

## **Priests**

1 Peter 2:4-10

May 18, 2014

“Dear Amy ...”

It's a newspaper column, like “Dear Abby,” only it's “Dear Amy.” Dick Grimm shared it with me this week, and now I am sharing it with you.

*Dear Amy,*

*Every fall, my sister, cousins and a cousin's sister-in-law have a weekend shopping excursion in our home city. We stay in a hotel, treat ourselves, shop for our children and go out for lunches and dinners. It is a great time to reconnect.*

*I have a sister “Wendy,” who we do not invite. She is offended to the point of tears when she finds we have not invited her. My two sisters and I are very close in age, but Wendy hasn't been as close to this set of cousins as my sister and I have been through the years. We are all married stay-at-home moms. Wendy is a divorced, working mom with one young child.*

*There are several reasons we do not include her. We know she doesn't have very much money for such an outing. She also does not have many of the same interests as we do. Her life is quite different from ours. We're not interested in what she has to talk about. She complains too much about her aches and pains, and claims to have some kind of neurological disease -- that some of us feel is more psychosomatic than real -- and which she uses to avoid getting up for church on Sundays.*

*She also complains about her ex-husband who left her for another woman, but everyone knows it takes “two to tango” and she is not without fault.*

*We're all very active churchgoers, while she only sporadically attends services. Plain and simple, she does not really fit in with us anymore.*

*She takes it very personally, and last year even came over to my home unannounced crying about it, which upset my children and caused my husband to threaten to call the police if she did not leave.*

*Now she barely speaks to me and has told our relatives that I am a horrible person (even though I've helped her).*

*How can we get her to understand that she should perhaps find another set of friends whose lives and interests align more closely with hers?*

*-- Sad Sister*

*Dear Sad,*

*Obviously, you can do whatever you want and associate with -- or exclude -- whomever you want, but you don't get to do this and also blame the person you are excluding for not "fitting in."*

*The only way your sister would ever fit in would be for you to make room for her. You are unwilling to do that, and that is your choice. But her being upset is completely justified, and you'll just have to live with that.*

*Perhaps this is something you could ponder from your church pew, because despite your regular attendance, you don't seem to have learned much.*

Have we? Have we learned much?

*No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here.*

Greg, who are you? Where are you on life's journey? You are welcome here!

Cliff, who are you? Where are you on life's journey? You are welcome here!

Craig, who are you? Where are you on life's journey? You are welcome here!

John, who are you? Where are you on life's journey? You are welcome here!

Paul, who are you? Where are you on life's journey? You are welcome here!

Are there others? You are welcome here!

*No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here.*

We have been reviewing together the vision plan of the national setting of the United Church of Christ, which intends to identify the purposes and values and objectives that best define and distinguish us as members of this particular church of Jesus Christ.

Greg and I attended a special anniversary service at Christian Fellowship Missionary Baptist Church this last Thursday evening, and, during the service, one of the invited guests, Superintendent Stevenson from the Shilliam Avenue Church of God in Christ, began chanting a phrase and was quickly joined by the unison voices of other members of his congregation in attendance that night: "The only thing that matters is that God is in charge!"

It was clear that they were clear about what where they stood, about what they valued. We should be just as clear about where we stand and about what we value!

In the United Church of Christ, we value this: continuing testament. God is still speaking. I love it, because this is testimony to a vibrant and living faith. Sometimes it seems that those Christians who seem most vocal and passionate about their faith focus exclusively on things God said and did a very long time ago, as if God has nothing more to say and nothing more to do. What do we believe? God is still speaking!

And, in the United Church of Christ, we value this: extravagant welcome. What do we believe? No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here.

No matter! We want our welcome to be extravagant. Extravagant means outlandish, unrestrained, surprising, even unreasonable. One dictionary defines "extravagant" as "exceeding what is reasonable or appropriate." We want our welcome to be so extravagant that it is even unreasonable and inappropriate!

We want our welcome to be extravagant, and radical. It is radical because it goes entirely against the norm. The norm is: everybody excludes somebody.

But why? Why an extravagant welcome? And how? How can we do something that is so far outside the norm, so much against our human nature?

Not because we are particularly or especially magnanimous! That's one thing that bothers me about some of the media promotion of "extravagant welcome" by the United Church of Christ. We extend extravagant welcome, not because we are the UCC: "Come here because we are UCC and we will accept you." No, we extend extravagant welcome because God has extended an extravagant welcome to us!

*At one time you were not God's people, but now you are God's people; at one time you did not know God's mercy, but now you have received God's mercy.*

“Now you have received God’s mercy,” Peter tells the women and men of the churches in Asia to whom he writes. You have received mercy, so, show mercy.

Peter’s admonition is especially poignant because these men and women were not the people on the top, but the people on the bottom, not insiders, but outsiders, people shunned, ignored, sometimes even abused for their faith in Jesus. Peter admonishes them not to return evil for evil, curse for curse, but to give back blessing instead. Peter reminds them that they are priests, the King’s priests, called to serve as God’s holy priests.

What is a priest? A priest is an intercessor, a mediator, standing between the people and God, pleading with God on the people’s behalf, and pleading with the people on God’s behalf. A priest offers sacrifices for the forgiveness of his own sins, for the forgiveness of her own sins, and for the forgiveness of the sins of all the people.

A priest is not a judge or even a prophet -- accusing, warning, condemning -- but a priest is an advocate for the people, a defender of the people, all the people. A priest does what it takes to make things right, to make things right between people and their God.

Jesus was a priest, making a sacrifice of himself to make things right. And we are priests too, making sacrifices to God with Jesus and through Jesus. We are priests, entrusted with the duty, and the privilege, of mediating God’s extravagant grace. It is all about God, not at all about us.

We exclude when we differentiate, when we believe we have something or are something that someone else does not have or is not. But what do we have that matters? What do we have to show for ourselves? Nothing! Nothing except this: the unconditional, undeserved, utterly extravagant love of God for us!

No matter. No matter who. Really!

Really?

Let’s push it. Let’s see if it’s true. Let’s test the limits, because everybody excludes somebody.

No matter who?

Is “Wendy” welcome here? That poor, neurotic, divorced, complaining, bitter, non-churchgoing woman? Is her “sad” sister?

Is Clayton Lockett welcome here? The man just executed in Oklahoma for shooting a nineteen-year-old woman and burying her alive? Are his executioners welcome here?

Is the pregnant Sudanese woman sentenced now to death for adultery and apostasy just because she married a Christian man -- is she welcome here? Is her brother, the one who accused her, the one who turned against her, the one who betrayed her? Are the defenders of the law that condemns her welcome here?

Is a married couple welcome here, a gay married couple? Are homophobes welcome here?

Is Barack Obama welcome here? Rand Paul? Karl Rove? Vladimir Putin? Donald Sterling? Miley Cyrus? Ayman Mohammed Rabie al-Zawahiri, the current leader of al-Qaeda?

Are you getting uncomfortable? Does it seem unreasonable? Too extravagant?

Push it one step further. Test your limits. Think of the last person you would want to welcome here -- your nemesis, your enemy, your betrayer, your thorn-in-the-side, your abuser. Is she, is he, welcome here? Or if he is, if she is, do you want to get out? Because you can't do it. You can't do it.

You can't do it! And that's the point. It's not about you. It's not about your generosity. It's about God, our loving and extravagantly gracious God! We are God's priests. We are messengers, mediators of God's grace.

Now be clear. God is gracious and God is just. God calls us out of darkness into his own marvelous light. That's the next value we will talk about: changing lives. God's extravagant welcome means everyone is welcome. It doesn't mean anything goes.

No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here. But hatred is not welcome here. Pettiness and prejudice and pride are not welcome here. Bigotry and cruelty are not welcome here. Selfishness and apathy and hardness of heart are not welcome here.

But, but ...

I bring some of those things, maybe even many of those things, with me! Am I welcome here?

No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here. You ... are welcome here ... no matter. And once you are here, once we are here, welcomed in the embrace of God and of God's own people, the priestly work of forgiving our sins and purifying us of all unrighteousness will begin ...