

Outsiders and Insiders

When you're making your way through the morning paper, do you like to read "Dear Abby"? I do. After reading *The Upper Room* daily meditation at breakfast, I often open the newspaper and turn to "Dear Abby." As an advice columnist, Abby gets some interesting mail. A lot of it is about problems with family members. And about how some relatives, for one reason or another, don't get invited to, included in, or welcomed at family gatherings. Some relatives are outsiders.

And sadly, some of the folks who write to "Dear Abby" don't get along with their families at all. Here's an actual letter that appeared a while back. The author is—by the way—neither a South Carolinian nor a United Methodist. Listen to her words:

"Dear Abby: I am a middle-aged woman who is [Christian] by faith. I believe that when I die I will go to heaven. My problem is, if going to heaven means being reunited with my parents and other family members, then I don't want to go! The idea of spending eternity with them is more than I can stand, but I don't want to go to hell, either. Any thoughts? Eternally Confused."

And Abby responds: “Dear Eternally Confused: Yes. When you reach the pearly gates, talk this over with Saint Peter. Perhaps he would be willing to place you in a different wing than the one your parents and other family members are staying in. And in the meantime, discuss this with your minister.”

Hopefully, your own extended family doesn't have issues with one another. But lots of families do. According to this Sunday's reading from Mark's Gospel, even the family of Jesus does.

Jesus' family has traveled to Capernaum, where he's made Peter's house his home base. The brothers and sisters of Jesus, and even Mary herself, have heard some reports that concern them. Reports that Jesus has been casting out demons. Healing on the sabbath. And even forgiving sins! He's been going around Galilee preaching about a new kind of kingdom. They say he's behaving strangely. They say he's off his rocker. This brother the Nazareth family has eaten with and played with and worked with—this One they've watched grow up—he's becoming someone they're embarrassed by. They want to rein him in. Shut him up. Take him back to Nazareth. The siblings of Jesus aren't following

him. They're not his disciples—at least, not yet. In fact, they're rejecting his message.

And Jesus' family end up on the outside. Literally. We find them standing outside the house where Jesus is staying. They end up on the outside figuratively, too: outside the circle of those closest to him.

But Jesus' family aren't the only ones who've been hearing rampant rumors about this itinerant rabbi. Those allegations have reached the ears of Jewish leaders in the capital city. Reached the ears of scribes. They, too, have come to check this Jesus out. To see for themselves just what it is that he's up to. They've come a long way up the country—all the way from Jerusalem.

These scribes are steeped in every nuance of the Law of Moses. They're teachers and interpreters of the Law. Expert legal scholars. Religious authorities. Scribes consider themselves insiders. And they consider Jesus an outsider. They accuse Jesus of being on the side of Satan.

Now when you stop and think about it, the scribes' accusation doesn't make a whole lot of sense, does it? Charging Jesus with casting out demons by the power of Satan? Satan is the *ruler* of demons. Why would he run off his own troops? Why

would he rise up against his own forces? And besides, you and I know that he is no match for Jesus, who is far stronger. And who has already tied up the enemy and is taking back what is Jesus' own.

But these scribes have attributed the compassionate, healing work of God in Christ Jesus to the evil one. And with this slander, this blasphemy, they have cut themselves off from the power of the Holy Spirit at work in Jesus. They have cut themselves off from the one, the only true source of forgiveness. That's why forgiveness can never be theirs. Because, tragically, they have placed *themselves* outside the realm of God's forgiveness. These authorities, who think of themselves as insiders, have turned into outsiders.

These verses about a particular group of people who lived at a particular time and place—do these verses trouble you? Through the centuries, they have greatly—and unnecessarily—troubled many devoted Christians, who focus intently on what Jesus calls *an eternal sin*. A sin for which a person cannot be forgiven.

Are *you* worried that you may have committed the unpardonable sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit?

If you are, I have good news for you this morning. If you're a person of faith who worships and serves the triune God, if you live your life following Jesus, hear me when I tell you that it's not possible for you to be guilty of an unforgivable sin! Because you have not cut yourself off. Instead, you have embraced a believing way, a faith-filled way of being in the world.

Jesus and his disciples were in this same world. And Mark tells us that just before the events in today's reading take place, Jesus and his companions have gone up on a mountain, where he's appointed his twelve apostles. On that mountain, Jesus creates a new community. In this radical new community of Jesus Christ, in this reality known as the kingdom of God, insiders can become outsiders. And outsiders can become insiders.

When you look in a mirror, what's your perception of the person looking back at you? Do you see an insider? Or do you see an outsider? Have you been influenced by family members or friends in seeing yourself that way? When you look in the mirror, do you see someone who has been first one and then the other in various seasons of his or her life?

That's how it is for the first man and the first woman, the ones we read about in Genesis. They start out as insiders. Created

in God's image, abiding in the nearness of God's presence, touched by the breeze of God's Spirit. Dwelling in a luxuriant garden, a lush and lovely paradise. But the man and the woman desire forbidden fruit. By doing the one thing, the *only* thing that God has asked them not to do, by choosing not to live in accordance with God's good intention and perfect will for them, they make themselves outsiders.

And so our first parents go out from the home of God's love into a world of brokenness that we have inherited. As descendants of disobedience, you and I start out as outsiders. We all begin as outsiders.

No matter what I do or how hard I try, I can't *earn* the place of an insider. I don't deserve it. Being an insider comes to you and me only through the gift of grace. Only through the loving invitation of God in Christ Jesus.

Who includes outsiders. Who welcomes outsiders. Who welcomes aliens and addicts, prodigals and prostitutes. Who welcomes tax collectors, trespassers, and transgressors. Who welcomes sinners. Who welcomes you and me. Jesus welcomes. Invites. Includes. And blesses.

Jesus blesses outsiders—those the *world* deems outsiders. In a world in which the prosperous keep getting more prosperous, Jesus blesses the poor. In a world where some have so much food that a great deal ends up in the trash, Jesus blesses those who hunger. In a world that considers happiness a *right*, Jesus blesses those bent with sorrow and grief. In a world that idolizes popularity and prestige, Jesus blesses all who are excluded and reviled because of him. In a world of self-assertion and self-promotion, in a world that insists: *nice guys finish last*, Jesus blesses the humble. In a world where nation lifts up sword against nation, Jesus blesses those who work for peace, those who are called children of God. Those who are brought inside God's family.

You and I were born into a family of origin, a human family. Relationships with blood kin are meant to be close and caring. But Jesus makes clear that these ties are not to get in the way of the bond we share with him in the family of God. The family we enter by responding in faith to the poured-out grace of God, by walking in obedience to the will of God.

And we know what that will is. It's that we love! Love God and love the neighbor. So that's what we do. We keep striving for

the most excellent way of love. We keep seeking to get better at it. We keep trying to be more loving. We keep learning to love as Jesus loves. We've been in this learning process ever since we met him.

Like those people in the crowd Mark shows us today, we start out by pressing around Jesus. Eager to find out more about him. Hoping to be touched by him.

And then, miraculously, he beckons to us. Draws us close. So that we are outsiders no more. But insiders, privileged to share in the work Jesus has come to do, the work he calls you and me to take part in: the work of turning this old upside-down world right-side-up.

When we do this work, when you and I live into God's will, Jesus claims us as his brothers and sisters. And he asks us to go and, in his name, to invite every outsider to become an insider. To include each one. To welcome *all* to a family gathering—the gathering of Christ's family—in the home of God's everlasting love.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.