

“An Inside Job”

In an interview for *Today's Christian Woman*, writer and speaker Carol Kent says: “One day when my son Jason was young, we were eating breakfast together. I had on an old pair slacks and a fuzzy sweater. He flashed his baby blues at me over his cereal bowl and said, ‘Mommy, you look so pretty today.’ I didn’t even have makeup on! So I said, ‘Honey, why would you say I look pretty today? Normally I’m dressed up in a suit and high heels?’ And he said, ‘When you look like that, I know you’re going some place; but when you look like this, I know you’re all mine!’”

This story brought both a tear to my eyes and a smile to my lips because it illustrates so beautifully *all* that we receive when we are members of a family. It is a story of acceptance, of encouragement, but most of all, of love. And in the midst of a fiery letter to the church at Galatia defending the gospel that he had proclaimed, Paul also writes beautifully about what it means to be a member of the family of God.

Paul had been to Galatia and preached the Good News that salvation comes through faith in Jesus Christ. However, false teachers had come along behind him and added to his Gospel. Those followers of Jesus who had previously been Jewish simply could not understand how anyone could be saved without adhering to the Law of Moses. So, Paul’s opponents had added **that** requirement to his prescription for salvation for the Gentiles. And the truth is that these opponents were not being malicious – they really thought they were right.

Being in the new church together was hard for them anyway. You see, these Jews had been raised with the understanding that it was actually illegal to help a Gentile – even a woman in childbirth. The mindset was that this would only mean bringing another Gentile into the world. So, to think about sharing *salvation* with them was really a hard pill to swallow. In today’s terms, we might say that their teachings were about who is in and who is out.

But Paul came along and basically said that ANYONE who wants to be “in” can be, by the grace of God. He said that if we try to keep the law, we will ALWAYS be on the outside looking in. On the other hand, faith puts us on the inside, no matter where we have come from or who we have been before we met Christ. This really is Good News and a wonderful promise for us all to hold on to.

Of course, the problem that Paul faced was that he could not completely discount the Law of Moses. This would only alienate the Jews further by implying that this Law, that had been so important to them, was now null and void. And as modern-day Christians, it might be tempting to believe that perhaps the Law is of no use to US EITHER. But this could not be farther from the truth.

The Law actually serves two very important purposes. First, the law tells us what sin is. By defining what righteous behavior looks like, we are able to know what unrighteous behavior is as well. And sometimes, it is easier to live as if we don’t *know* about our sins than it is to try to repent. In a sermon on sin, a certain preacher announced that there were 789 different sins. Within a few days, he received 94 emails from members of his congregation requesting the list of the 789 sins!

The second use of the Law is that it turns men and women toward the grace of God by showing us our weakness. In other words, the Law helps us understand that left to our own devices, we can never live free from sin, so we are without hope. But God gives us grace freely - there is nothing we can do to earn this grace or pay for our own sins. This is where we find our hope – in God’s outrageous grace.

The story is told of a soldier who told his chaplain that he would give anything to believe that God could forgive his sins if he simply asked. When the chaplain asked why he couldn’t believe it, he replied, “It is just too cheap.” The chaplain then said, “Didn’t you work in the mine today?” when he acknowledged that he had, he asked, “Well, how did you get out?” He answered, “The way I always do; I got into the cage and was pulled to the top.” “How much did you pay to get out,” the minister asked. “Why nothing,” he was told. “Weren’t you afraid to trust yourself to that cage – didn’t you think that was an awfully cheap price?” The soldier said, “Oh no, it was cheap for me, but it cost the company a lot of money to sink that shaft.” And then the soldier began to see the light. He suddenly understood that *grace* is the infinite price that Christ paid for each of us and that it comes to us simply by faith and not by anything we can do ourselves.

We don’t achieve outrageous grace by being good. We receive outrageous grace by being God’s. Just as the children of Israel were rescued from slavery simply because God chose them, so we are chosen to be rescued from the enslaving aspects of life today.

So, Paul decides to illustrate these principles of Law and grace by using the illustration of a family. He tells us that anyone who believes in Christ is an adopted child of God. This basically means that anyone who accepts the gift of grace is automatically “in” where the family of God is concerned. And putting his teachings into the context of

family assures us of acceptance, encouragement and love. Like the love that the little boy had for his mom.

But in reality, because this family of God is made up of humankind, we may not always feel accepted and encouraged. Mary was having a really bad day, so she decided to lay on the couch and indulge in some well deserved complaining and self-pitying. She moaned to her mom and younger brother, “Nobody loves me . . .the whole world hates me!” Her brother, busily occupied with a video game, hardly looked up at her and passed on this encouraging word: “That’s not true Mary. Some people don’t even know you!” What a lift!

But Paul reminds us of two very important things about being an insider with God. First, we have the presence of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. Next week is Pentecost and we will hear more about the Holy Spirit then. However, the Bible gives us a job description of the tasks the Spirit performs.

The Spirit is our comforter, our guide, our advocate, our helper. The Spirit is God’s presence in us and even prays for us. The Spirit is our encourager. Paul’s words reassure us that once we accept the gift of God’s grace, the Holy Spirit is in our lives to stay.

And second, Paul tells us that as adopted children of God, we can call him “Abba! Father.” Paul uses both the Greek, Father, and the Aramaic, Abba – the word that Jesus himself used in the Garden of Gethsemane, which is better translated as “Daddy!” This means that we have been given the privilege of addressing God with intimacy. There is no need for formal, stiff protocol but rather we are free to speak to him as a child speaks to a parent. We can express ourselves without fear. We can share the intimate details of

our lives. We can be spontaneous! All because we know that we have been legally adopted by God through the life, death and resurrection of his Son and given all the benefits of the gifts of the Spirit.

But Paul's words take this adoption a step further. He reminds us that Jesus was not just born into the world but into our hearts. Therefore, we have received experiential adoption by the pouring of the Spirit into our hearts. Grace gives us the freedom to both accept the Holy Spirit and to call God our Daddy.

When we were travelling through the Holy Land, it was easy to identify peoples' faith by their dress. It was a constant reminder that there is still tension, thousands of years later, about who is in and who is out, where God's family is concerned. But I never felt afraid or was treated with anything other than hospitality by Christians, Jews *and* Muslims while I was there.

This make me think that it is us – humankind – who, just like the Jews in Paul's day, want to put limits on who God can call and who God can love. And it emphasized to me that God loves all people so much he sent his Son to save the WORLD. As Christians, who have been empowered by the Holy Spirit to share the love of God, I believe it is our responsibility to try to see that we are really more alike than we are different – no matter where we live or how we worship.

Another thing I observed in Israel is that, in any place where something potentially significant happened in Jesus' life, a church has been built. One day, after we had crossed the Sea of Galilee, we stood in a church that was built over some ruins of what may have been Peter's house. It is also near the spot where Jesus fed the 5,000 with the loaves and fishes. So, it is called the Church of the Multiplication.

As our group entered, another group was seated together, obviously having an abbreviated Mass. They spoke English but with an accent and we later learned that they were Australians. We respected their time by quietly walking around inside the sanctuary, as individuals or in small groups, looking at the paintings in the church, sitting prayerfully in the pews and feeling the history for ourselves.

All of the sudden, we all in our own places, realized that the group was saying the Lord's Prayer. And without any prompting or planning, we all began to say it with them wherever we stood or sat. It was a holy moment as two groups of Christians from opposite sides of the globe – one Protestant and one Roman Catholic - had a brief moment of worship together and prayed to our one God – the Father who loves us all. The fact that it was so spontaneous made the prayer that much more holy. It was just so unexpected!

But friends, the love of God stands strong and IT is something that we CAN expect. The acceptance and encouragement from our fellow Christians remain available. The grace of God's forgiveness is always before us. And the Spirit empowers those that we don't know or might not choose, just the same as that WE are empowered. Therefore, we can be reassured that as children of God our status as his adopted heirs will continue to bring us the gifts that come through God's grace.

As we come today to the Table, let us be reminded that it is set for us by the grace of God. We do not deserve to eat the bread and drink the cup. But God sacrificed life's loveliness so that we could all receive the inheritance that God made possible for us. Let us come not because we think we deserve to call God "Daddy", but because we know that we do NOT deserve to come and yet, God invites us anyway. Amen.