



June 22, 2008

Preaching: Rev. Ronni Verboom

Matthew 10:34-42

“Where Did We Go Wrong?”

Dear Valerie,

I’ve been lying awake, dear sister, unable to sleep-- lying in the bed next to John, listening to the rumbling and stirring of his body in sleep. The hall clock keeps on ticking and striking, ticking and striking- BONG BONG BONG. It’s three o’clock in the morning and I’m giving up on sleep and writing to you.

I know I called you last month when we received the news about Christine. I chewed your ear off then, we talked over two hours, didn’t we? But inside my head the same thoughts keep swirling and gushing, like muddy waters about to engulf me. I’m being eaten alive by the same anxieties and questions—Valerie, please bear with me going over it again one more time.

Where did we go wrong, Valerie? Where did we go wrong with Christine? What did we do to make her the way she is? Why does she have to DO the things she does? Why did she fly off to that country—that hotbed of political unrest? I know she talks about “being called by God”, and I know she’s probably doing, oh, I don’t know, GOOD CHRISTIAN things there----- but Valerie, it seems the Christian things Christine hears God calling her to do are always these FAR-OFF, DRAMATIC kinds of things. She COULD be a Christian without putting her life in danger, right? She COULD be a Christian without leaving the country-right? There are plenty of Christians right here in Illinois, for God’s sake! WHY??

Valerie, I keep remember things from when she was little. Of course we took Christine and Jack to church.... We wanted them to grow up learning about God

and the Bible and Jesus. We took them to Sunday School, we taught them prayers to say at bedtime and before meals. Remember the one Christine liked when she was four? *Thank you for the world so sweet, thank you for the food we eat, thank you for the birds that sing; thank you God for everything!*

But already at four, I didn't know what to make of her. We bought her the doll she'd seen on TV—remember, it ate and drank and crawled. She'd seen it on TV for months, and had her heart absolutely set on it for her birthday.

We didn't have much money then, remember? We were barely scraping by with John trying to finish his degree, working at the market 25 hours a week, and me with a year old baby to care for in addition to Christine. But we loved her, Valerie, we loved her so much. She was such a sparkling child with that halo of coppery hair, always laughing and full of questions. We bought her that doll. Sure, it was a gimmick and yes, it was outrageously overpriced, but she wanted it. She WANTED it. And we wanted her to have it.

Then, remember Valerie, she gave it to that eight-year old on the corner, what was her name.... Kathy Howland, wasn't it? We were living in a modest neighborhood then, and some folks in that neighborhood had tough situations to deal with. Kathy's mom had wandered off when she was a toddler—and she'd never known her dad. She and her two older sisters were all living with a stern, brittle grandmother who seemed to be overwhelmed by their needs. They didn't have much. Those girls all seemed like poor scared rabbits. Your heart went out to them... it did! But Valerie, Christine gave her brand-new doll to that girl. She hadn't even played with it a week. And when I asked her about it, yes, I admit, I was SHOCKED. I was ANGRY even.

“How could you GIVE AWAY your brand- new doll?? You GAVE AWAY your birthday doll??”

I was going to MAKE her go back and get it. I was pretty sure Kathy's grandma wouldn't object. It was much too valuable a toy to be casually given away.

But Christine got this look on her face, Valerie, she looked at me SYMPATHETICALLY. She came over to where I was sitting, put that tiny hand on my arm, and leaned close, peering into my eyes.

“Don't you know what Jesus said, Mommy?--- her eyes said, “You poor thing! Nobody ever taught you this???”

When I paused, dumbfounded, she went on, patiently instructing me:

“Jesus said to do for other people things like you want them to do for you. We learned it in Sunday School.”

She waited for my response. Confused, I babbled something about how, yes, I guess I HAD heard that somewhere, sometime.. She smiled and ran off. What could I say to that? I had to let it go.

Oh, you and I both know that Christine wasn't some kind of freaky angel-child. She slugged her brother, she got sassy, she called me a witch—and worse, once she hit the teen years. But she always had this habit of taking everything she learned in those Bible stories so SERIOUSLY!

She learned Jesus said something once about giving away coats—I don't remember exactly WHAT the Bible said on this, but when she was in third grade she went through her closet and took out every single coat and jacket except ONE, and took them to the Goodwill dropoff at the supermarket parking lot.

Of course there were those work trips she went on with the youth group in high school... to Appalachia, to Denver, to work in the inner city. We thought they'd be GOOD for her---broadening her experience of life. WE didn't expect her to want to make this kind of stuff a full-time occupation as an adult! –full time Christian service they called it, I guess.

Valerie, it just seems like we made some kind of mistake with her. We didn't manage to raise her to be a well-rounded, well-balanced sort of young woman. Christine has ended up terribly INTENSE; so inclined to go totally off the deep end with her convictions and beliefs.

I think we did a better job with Jack, somehow. I mean, he finished law school, got in with a solid firm, and he and Jenny and the kids are all settled in their brand new house they bought last July. Of course, they don't go to church at all. Jack hasn't gone back since he went off to college his freshman year. Once I talked to him about that. With Kevin and Joel now three and four, it seemed to me it's getting to be time for them to begin Sunday School. Jack really jumped on me about that.

“Why should they go to Sunday School?” he asked.

“Well, so they can receive Christian education, and training,” I said. It seemed obvious to me.

Jack got this sly smile on his face and asked, “So they will grow up to follow Jesus Christ, like Christine???”

That wasn't fair, I thought. I wasn't fair.

But maybe it was. Maybe it was.

Jack's question keeps haunting me in the night. I close my eyes and I see Kevin and Joel the way they looked sleeping in their beds when I kissed them good-bye on my last visit—peaceful, breathing deeply, their copper colored hair gleaming in the light of the hall as it spilled through the door.

I close my eyes, and I see Christine as a child, that coppery hair splashed across her Snoopy pillowcase as she slept in the upstairs corner bedroom.

I close my eyes, and I see that OBSCENE message sent by that Board of something or other that sent her thousands of miles from us:

We regret to inform you that Christine March is presently missing- there is civil unrest in the region. We will be in touch via telephone as soon as we have any updates. Please feel free to contact us in the meantime.

John, of course, called immediately- but they had basically nothing concrete to tell us. I know I've told you all this already. But John can't handle my talking about it with him now. I go on and on and on about it. Can you believe it's been 29 days?- I guess 30, now, this is morning—a new day. Forgive me, but I need you—I need you to talk to, to listen, to receive my dark night messages.

Oh, I almost forgot to include the one thing I HAVEN'T told you yet. Yesterday we got a letter in the mail- it's a letter from Christine. It was mailed before she disappeared. You know how slow mail can be coming from there. It's a newsy kind of letter, nothing really unusual—except for the closing:

I know, Mom and Dad, you are terribly puzzled about, and even disappointed in how I have chosen to live my life. I understand that. It's all right that you are puzzled and disappointed. But I just want you to know that I am happy... Happy isn't the right word. I've tasted JOY here. Joy I can't describe. Please never be puzzled or confused about this one thing: I love you. I love you very deeply. Hugs and kisses, Christine.

Valerie, I don't know how to end this message. Thank you for your love, for listening to me- on the phone, via e-mail. I ache. I hurt. Where is my baby, my

lovely grown daughter? What has happened to her? What will be come of her? Is God still with her? Will God protect her? How can she have been full of joy in the midst of such danger?

Please Valerie, pray for me, and for John, and for Jack and his little family- they are devastated. I guess that's what I most need to say to you, pray for us and pray for Christine.

Love, Claire