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“Advent in Blue, Purple, and Pink”

A sermon by Cheryl Barton Henry

Third Sunday of Advent

December 12, 2010

Isaiah 35:1–10; James 5:7–10; Matthew 11:2–11

I have a confession.

Every Sunday evening around 7 p.m.

you can find the Henry clan

cuddled up on the living room couch watching AFV!

Yep, that’s us, devoted viewers of America’s Funniest Videos.

It’s disappointing, I know.

Anyways, I bring it up

because a few weeks ago

there was the sweetest video

of a little kindergarten girl

whose mom videoed her as she got off the school bus

after her first day of school.

As always with these short clips, what we don’t see but imagine,
is almost as important as what we see.

In this case the mom behind the camera

explains to us that this is Sally’s first day of school,

how excited she went off in the morning

eager to begin her career as a student

and how she can’t wait to hear all about Sally’s day.

We watch as the typical yellow school bus arrives

and the children pile off.

And there she is! Our Sally.

She *is* cute!

Dressed with her hair in a bow

and the all-necessary backpack,

we too are excited to hear what she has to say.

As Sally comes into the center of the field of mom's camera
we hear mom cheerily ask that age old question of mom's everywhere, "How was your first
day of school?"

It's about then that we notice the small child's face
isn't the merry one we expect
and within a few seconds we witness as that sweet face
at the sight of her mom wilts
and tears erupt

as the sobbing child answers her mother's question
with an honesty so endearing.

She says simply several times, "I got the blues mama! I got the blues!"

Today is the third Sunday of Advent.

When I was just out of seminary in the mid-80's
the liturgical practice was to assemble an advent wreath
with 3 purple candles, one pink candle and a white Christ Candle.

The pink candle was to be lit on the 3rd Sunday of Advent
and its bright color was to symbolize the Joy of the Joy Candle. Peace, hope, joy and love –
those were and still are the four candles of advent.

Of course, liturgical traditions vary and change with need and time. They aren't set in stone
nor should they be.

But as I prepared my sermon this morning;
as I read the scripture lessons about John in prison,
I couldn't help but wonder, why, in all their liturgical wisdom
did the liturgical powers-that-be,
choose this story for Joy Sunday?!

Far from being "tickled pink,"
John like our little kindergartener,
who in the morning of his ministry
went out energized and excited to preach
repentance in the desert,
now finds himself at day's end as he sits in prison,
just full of the blues!

And I as I look at this advent wreath and wonder,
what color might best represent our advent joy;
should the candle be pink or
should it be purple or
maybe we should do as the Catholics and Lutherans
are doing these days and change the whole season to blue

I think of John
and others who sit in prisons;
stuck with questions and doubts and wonderments
dark and deep.

In many churches and other places of faith
“Blue Christmas,” “Longest Night” services
and even the traditional “Service for Healing and Wholeness”
like one Mary and Marilyn and Kathy led us in this last Wed.
have become popular around this time of year.
And it’s easy to see why.
These are days when the going can often get tough
and even the tough can get blue.

And there are few tougher than John.
You remember John.
He was a guy who had spent his life out in the wilderness
with a hair shirt, honey and locust for food.
One thing about John,
He always did things the hard way,
the green way even,
the religiously pure way.
Matthew in Chapter 3 portrays John
as one on top of his game;
ready to go toe to toe with the religious leaders of his day;
ready to tell the truth and never look back.
And yet all this preparation,
all this bulking up of the spiritual muscles finds him
in Chapter 11
doubtful,
unsure,
second guessing himself and his Savior.
There is no way from the scripture text
to know John’s emotional state,
but also I imagine him depressed, fearful, disillusioned even.

Now most of us probably do not consider ourselves
to be the spiritual superhero that John was.
But I’m willing to bet that most of here
have tried as John did to be faithful
to God’s calling on our lives.
And more than a few of us
like John have at some point in our lives heard God’s call
and have raced out the door in the morning of that calling
eager, enthused and ready;
only to return at day’s end, like Sally, with a powerful case of the blues.

This week Kathy Parkins

introduced me to the concept of “second calling”
She first heard of it from a book called the “Ragamuffin Gospel”
by Manning Brennen
and as I understand her understanding of the concept
a second call is that call to faith that comes when the first call
has seemed to end in a dead end.

As this concept played itself out in my imagination
I couldn’t help but think of John in prison
as one who wrestles with the seeming ending of a first call
and consciously or unconsciously is looking for a second.
No longer the young, ready and eager disciple who baptized Jesus,
John sits in prison precisely because
God’s first calling on his life has landed him there.
Surely he never imagined that the call to be chief baptizer
and Messiah-proclaimer would have him
end up in prison!

But one thing we know for sure,
John did wonder where God had gone wrong.
And he wastes no time going to
what he sees as the source of the problem.
He sends his disciples to
to ask Jesus
straight up,
“Are you for real? Did we get it right about you
being the Messiah or is there someone else.”
It was a good question!

The hard news about first callings is,
that they often, maybe always on this side of the grave,
eventually leave us with
hard but excellent questions!

Our sweet Sally has the blues
and she wants to know,
Is this what I have to do to learn?

On the other side of the equation,
the man who sacrificed wealth and prestige to be a teacher
hears the story of Sally,
wants to cry himself asking,
Is this what education is?

Excellent questions.

And Jesus has an answer.

Not an easy answer, as you might have guessed.

Never one to answer directly

Jesus issues to John a second calling sort of answer.

And as I've looked at this lesson this morning

I am struck by some important ways in which it is different
from the typical first calling
we think about.

Take for example the typical first calling that comes to disciples
in the Gospel of John,
the first chapter.

In that story 2 new disciples ask Jesus
where he is going and Jesus says, "Come and see."

Those disciples are young, ready and able body.

And the call matches their position.

But here in Matthew,

John is not a new disciple.

He is not new to all this.

He is not ready or able to just pick up and go.

He sits in a prison – one that he is in and one that is in him
and whatever else he might do, he cannot, "Come and see."

Are you beginning to relate to John?

Have you ever been there?

So what does a call look like to someone who cannot "Come and see."

Well Jesus instead asks John to hear and trust
what others are seeing.

He is asking John, to hear him and trust
that though his particular situation is drear,
it is not the final or only or last story to be told
and it definitely is not the end.

I have a student friend who tells me
that whenever she or her brothers learn something the "hard way"
-- you know, something like the importance of studying
for an exam because their grade was clearly indicated
that they did not put in as many hours studying than they did --

their father makes a point to tell them that they have *not*
learned the “hard way”
but the easy way – He says that because he maintains that
it’s much harder to take the advise
based upon the experience of someone else
than it is to experience and learn it for yourself.

John who once heard the gospel call the easy way’
in a way where he could experience for himself its power
must now hear it the hard way.
He must hear and trust what others see
where before he could come and see.

Jesus says to John, “Hear and see!
The blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed,
the deaf hear, the dead are raised
and the poor have good news preached to them.
Blessed is the one who does not take offense at me.”

“Hear and see” Jesus tells John, “Hear and see.”

In the blue days of advent,
friends, Jesus calls those of us stuck
with the disappointing results of a first call
to listen for a second.
a call harder than the first;
a call to listen and trust what others are seeing.

I wonder how John heard that calling?

I wonder how he felt about
the ambiguity of Jesus’ answer?
Was he surprised yet again by this Savior who came
here on earth not to be the sort of Messiah humans *want*,
but to be the Messiah they *need*.

A Savior here to love us – not in some one size fits all sort of way

Jesus is calling to John a second time.
and he’s saying, “Dear John,
Once you came and saw,
but now in the place where you are;
the place where you cannot come and see
can you now hear and trust what others see?”

Over the years it has been my privilege to marry couples,
some of whom are remarrying
due to divorce or death of a spouse.

I remember one bride in particular
who had had a terrible experience in her first marriage
a marriage that ended in divorce.

The call to
marry the person she now loved was strong,
but the fear to commit again was also great.

In tears she said to me,
“How do I say those words again with integrity?”

There she sat in the prison of her past.
God was calling her to love again,
but it's not as easy this time.
She had harder questions to pose than before,
and the ever ambiguous answer of love
that really promises only to abide
but never guarantees what the future will bring haunted her.

But then she did something interesting to me.
She began asking about others experiences.
I noticed how important hearing and trusting
the stories of others can become for her at that time.
I watched as she asked friends of second marriages
and read of others about how they made sense
of the call to marry a second time.
No longer the believer of sappy, first love stories, like before,
she reveled in the rough hewn joyful stories of
those who had loved and lost and
found a strange joyful continuity
between the new love that attracted them now.

Eventually, wary though she was,
she did marry, certain that it took greater faith
to embrace this second call to love
but convinced that in that greater faith she found greater love
and joy.

Of course, such a journey is perhaps more observable
in those who remarry
but is a fact with any couple who loves and marries
for all couples must suffer dashed dreams

and reinvision their life together
hundreds of times over the course of their relationship together –
They too listen for the hope
found in stories of those who have gone through
the shadows and made it to the other side.

Friends it occurs to me that
the Joy Candle we light this Sunday
is an invitation to joy through our ability to hear and see
the witness of others.

A story that tells us that
on the way to answering our calling
some Herod or another, within or outside us, sometimes both!
throws us into prison.

Once there the blues are bound to come
and along with them doubts and questions galore.
The most important ones are addressed to Jesus
who tells us we have come to the place in the road
where we must listen and trust what others see
and hear the good news they are experiencing.

We must open our eyes
to a call bigger
than what we have been about to Come and see.

A call that includes the calls of others
whose stories can help us understand even deeper
what it means as we strive to usher in the love of God in Jesus Christ.

Their stories added to ours
makes the vision larger than we ever imagined.

It makes it more than about us.

It shows us how we must,
for love's sake, endure to the end.

It calls for a love that has great patience
as the epistle lesson from James suggests.

It calls us not to judge the end by the present circumstances.

It means being faithful to loves tasks
despite feeling wary or weary or stuck sometimes.

That's the call Jesus himself answered
and the one he issues again and again.

And the tradition tells us, John answered it too – a second time.

This morning friends, I think Jesus is calling any of us here today
who has tried before but has given up.

He calls us as he called John
to the joy of the hardest way;

the way of listening and trusting
again in spite of our experience,
the good news others have for us.
It takes a level of faith maturity that is quite deep to hear such news.

I'm still thinking about the color of this third advent candle.
The blues are real, but so is the pink.
Maybe for now purple is the right color
since it combines the two.

You choose,
but more importantly
hear the call
and trust the stories.

The blind do see. The poor are answered.
There are even those who have endured prison
have lived to praise God's name for it.
You can ask Catherine Miller about those stories.

Joy blossoms in the desert
pointing the way to Zion
where God will meet
all the joyful who heard and trusted
and found there was no prison that could keep them
from proclaiming the love of God in Jesus Christ.
It is a joy that even if Herod wants to cut off your head for it,
it can't be killed!

Amen.