

BodyLife Past Article Archive

Painting Outside the Lines

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Remember the old paint-by-number sets? Collies stretched out on a hillside. Fly fishermen casting over a forest stream. Autumn trees and distant mountains.

Somewhere inside me must be a wanna-be artist, because I loved those things as a child. Even today as I channel surf, I get stuck on the painting lessons that public broadcasting offers.

But I don't have the gifts of an artist, and I've long outgrown paint-by-number sets. They were fun and though the results were surprising from someone so untalented, no one would mistake them for real art. They were manufactured paintings, not requiring my talent, only my technical skill at painting between the lines.

You can spot those paintings in an instant, can't you? Blotches of color between hard and fast lines is not how real artists paint. They blend colors, overlay strokes and produce paintings that have meaningful detail, passion and even life.

I can't help but wonder if religion's attempts to help us find a meaningful relationship with God isn't a lot like a paint by number set. A discipleship curriculum I worked on nearly a decade ago had a grid containing behavioral objectives designed to help someone walk with God. I think it had about 60 things to do, staged over a four-step growth process.

Last month I listened to a presentation on discipleship-making that listed 372 behavioral objectives over a four-step process that would teach us how to be followers of Jesus. (Given enough time, I think I might have come up with that many.)

But we all know that following such guidelines doesn't produce the relationship with God we hunger for. They might be able to help us conform enough behavior to make us look more Christian, but they cannot produce what our hearts hunger for most. For that reason my chart got put away many years ago. God had something better in mind:

God's Incredible Wonder

Last spring Sara and I had the chance to walk through some of the most beautiful gardens in France, including those in Paris and at the Palace of Versailles. They were splendid examples of human landscape but as lovely as they were, they were not breath-taking.

If you want breath-taking, stand on a bridge over a New England stream, completely surrounded by the vivid hues of autumn color; or try the vista of high Sierras from the bluff alongside Walling Lake in the Kaiser Wilderness; or, gaze out over the Grand Canyon from the South Rim. All of those have actually taken my breath away and are more lovely than anything man can produce with all his symmetry and planning. Not only is God's canvas far larger, but he creates beauty in ways we can never duplicate.

At a leadership meeting years ago I remember someone sharing an insight God had given them about managing his work. We put gardens in rows, curb off the grass and tightly clip hedges. God scatters wildflowers across the hillsides. He warned us that if we ever tried to fit his work into our boxes, we'd miss out on what he was doing and the results would be a pathetic shadow of the real beauty he wanted to produce in his people.

We didn't listen. Soon we had almost as many lines for God to paint in as most other religious organizations. The more we tried to force God into our expectations the more people got hurt and the further we got from the simplicity and beauty of just loving him. That doesn't mean he wasn't faithful to paint inside our lines whenever he could, but it meant that we missed so much of his working because it didn't fit neatly into our expectations.

Managed Spirituality

Anyone who seeks a relationship with the living God, knows it doesn't fit in neat boxes designed by human ingenuity. That's why 2,000 years of Christendom has produced hundreds of thousands of different denominations and organizations--none of them able to contain God's working, though all of them have tried.

Life in God is a dynamic relationship. You can't mass produce it by behavioral objectives. You can't find it in religious tradition or embrace it vicariously through a charismatic leader. Life in God has to be lived in our own hearts.

It's been almost four years ago since Sara and I were painted out of the fellowship we helped plant and in which we had lived for 15 years. We didn't plan on getting painted out, but people we loved deeply drew lines of conformity we could not embrace. We saw the lines as limiting God's work to a few personal preferences. Rather than release God's fullness to people it would limit it. I only say that to explain that I never set out to live outside the lines. I was a line-drawer myself for many years and thought that was as God wanted it.

I decried people who didn't "belong to a local body of believers" as independent, selfish and in danger of being led astray. I saw institutions like ours as their source of safety. And it was true that I didn't know anyone outside the lines that was doing very well in their walk with Jesus. The ones I knew were bitter,

distant and uninvolved because they had no passion for God.

I don't know now if that assessment was true or whether it was skewed by my own need to have others belong to my system, but since we've been outside the lines Sara and I continue to meet the most wonderful, passionate, giving people whom we have ever known. Far from bitter or isolated, they are wonderfully free, engaging God in ways that thrill my heart.

To be sure, there are plenty of others outside the lines who have no idea who Father is and use a cry for freedom as an excuse to indulge their flesh and justify themselves. It's a fascinating paradox--what hungry people most need to thrive in a relationship with the Living God are the same things that selfish people abuse to pretend a faith they don't live.

I guess that's why we draw so many lines, so that self-dominated people cannot fool themselves. But when we take away the truth of God's life because someone is abusing it, we hurt hungry people who want to know him in truth and be transformed into his likeness.

Unstructured Is Not Unsaved

According to George Barna, a Christian researcher, the fastest growing wing of church life today is among people who have exited the organized religious establishments, but gather in loosely-affiliated relational groups for prayer, study and sharing their growth in Christ. That's amazing!

A few years ago, I would have cast a suspicious eye toward such 'unchurched' rebels. Not anymore.

I have discovered that 'unchurched' is not necessarily 'unsaved.' Even the term 'unchurched' shows a weak understanding of what church is to begin with. You're not 'churched' because you frequent a weekend service at a local building. You are part of the church when you live in relationship to the Living God and share his life with people he places around you.

To be sure, there are people who find religious structures a wonderful place to grow in their relationship with God. But not everyone does. Many believers today are finding ways to gather with believers and reach out to the lost without the cumbersome costs and time constraints of organized religion.

To embrace what God is doing in that arena represents quite a change for me. I've jokingly told others that five years ago I wouldn't have even talked to the believer I've become. I found it too threatening, and myself too selfish to consider the genuineness of faith and fellowship that can exist outside the structures that we have come to call church.

But I've found out my canvas wasn't quite large enough for all God is doing in the world. It seems he is calling an increasing army of people to walk with him outside the traditional patterns we've come to

associate with organized Christianity.

I've discovered that church isn't something you can go to, it is simply what you become a part of when Father invites you into his family. It is not an organization, but a way to live in love and freedom with his people all week long. It is not limited to a select group of his followers, but whomever God brings into our lives at a given moment.

Outside the Camp

Over the past month or so I've gathered with a significant number of such folks in Alaska, Portland and St Louis. Their passion for God excites me, and even though many of their former friends in the faith cannot understand the choices they've made, none of them regret the freedom or the passion for God that they've discovered outside the lines.

In fact, the reproach of well-intentioned believers who think unstructured Christianity is unsafe at best and blatantly wrong at worst is part of the process God is using to invite people closer to himself. There's something in all of us that seeks the approval of others. Paul called it people-pleasing. He said as long as we worry about what others think of us, we'll never know what it means to be a bondservant of Jesus Christ. When he said it, Paul was talking about brothers and sisters, not the world's rejection.

Is that why God is calling an increasing number to follow him outside the camp, risking the reproach and judgment of other brothers and sisters when their lives don't match what they believe to be normal Christianity? Is this why there is such power and excitement among believers, because they have taken the road less traveled, and are willing to lay down the need for other men's approval to live to God alone?

That may explain why as soon as a move of God becomes known and recognized, that its power fades away. Instead of people discovering a deeper reality of God at great personal cost, they jump on a bandwagon for their own amusement. The glory fades because selfless pursuit is replaced with other motives that will not lead us closer to him.

I know that nothing pains me more than to be misunderstood by other believers whom I have loved (and still do!) and with whom I had served in God's kingdom. This is not the easiest way to live as God's people. Far from it. It requires greater initiative, passion and sensitivity to God than following any managed program.

But the rewards are commensurate with the risk. Once you have tasted of life with the Living God, you simply know that no system or program can ever contain it. There is no greater joy than knowing how much he loves you, hearing him speak with such simplicity and power, watching him work his ways into your life, and engaging spontaneous fellowship between believers without the weight of programs and agendas.

I realize that all of these things can also happen within more traditional expressions of Christianity, but in my experience they are rare indeed. Too much time is filled up maintaining machinery and compelling others to conform to the program that hunger for God is often swallowed up by so much spiritual busyness and well-intentioned programs.

It makes me wonder whether our attempts at organized religion is just our way to box God into our traditions and preferences. No wonder it leaves many confused when God doesn't seem to be as real as Scripture indicates he wants to be. Maybe he finds our lines unable to contain all his wonder and beauty.

Outside the Lines

Jesus seemed to paint outside the lines with regularity--healing on the Sabbath, feasting with sinners, even ignoring the fast days that the religious crowd observed. His lifestyle plagued them with doubts about his authenticity and they regarded his nonconformity as a threat to their power and position with people.

Living outside the lines does not mean we have to rebel against the system. I don't see God doing that. In fact, he extends his life to every person, regardless of where he finds them. I think it simply means that God has no regard for our machinery, nor limits himself to its demands. He can move through it, in spite of it and beyond it. He can point out its failures even as he uses those failures to transform those who look to him. He is an amazing artist, brushing his glory into our lives in more ways than any structure could ever contain.

Living outside the lines frees us to live in God and not be controlled by other people's attempts to manipulate us. It looks something like this:

- It is the freedom to put your relationship with Jesus above anything else.
- It is the freedom to obey him and live in the truth of Scripture even if others don't approve.
- It is the freedom to engage Christ's body however he calls you--within structures or beyond them.
- It is the freedom to love God's people and broken lives in the world without putting people in boxes.
- It is the freedom to walk away from abusive religious settings and so-called 'leaders.'
- It is the freedom to ask hard questions and not allow your faith in God to be questioned.
- It is the freedom to be honest about your struggles without being condemned or accused of rebellion.
- It is the freedom to be known for who you really are and not pressured to pretend to be anything more or less.

This is the environment where our relationship with God can grow and flourish. And yes, many people use these very same truths as excuses to indulge their own selfish desires or to live in captivity to their

capricious feelings. But just because some will use this freedom as an excuse for the flesh is no reason to deny it to people who really want to know God in truth and be transformed into his likeness.

The reason Christ set us free on the cross from the bondage of religious tradition and obligation is so that we might behold him in the fullness of his glory. We are not settlers who can pitch our tent and live in the relative comfort that God will conform himself to our expectations. He has called us to be pioneers, still journeying toward the city whose builder is God.

Don't settle for anything less, just because it merits the approval of others. Keep seeking to know the Living God in spirit and in truth, until you see the glory of his life poured out in you every moment of your life on this earth.

He died for that to be true of us.

Let us live to make it so!

Quote

"The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried."

G. K. Chesterton

Sidebar #1 - From Anna, Mister God and the Black Knight by Fynn

"Sometimes Tich, I think it's a whole lot easier for kids to know Mister God than it is for grown ups."

"Why, Finn?" she persisted. Why?"

I didn't quite know the answer to that one, so I just had to make it up.

"Well," I began, "I reckon grown ups have often got so many problems of their own that they just haven't got time to... er...er..."

"Play?" she suggested. "Play with Mister God. Eh? Play?"

"Something like that," I said.

"Um. Grown-up people make church so, well, serious that they ne-ver have time to play, do they, Fynn?"

"I guess you're just about right on that one, luv," I replied.

"Too busy trying to earn enough money to pay the bills, I guess."

Sidebar #1 - From Who Builds the Church? By Alan Richardson

It's worth turning aside a moment to encourage those of you who may, right now, be out in the wilderness at this point in your experience of life and God. You're there because God has taken you to one side to show you something of Himself. It's not easy, and it's not very comfortable. You're almost certainly misunderstood, mostly rejected and probably written off by most of your former peers. You may even be wondering sometimes what is happening to you.

Especially, if (your former peers) are enjoying apparent success and limelight, while you seem lost in the back woods.

After you've been out there a while, your true friends will begin to be made known to you. They're the ones who stick with you through thick and thin not because of what you do, but because of who you are. And at the times when you're not even sure who that is any more, they'll hold through because they have no hidden agendas in the relationship. They're with you and alongside you simply because of God's love.

But then there will be some friends who are performance related. They are your friends because of what they expect you to do, or because of the way they expect you to act. And when that fails to line up with their expectations, things go a little awry. You get criticized albeit "in love". You get marginalized or put on the sidelines. And what's even harder for you is that while you seem to "decrease", these other friends whom you are sure are really missing it go on from success to success.

Your temptation is to let go of what God is seeking to build in you. To deny the struggle, the doubts the uncertainties and just get back into the flow where your former friends are seeing it all happen. You know you can do that or at least join them. And if you do, you'll bring this uncertainty to an end.

But if you go back into what they are doing, God would have had no need to call you to one side.

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