

## ***The Wonderful World of Color***

**Luke 14:12-24**

It was around 1965, I believe, when I was first introduced to the joys of watching color television. It's not to say that a nine-year-old boy from Bangor, Maine wouldn't have seen or heard about this extravagant new phenomenon. No, in fact, some of my friends' homes enjoyed those luxuries. I, however, remember going down to the storefront windows of Freese's Department Store where I could view for myself the brand-new RCA or Zenith color televisions on display. And every Sunday evening, I imagined what Walt Disney's *Wonderful World of Color* would look like apart from the various shades of gray on the Hayes family black-and-white console.

That's where the words, "living color," were first etched into my mind and longing heart. All the vivid artistry dotted by the dazzling Tinkerbell would only be imagined as the voiceover reminded us of what we were missing ("This program is brought to you in *living color!*")—rainbow hues that in our black-and-white version were blandly absent.

Then, my world changed forever when my grandfather purchased an RCA Victor TV (with "color so real you'll think you are there!"). The night following its delivery, he invited us boys over to his apartment to watch, of all things, the *Wizard of Oz*. "Living color" did become all so real at the scene where Dorothy left Kansas and entered Munchkinland. The transition from a monochrome world to living colors was absolutely stunning and forever etched in my pre-adolescent mind! A black-and-white view of the world would never quite satisfy me again.

I recognize my recollections of childhood resonate with those of you of a certain age, while others much younger than I wonder if I lived in the dark ages. In a way, I suppose I did. Each generation has been dazzled by technical “wizardries” of their era, and for my generation, color television was certainly one innovation that changed how we viewed the world.

This period of my life was also around the time American society began to address other issues related to color. Television played a significant role in that revelation as well. The Civil Rights demonstrations and acts of violence committed against people of color in Alabama, Mississippi, and elsewhere were broadcast on the evening news, bringing to every living room the reality of inherent racism that had plagued this country since before its founding. This nightly window on the disturbing reality of discrimination in America led to major commitments and changes in the laws of our land to protect people of color and establish equal voting rights.

At that same time, television revealed the plight of poverty in our major cities and throughout the rural North and South and made it a national concern. Poverty began to be taken seriously and the government’s commitment to addressing it sounded oddly similar to the language employed in another war at the time that politically and militarily paralyzed us while draining our national resources, leaving our nation wondering about our standing and our security in the world.

Yet, here we are, a half-century later, virtually back in the same place. Our polarized notions of black and white, of right and wrong, of good and evil, then and now are colored by the realities of blood,

bigotry, and partisan blame. We seem to be facing the same lessons we were presented with before. Much like in the past, some would prefer to remain in the black-and-white world, when life was simpler, their views were predominant and easier to define. But as we eventually discovered in my youth and will once again, our collective lives are much richer and our society more beautiful when we embrace the world as it is in its amazing diversity and living color.

This shouldn't surprise us. As any artist knows, color transforms our visual and mental picture of the way things are. Color elicits a sensory response; it awakens our minds and spirits; it alters the way we view things around us. This is why color is inherent to nature and human sensibilities—our brains and eyes are pre-set for color. Color is integral to life as it is the essence of light. Take a prism into the sunlight and you will see a spectrum of colors; let the light shine through the gray tones of clouds and rain and you will see a rainbow of hues. Color is the underlying essence of everything we perceive as white or black!

So, why do so many people seem to *fear* color?

I spent the past week exploring the nature of racism in our society, in particular, the nature and meaning of white privilege. In some ways, it was like enduring a root canal without Novocain—very painful, but necessary at times. On another level, it was remarkably revealing.

For one thing, I was challenged by the thought that what I presumed were blessings in life from God are more likely reflective of white (male) privilege—privileges afforded me by society (where I live, what I've done, what I can do, etc.) because I am, for all intents

and purposes, a part of the dominant educated and professional class in America based on a status and place in life I've inherited and pursued. Many of these advantages, frankly, were systemically built upon the male patriarchy and white racism of the past. I thought I had already understood this, but my experience over the past week was quite revelatory. Yet, as it so happens, I'm also co-leading the planning for next summer's conference, which will be the sixth Global Baptist Peace Conference—a setting where racial, lingual, cultural, and religious diversity are vividly affirmed and celebrated.

I know that, for the most part, you and I embrace similar values that support and bless diversity. Even though we are largely white in our racial makeup as a congregation, we are a single community of faith among a worldwide communion of racial, ethnic, national, cultural, lingual, and tribal identities. We are a single American Baptist Church among a nation-wide American Baptist family that is the most racially, culturally, and ethnically diverse Protestant denomination in our country. We are a single Welcoming and Affirming congregation among a host of gay-friendly churches within Christendom that celebrate the symbolism of the rainbow and appreciate the range of gender identities and sexual orientations. We are a people of Christ, followers of Jesus, who represent and witness to his light in the world. We are the “God colors,” as Eugene Petersen so aptly phrases it in his translation of Matthew 5.14: “You’re here to be light, bringing the God-colors in the world.”<sup>1</sup>

In this colorful spectrum of identity, we represent the richness, the vitality, the vividness, the complexity, and the powerful truth of

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene Petersen, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language*, Navpress, 2002.

God that is discovered when our one-dimensional, uniform, monochromatic worlds open up to multi-dimensional expressions of love and life. In that colorful reality, we also reckon with the pain, the suffering, the poverty, and the prejudice that are the consequence of inherited and present racism, or of black-and-white moral judgments, or monochromatic perspectives and narrow-minded views.

In the story that was read earlier about the wedding banquet, Jesus revealed something about his own views in his colorful choice of characters. The story, of course, is traditionally interpreted as a parable about the future reign of God, when God redeems the world from its sinful condition. The banquet represents the messianic feast; the ones who were not initially invited, representing the Gentiles and those outside of the chosen few in Israel. With that, the black-and-white interpretation is of divine judgment and condemnation of those who refuse to believe the Gospel, while rewarding those who do believe. Future salvation is the traditional focus and message of the parable.

But is that really an interpretation that stands up to reality and the way life plays out—where one's eternal destiny is solely determined by what we believe relative to a worldview that existed 2,000 years ago? Even then, that would be a strained interpretation if you place the Gospel in its original context. This story is not a commentary about religious belief and ultimate salvation, but about recognizing who in the world is our neighbor.

In Jesus' telling, it speaks more about those who insulate themselves from others and whose ordered view of the world is fairly monochrome and self-serving. It stems from the fact that those who

were excusing themselves from the host's initial invitation were doing so because they were already well-off, they had other pressing engagements, they didn't need a banquet, and quite frankly, it was unlikely they wanted to reciprocate. In other words, they were snubbing the host—sending him this message: "You aren't that important to us; we don't need you to gain social standing by associating with you!" Those are the social games of elite status.

When one lives among the privileged class, the world as it is seen largely consists of their own needs, their own desires, their own interests, their own black-and-white view of the human condition, which usually justifies their own position while looking down on those of lower state with disdain. Thus, they aren't required to make sacrifices for others because they determine how the game is played. That's the advantage of being on top. There's really no *noblesse oblige* required toward anyone below them. The Golden Rule of privilege is best summed up in this way: those with the most gold get to rule.

However, as the story turns, this was not the case for those who eventually came. When the doors were flung open, those who responded were the ones who never would have been invited to such an occasion! They represented, in effect, the "colorful" people of those times—those who were racially discriminated against or those of the lower class whose conditions were routinely overlooked and ignored, those who didn't fit into the one-dimensional, self-serving, black-and-white world of the elites and ruling class, those who probably didn't have much in the way of material resources or social graces, and who had very little standing in society.

People such as these were generally viewed as “the least of these”—expendable in Jesus’ society because they didn’t add positive value to society or capital to the economy; or they were among the despised Samaritans or other alien residents from other parts of the Roman world, usually not contributing much to the social standards and financial prosperity of the elite’s ruling interests. In today’s world, it would be a mix of people who do not enjoy the privileges or “blessings of life” because of their social location, whether domestic or immigrant. In Jesus’ story, these are the ones who were ultimately given invitations to the banquet. So, what does that tell us? Which version of the Golden Rule is in play?

I suppose, this is a timeless tale. God has given us a colorful world—of great diversity wildly spawned from the divine imagination! Yet, in contrast, in the making of any society, power, privilege, and preservation of the dominant race and culture serve as paramount concerns, usually at the expense of all others. Every generation has those who sit at the top in prestigious, advantaged positions, where they like to control and order society to their tastes and class interests, while establishing the norms, values, and primary aspirations for mainstream society.

Those on top tend to foster a uniform, perhaps even monochromatic way of thinking or being. Those who are dominant are frightfully disturbed by such an array of colorful people, who are not homogenous like them and who will not naturally fall in line. Those at the top fear disorder and dissent—they demand law and order; they can’t account for or respond to diverse interests and needs. Ultimately, they can’t tolerate the true colors of this world.

And yet, as this story is told (and my experience confirms), at Jesus' table, there's ample room for colorful people. He sets a table that provides elbow room for everyone. He especially sets a table that serves up the best for those who aren't the first ones on the guest list.

That's why it's important for us as a congregation—as racially homogenous and monochrome as we may be—to continually aspire to be so much more than we are—that we will be always lift up and embrace the rainbow of colors represented at Jesus' welcome table. At Jesus' table, many languages are spoken; at Jesus' table, some love the spicy food, while others prefer it more bland; at Jesus' table kids sit beside grown-ups and the “Goldilocks” portions are perfect for each.

At Jesus' table, silly conversations are laughed about, while sympathetic tears are shed for others; at Jesus' table, there are no gated communities, or efforts to separate children from parents, or walls to hold people out, or empty chairs at long dining room tables to remind everyone what a privilege it is to sit there.

At Jesus' table, one hand helps another and no one is left out when the bread is passed; at Jesus' table, people feel safe and secure because it's based on trust and mutual concern. Everyone is pleasantly surprised by the generous hospitality enjoyed by all. For at Jesus' table, life reflects the way God is in the spirit of heaven!

So, why do people fear color? Color brings out the best in us! Why would a black-and-white world seem more appealing? Once you see color, perhaps even for the first time, you cannot miss the dazzling glory. When you go from black-and-white to living color, it's hard to go back to the way it once was! Whenever you embrace the

living color of life, in all its glorious God-inspired hues and humanity, one never is satisfied with settling for anything less! For this is the way life was meant to be and will yet be when the realm God is fully known as a beautiful, marvelous, and wonderful world of color!

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