



## Outside the Lines

Ps 50:7-15; Hs 5:15-6:6; Mt 9:9-13, 18-25; Rm 4:13-25

As a child, I was taught to color inside the lines. The lines were there for a reason. They gave shape to the images on the coloring pages. The lines helped me color what I could not have drawn on my own. At times, however, there were just a set of numbers on the page, and I was to draw in the lines. In both cases, someone else designed the parameters. I worked with someone else's creativity, building on top of what another had begun. The lines were comfortable, secure, and ensured a quality I did not have the skills to create on my own. There were other times, however, when there were no lines to follow. I was to create without the safety of those crutches. In our task of faith living, how set are we in depending on the crutches and parameters of our traditions? Do we have the quality of faith to allow God to color outside the lines in our lives?

We have our determined ideas of how faith should operate. We have the sense that faith in Christ follows established parameters, guidelines, traditions, and rituals. We are not always happy with our traditions, but we cling to them, nevertheless. Worship is a known quantity with certain prayers, hymns, special music, offering collection, Bible reading, a sermon, pews, hymnals, piano, climate control, electric lighting, and someone up front for us to watch. Church is our gathering in a special building, the routines and traditions of a Sunday morning service, Sunday school, vacation Bible school, choir rehearsal, deacon meetings, committee meetings, and so forth. What do we do with the fact that God often colors outside of the lines we take for granted? What if God wants something more or different from the established patterns of our comfortable religious practices?

Hosea's words point to this reality. "I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings." Israel had all its well-established patterns for worshipping *Yahweh*. Sacrifice was central to their understanding of what it meant to serve God and remain on God's "good side." Sacrifice was a way of getting the attention of divine beings, as an animal's life would return to its maker as its blood was spilled. This was understood in Israel, just as it was in other religious traditions surrounding Israel. One sacrificed, not just because it was a demonstration of trusting God to provide for one's needs. One sacrificed as a means to have one's petition reach the ears and attention of God. It was the tried and true method of getting divine attention. Quicker than email, one's message would rise to the heavens with the life of one's animal sacrifice.

Hosea says *Yahweh* had had enough of it. *Yahweh* did not need animal sacrifices. There was something else that God required of Israel instead. Hosea's words were heresy. Hosea's words attacked the foundation of Israelite faith, for they attacked its basic structure. If his words were taken to heart, they would destroy the fabric of Israel's religious structure. It would mean that concerns over ritual purity, the correct way to offer which animal in sacrifice for which purpose, and the sacred pleading for the ear of *Yahweh* were pointless tradition. If the people gave up on the institution of animal sacrifice, what would they have left? How could they approach God outside the comfortable lines and raise their concerns to heaven?

Hosea and the psalmist both say sacrifice does not feed God. God is not needy. God wants our service, however, for the sake of relationship and delivering us from ourselves. Outside the lines and comfortable boundaries of religious practice, God desires our practice of mercy, love, and grace. "Mercy, not sacrifice," means letting go of self to meet the needs of others.

Selfless giving is not sacrificial, for self moves out of the way to care of another. It is no sacrifice to give to those we love. It is no sacrifice to love those for whom we care. It is no sacrifice to deal in mercy as an expression of love. Such giving becomes more blessed than caring for our own petty interests. It ignores the lines of established procedure and becomes a measure of God's grace.

Paul says God did not follow rules, giving Abraham a promise, instead. It was not through an elaborate set of established parameters that Abraham became the father of faith. Rather, it was through a relationship of faith—trust—confidence in God. Faith took him beyond the established and expected limits of living. It took him into a new way of relating to God, finding meaning and purpose to carry him through an unknown future.

The same pattern is set for us. There are no bold, dark lines within which to color. Rather, faith by definition calls us beyond the comfortable lines of comfortable expectations. It calls us to trust God into the unknown and unforeseeable. By definition, faith requires stepping outside the lines. Paul says that by faith God calls into being what did not, and may never before have existed. It is the primed canvas of God's creative work.

Perhaps more than any, Jesus colored outside the lines of established practice. He called a no-account tax collector to serve as one of his disciples. He ate at this man's home and expected more of Levi's new life than others would ever have deemed appropriate or even possible. Through their interaction, lives were changed.

Jesus stepped outside the lines, creating life, where hope was gone. Such was the case with the daughter of a synagogue leader. The crowds were assured of her death, but Jesus healed her, returning hope and life to her family. He allowed a woman with an issue of blood to touch him. We wouldn't think too much about it, but for that day and age, she was impure, unclean, and ritually disallowed to participate in worship. She was not allowed to go to the temple area to plead with God for healing. Her physical condition caused her to be shunned, and there was no cure to be had. Jesus did not chastise her for touching him and making him ritually impure. He did not seem to care about such lines of propriety. Grace flowed through him beyond those established boundaries. Healing, forgiveness, mercy, and cleansing ignored the boundaries of safety and touched lives all around with the presence of God's restoration.

According to the established lines of conduct, Jesus should not have been able to enter God's presence to heal the synagogue leader's daughter. Having been touched by one deemed unclean would mean he also was ritually impure. Mercy, however, was more important than prescribed rituals. Living the steadfast love of God was more important than preserving traditions, expectations, and established norms. Grace and faith meant allowing God to work outside of our boundaries that limit our religious lives to the safe zones of living.

Faith gets messy. It is naturally imprecise. We can't always tell where the process is headed. In the beginning it does not look like much of anything at all. A swash of color, blurred lines and swirls, and lack of structure may be all we can see. It won't be worth much until it is finished. Are we willing to entrust our lives as a brush in the hands of the Master? He doesn't always use the lines we find so comfortable. Then again, masterpieces are not normally paint by number.

—*Christopher B. Harbin*