



Coloring the Lives of Children and Families **October 2009**

With Crayon In Hand

Introduction

Do any of you remember the days before color television? In the days of black and white broadcasts, only in our imaginations could we experience the true beauty of a sunset or determine the color of a favorite star's hair or clothing. Then something exciting happened. Color came to the small screen. In the early days of color, the NBC peacock would announce, "The following program is brought to you in living color." That announcement raised the bar and brought a sense of anticipation - something exciting was about to happen. For the first time, Americans learned that Opie Taylor (The Andy Griffith Show) had bright red hair and Little Joe's (Bonanza) jacket was green. Color added excitement and emotion to the world of television, just as color adds vibrancy and vitality to the real world around us. Today, it is difficult to imagine a world, real or fictional, that is not brought to us in living color.

For many of us, one of our first creative acts involved taking a Crayola crayon in hand and adding color to an otherwise drab, black and white page. Over time, we graduated from scribbling all over the page with a single color to making use of the full box of eight crayons. Finally we were able to stay within the lines and create true masterpieces. Crayola crayons have been adding color to the lives of young and old alike for over 100 years. (The name "Crayola" actually means oily chalk.) The company began making crayons in 1903, and the one billionth crayon was rolled out of the plant in 1996. It is estimated that by age ten, the average child has worn out 730 crayons. That's a lot of color!

When was the last time you got out a box of Crayolas and spent time coloring? Do you remember the feel of the crayon in your hand? What is your favorite color? (According to research, the favorite color of most people is blue.) Can you still smell the distinct aroma of the wax? According to a Yale University study, the smell of Crayola crayons is among the top 20 most recognizable smells for Americans. Even though there are many other makers of crayons, Crayola is one of the most recognizable brand names in the marketplace, and has become synonymous with color, fun and quality. Whether you are a child, a parent, a grandparent, or just a child at heart, there may be no better therapy than sitting down with a blank piece of paper and a box of crayons.

Color Of Creation

I think that God loves to color as well. In the very act of creation, it is as if God took a box of Crayolas and added color to the chaos. With orange God colored the sun and with yellow God painted the moon. God added strokes of blue to the oceans and the sky, and used brown to color the earth. Green was chosen for the lush places, and purple was used to highlight the majesty of the mountains. With white and pink God colored the blossoms that would become plants and flowers and fruit of every kind. When it came to the creatures of the sea, the birds of the air, and the animals of the earth, God couldn't decide on a single color, so God used them all. Likewise, God created human beings so wonderful and so diverse that no single color could define them. Then, when the picture was done, God stood back and said, "It is good." And God rested, perhaps with a coloring book and crayons nearby.

But, God's creating work was not done. Throughout the scriptures, God continues to add color to the lives of people. The weak are made strong, the blind are given sight, the lame leave leaping, the possessed are separated from their demons, the sick are made well, the dead are given life, the lost are found, the unlovable are loved, and the unforgivable are forgiven. No matter the condition of the life, God can take the old canvas and repaint it in a way that makes it new and fresh again.

Application

Thanks to God's creating and re-creating work in our lives and in our world, and thanks to the people and experiences God has placed in our path, most of us are able to live out our lives in magnificent living color. That color represents much more than the hues of things around us. There is a vibrancy and vitality to our work, our relationships, our faith, and our experiences. But not every life reflects that vibrancy and vitality. One traumatic event, such as surviving a car accident, witnessing a crime, or being the victim of a violent act, can drain the color out of a life. The effect may be even more dramatic when the trauma is experienced at an early age.

Many of the young people in the care of the Children's Home, and many of the young people in our families and communities, are survivors of *multiple* traumas. Recently a survey was conducted at the Children's Home in an effort to determine the most important issues facing the young people. The residents came up with a long list, including poverty, sexual abuse, domestic violence, bullying, learning disabilities, and neglect, as well as a number of other concerns. The residents were then asked to pick the top two or three concerns in their lives. For many of the young people, it was very impossible to limit the choice to only two or three issues. As one young lady stated when she read through the rather lengthy list, "This is the story of my life." Young people who have experienced years of abuse, neglect, and other traumas often live out their lives in a "black and white" world - a world devoid of the excitement, joy, anticipation, and opportunity most of us take for granted - a world in which they feel unsafe and unwelcome. Their world is one of turmoil, chaos, confusion, and emotional pain.

The Children's Home responds with trauma-sensitive care designed to add and restore color to the lives of young people and their families. The Children's Home offers an array of programs from preventive services, to residential care, to independent living arrangements. Some of the "crayons" in the box include caring staff members, consistent and predictable structure, therapy sessions with trained social workers, a full recreation program, educational opportunities, life-skills training, and spiritual life programming. Each program and each intervention is designed to add new and different dimensions of color to the lives of the young people in care. One stroke might add the color of safety. Another stroke adds the color of forgiveness and unconditional love. Still another stroke adds the color of a brighter future and a life worth living. Little by little, one stroke at a time, a masterpiece begins to take form.

Consider the life of Rose. Rose was a seven-year-old girl whose parents left her with a relative when she was very young. The parents never returned. She was placed in seven different foster homes and spent time in an emergency shelter and a diagnostic unit. When it was decided that Rose should be placed in a residential setting to assist in dealing with her multiple issues, the Ardsley House Group Home, one of the programs of the Children's Home, proved to be the perfect placement. There she not only got the specialized care that she needed, but she was able to maintain contact with family and friends. Little by little, stroke by stroke, color returned to Rose's life.

When young people are beaten down by physical, emotional and psychological abuse, it's not always easy for others to know and appreciate the person who looms behind the presenting pain and chaos. It is easy for us to look at the young person and see only the black and white snapshot of their present behaviors. The good news is that God sees every one of them in full, living color - with all their wonder and all their possibilities. And God calls each one of us to do the same. Our prayer should be that God will, "Teach us to care for people; for all, not just for some, to love them as we find them, or as they may become." (*Help Us Accept Each Other*, UMH #560) Then, with crayons in hand, we can work together to add healing color to the lives of those around us, and especially to the lives of children.

It is helpful to remember that caring for young people is not a one-way street. At the same time that we are striving to add color to their lives, they are adding color to our lives. I think that is what Jesus was saying when he called the little children to come to him (see Mark 10:13-16). Jesus knew that the lives of those children would be forever changed by their relationship with him. But he also knew that somehow, the kingdom of God is colored and completed by the presence of children. There's something about their innocence, their capacity to embrace mystery and wonder, and their honesty that pleases and compliments God. The presence of children can expand and enrich our world and our lives. The children come to us as a blessing, allowing us to become like children again and helping us to see our world a little differently and a little more simply. Then, being so blessed, we can go forth to be a blessing to others.

Conclusion

It's fitting that when God was looking for a sign of restoration and re-creation after the flood God chose a rainbow. God once again took a box of crayons and filled the sky with the colors of creation as a way of saying, "Let's start over." When we are battered by the storms of life, God comes to us with crayon in hand to re-create us, adding new strokes of color to our faded lives. And God calls us, as individual and as churches, to do the same. What would happen if we took our box of crayons in hand and painted a rainbow of welcome over the doors of our homes and our churches as a way of saying to troubled lives, "Let's start over; you are welcome here. Come in and allow God to repaint your past and create a colorful vision of the future."