

Mark 3:19b-22, 31-35

Then he went home; ²⁰and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. ²¹When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, 'He has gone out of his mind.' ²²And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, 'He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.'

Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. ³²A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, 'Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.' ³³And he replied, 'Who are my mother and my brothers?' ³⁴And looking at those who sat around him, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers!' ³⁵Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.'

Inside Out

Well, Ascension Day was actually on Thursday, and on that day I ascended twice, once in Seoul and once again in Beijing. And while Jesus ascended and has not yet descended, I HAVE – I descended on New York around midnight, and it's good to be back with you. I thank those who took care of business and led worship while I was away.

What exactly does it mean that Jesus ascended to the Father? It's hard for this modern-day Christian to get his head around the idea of Jesus going up into the clouds; to people who lived a few thousand years ago perhaps it wasn't too hard to accept because "up there" was a mystery; it was easy enough to believe that supernatural being dwelled up there in the heavens, the same place that brought sunshine and rain and lightning and thunder. But science has cracked so many of the mysteries about what's "up there" and we can't quite imagine it as a place that Jesus ascended TO. What we should recognize though is that Jesus was returning to the place from whence he came, and that is to be with his Father, wherever that might be. So for Jesus this was a homecoming. And based on what Jesus has taught us about the Kingdom of God this was a place quite a bit different from the way things are "down here" in our world.

Jesus was an outsider as opposed to an insider. When we think of insiders/outsideers, we think in terms of social structure. On Wall Street, insider trading involves making profit through information that is only available to certain insiders. In terms of politics, insiders are those who have special access to people in power and knowledge about what those people are thinking and planning. Being an insider gives you advantage over other because you can influence those in power or you can act upon inside information that gives you advantage over the uninformed public.

Jesus was an outsider because, I hate to say it, but God is an outsider in this world. Humanity still basically operates on the principle of self-preservation which is driven by fear and often comes at the cost of others; people strive for worldly power usually to make their own lives better according to the standards of this world. God is not

interested in self-preservation; he doesn't need to be because he's eternal. But those who have lost their connection with God can only hope for a comfortable existence in this life, and out of their fears they trample on others to secure that comfortable life. Jesus comes right out and says that the Kingdom of God is the complete opposite of this; he says, "to gain life you must lose it," "the greatest among you is the one who serves the most," "the first shall be last and the last shall be first." The fact is that the world does not buy his message; it still operates on the self-preservation principle. Democracy is certainly the best form of government, but Jesus could never win an election because people in a democracy vote according to self-interest based on worldly standards – "am I going to profit by voting for this person?" "Will my insurance premiums go down?" "Will I feel safer with this person leading our country?" Jesus would have asked questions like, "Is this person going to have enough food to eat?" "Will this person have the opportunity to receive a good education?" "Will *these people* be treated fairly?" I think Jesus would have certainly cared about people's safety and security; he hated violence in whatever form it took, but he would have also known that the way to diminish violence is to improve your standards of justice which means treating all people fairly, and a world where people driven by self-interest is constantly pushing against true justice as people are always trying to gain an advantage, to get special privilege, to be an insider. And when you live in a world where there are insiders, you know that there are also outsiders, and those were the people Jesus hung out with – the outsiders.

Our scripture lesson really draws out this distinction between insider and outsider. Jesus is in a house and a crowd had followed him there. Why did they follow him? Some may have just been curious. Some were hoping to be healed. Some wanted forgiveness (this was something radical that Jesus was doing against the rules devised by the religious authorities). Anyway, word gets to his mother and siblings in Nazareth; "You better come and collect your son, because 'people' are saying that he's crazy." Who were the people saying this, and why were they saying it? I can't imagine Jesus prancing around clucking like a chicken. My best guess is that Jesus was saying and doing things that were unconventional (like healing on the Sabbath and forgiving people willy nilly) AND perhaps there were a lot of folks in the crowd who didn't quite fit the image of normal – the poor and the sick, people possessed by demons, "sinners" and tax collectors, the lowest of the low; people we might consider "outsiders." They don't fit "in" to our community and our way of life. Perhaps people called Jesus "crazy" because of the direct way that he challenged the rule of law ("Man, this guy's crazy; he's gonna get himself arrested!"). The scribes were saying he was possessed by demons, and you know what they do to people who have demons swarming around inside of them. And so his mom and brothers and sisters come to collect Jesus and get him back home into his rubber room before the people in power, the insiders, decide to get rid of him. And when someone tells him, "Your family is here asking for you," Jesus says, "You are my family; those who do the will of God are my family."

You might ask in what way the sick and demonically possessed and the tax collectors and sinners were doing the will of God in this situation, and the answer is that they were coming to Jesus for help. Some were repenting. They all wanted to be *restored* to

health, physically and spiritually, because you can't testify to Jesus' healing powers unless you have somehow experienced his healing. It's God's will that you be healed in order that you can better heal others. And what we need to be healed of most of all is not our overactive thyroid or our diabetes; what we need to be healed of is our own alienation from God that causes us to live in fear of deprivation and death. We need to take to heart Jesus' assurance on this Ascension Sunday that where he has gone we will go as well, and that when he returns we will enjoy new life here as he rules in a new world where the outsiders are in and those seeking to be insiders are out, where our hearts are set on loving God and loving one another.

I want to challenge you today in two ways. First, as disciples of Jesus Christ, I challenge you to consider yourself an outsider as Jesus was an outsider. Being an outsider is not just about doing things differently for the sake of being different; it's about **doing the will of God even when people around you think you're crazy for doing so**. We're not called to isolate ourselves from the darkness; we're called to **bring light into** that darkness, and that means that we have to tread where there are people living in darkness – where the sick and the outcasts dwell. And who are the sick and the outcasts who dwell in our midst in our community? Those drawn into addiction? Those suffering from mental illness? Those who are desperately seeking a way to get their lives in order? Or could it be the foreigner, the immigrant or those who society looks down their noses at? Are you willing and able to dwell with such people, even if it means some people will think that YOU'RE crazy, even if people no longer consider you an insider? That's what makes this challenge hard; there's a price to be paid for abandoning your position as in "insider." You may get ostracized. You may even get threatened. But you can rest assured that you'll be doing the will of God.

My second challenge to you is this: once you've accepted the idea that you are an outsider, I want you to make a real effort to get to know your fellow outsiders. Don't just write a check and send it to some agency that's going to provide charity to someone; that is not dwelling with them, and thus you're not really one of them. There's much more benefit to be gained for you and for others when you give your time and energy to the people who live in the shadows. Dwelling among the outsiders means you have to go with an open mind and open heart, to hear their stories, to learn about them, and in so doing you begin to understand their struggles, to speak their language. Having just spent two weeks with my Korean side of the family, I've resolved to spend more time learning the Korean language, because learning the language helps break down walls that distinguish inside from outside. That's going to take some work, but as I do the work I know that I will not only get to know my family better; I'll get to know Korean culture so much better. I'll get to know their struggles and their aspirations, and that will help me feel a greater sense of belonging to them. And that will help me better understand the struggles of the Korean-American community as well. The same sort of investment is required for any crowd or culture that you want to engage with. If you want to really know the struggles that people face from growing up in the projects you need to take that scary step of getting to know those who live in that environment, to hear their stories, to gain their perspective, to understand what they experience. Without taking the risk of learning about other people and spending the time and energy to get to know

them, you stand the risk of embracing lies about “those” people; human beings have a psychological need to justify our behavior, and so we demonize those who we don’t want to help in order to justify our lack of charity. We have to diminish and demean those we deprive or persecute in order to feel more comfortable with ourselves; it’s called moral insanity. “They don’t deserve it,” or “They’ll end up wasting what we give,” often becomes our line of defense. Do you really know someone well enough to make those kinds of assumptions? You can’t know them unless you spend time among them and dwell with them. Only then can you make such judgments.

Those are two huge challenges that I leave you with; to look upon yourself as a follower of Jesus as an outsider among outsiders, and then to spend some time and energy getting to know your fellow outsiders. Jesus hit the nail right on the head when he said, “Inasmuch as you have done this to the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you have done this for me.” When you give yourself over to the least of these, to the outsiders, you will no doubt meet Jesus in their midst.