back. They invite him to read the scriptures and to preach for them, and he chooses a passage from the Prophet Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” And then he sits down to begin teaching them what those words mean. Everybody is staring eagerly at him, waiting to hear what he will say in his sermon. And he begins, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” He must have been delivering quite a sermon, because everyone is leaning over to their neighbor and whispering, “Wow, this is really good. Can you believe this is that construction worker’s kid?” They are getting all kinds of warm fuzzies from the gracious words Jesus is saying. What a pretty picture! And then Jesus starts to color outside the lines.

Suddenly, instead of making them feel good about themselves as faithful religious people (which is what a sermon is supposed to do, right?), instead of telling them the predictable things they’re used to hearing

that make them feel special, Jesus takes that fuchsia crayon and starts scribbling all *over* their lines, not just outside them. They start to feel insulted. Insult number one, he tells them that he's not going to do the miraculous healings in Nazareth, his hometown, that they have heard he was doing up the road in Capernaum. Hey, isn't he one of them? He's an insider! He owes them! How dare he cross the line that they've drawn around their village? Aren't we supposed to take care of our own first?

And then, insult number two, he reminds them that God sent the Prophet Elijah not to a faithful Israelite widow, but rather to a penniless foreign widow, a Syro-Phoenician woman who lives across the border in Sidon, who is not even a believer in Israel's God ... but that's who God chose to use to shelter and feed God's prophet. Remember also that women, especially widows, were at the very bottom of the social structure ... so there's an extremely powerful multi-layered message there: God chooses to work through and to bless a powerless, poverty-stricken, unbelieving, foreign outsider, instead of the good religious folk who followed all the rules, instead of the chosen ones. Hand me that "goldenrod" crayon, will you?

Then insult number three, Jesus reminds them that the Prophet Elisha healed of leprosy not any of the faithful Israelites who suffered from that dread disease that in and of itself even today is a word that screams "unclean" and "outsider," but indeed God chooses to heal Naaman, general of the oft-invading Syrian army, a man who disdained Israel's religion and who had terrorized God's people ... it's almost as though Jesus were to tell us today that God had chosen to heal Osama Bin Laden of a stigmatized disease and not to heal one of us insiders—that's how shocking it was to his hearers that day. God scribbles across all of our lines, across all our little black walls, to bring Good News to those who are outside them.

The people in the synagogue, the insiders, react with rage to Jesus' words. Their response seems extreme, but we all know that we humans can get very angry and threatened when people aren't coloring within the lines, when our sense of order, our sense of specialness is threatened. And underlying Jesus' message is something uniquely unsettling: Jesus is pointing out that GOD colors outside of the lines. Using scripture itself, Jesus points out that God does not behave the way we want God to behave. God is not bound by the limitations that we seek to place on God, God is not bound by our expectations. God scribbles outside the lines, scribbles across the lines of religion, gender, race, class, disease until we can't see the lines anymore. God goes to the outsiders, chooses them, blesses them. We don't like to think that God's grace gets shown to those who are outside the lines that we've drawn, when it comes down to it. It just doesn't seem right, somehow, does it? The people in that synagogue think they know what God wants and what God approves of—and when Jesus showed them that God simply will not be pinned down in that way, it shatters their world. Jesus is not announcing a new way that God is going to behave ... he's demonstrating that God has *always* colored outside the lines. We, like the people Jesus was speaking to, also like to think we've got God figured out, that we've somehow domesticated God, made God predictable and controllable. But as God proclaimed to Moses, God's own name is "I AM WHO I AM," or possibly a better translation is "I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE." God delights in doing the unexpected in order to fulfill God's loving, creative purpose.

In showing to us a God who colors outside the lines, a God who is willing to go anywhere and to use anyone God chooses to do God's creative and redeeming work, a God who cherishes us as beloved children but who loves God's other children as much as God loves us, Jesus is showing us that we, too, are free to color outside the lines ... to include those whom our lines have formerly excluded (there's a long list of those, isn't there?), free to worship God in new and wonderfully creative ways, free to find new ways to serve the neighbor, free to look at our world and to see God's hand moving and working among people whom we don't expect to be used by God and to join them in that work, and not to be offended that they also are agents and recipients of God's blessings. As scary as it sounds, it is good news, liberating news. It is good news for us as individuals ... for all those of us who have found ourselves outside the lines that people have drawn, it is good news of release from that captivity. We, too, can be used by God. And for our lives together as the people of God assembled at Immanuel Lutheran Church, it is good news, because we are freed in Christ to give new and creative voice to the Good News of Jesus Christ, bound only by the great commandments to love God with all our heart, and soul, and mind, and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. We are free to scribble outside the lines as we seek to join God in the creative, healing work that God is already doing in our world. So pick up those crayons, and let's start scribbling. The Teacher says we can! Thanks be to God! AMEN.