

GOD'S VERY NATURE

Do you think there's such a thing as a sin so terrible, so appalling, that God either can't, or won't, forgive it?

In this morning's reading from Mark's Gospel, Jesus seemed to indicate that there was.

"Whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; they are guilty of an eternal sin."

Does that send a shiver down your spine?

In recent years—and increasingly during the last months when he was under hospice care at home, my father would make comments about "getting through the gate." He was concerned that he wouldn't be allowed into heaven to be with my mom.

When he said this, my pastoral instincts kicked in and I told my father that God was a loving and merciful God. I'm not sure he was convinced. I'm happy to say that, the day before he died, my brother JP was with Dad in the Gosnell House and Dad awoke from a morphine-induced sleep and said, "It's wonderful over there. It's wonderful over there."

Four times my father said that. And later that day he said basically the same thing to my older sister: "It's beautiful over there."

I'm convinced that my dad had one foot in this world and one foot in paradise, and caught a glimpse of the glorious heavenly home Jesus had prepared for him.

So yes, despite his uncertainty and fear that he did something to cause God to cast him off, I believe my father "got through the gate" and is with my mother now. Because ours is a gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

I'm firm believer in the grace and forgiveness of God. In fact, I've staked my whole ministry and my eternal destiny on it.

The heart of my ministry can be found in the eighth chapter of the Apostle Paul's letter to the Roman church, verses 38 and 39:

"For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, not things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Nothing can separate us from God's love, Paul declared. But then we hear Jesus say, "Whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; they are guilty of an eternal sin."

That sure sounds like something can separate us from God's love. I wonder how many Christians in the world believe they have committed an "unforgivable sin," or perhaps they repeatedly committed the same sin so many times that God's patience finally ran out and the threshold of God's mercy was reached.

Probably quite a few.

These individuals are tormented and terrified that, at some point in their life, somewhere back in their life-history, they committed some sin or made some terrible mistake that's irrevocable.

Maybe it happened so long ago they didn't even remember what exactly they did wrong or what unforgiveable sin they committed.

And they fear that when they stand before the Lord to give an account of their lives, that sin will be waved in front of their face like an old arrest warrant for a capital crime; and God's going to say, "I got ya! You were hoping I forgot, but I didn't. You did something unforgivable, and now it's time to pay the price!"

So, what did Jesus mean when he said, "Whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; they are guilty of an eternal sin."

Well, right before saying those words, Jesus had been healing many sick people and exorcising demons from the possessed.

The people who witnessed those healings and exorcisms were amazed. They began to believe that God's Kingdom had indeed arrived in the person of this itinerant rabbi from Nazareth.

But the religious leaders, the Pharisees, saw those healings and exorcisms in a much different and sinister light. They said, "He [Jesus] has Beelzebub. "And by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons."

Beelzebub was the Prince of the demons, the devil himself.

The Pharisees were saying that Jesus' healing ministry was the work of the devil and was evil, because they believed Jesus was going against the true religion and luring people away from Judaism with his supposed good deeds.

Jesus argued back that if he was an agent of Satan, he would be destroying his own kingdom.

"A kingdom divided against itself cannot stand," Jesus said. "If Satan has risen up against himself and is divided . . . then his end has come."

In other words, the devil would be doomed.

His goose would be cooked.

After saying that, Jesus warned the Pharisees, “Whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness.”

Now we can more clearly see what Jesus meant.

It was by God’s power—the power of the Holy Spirit—that Jesus healed and exorcised demons. And when the Pharisees looked upon the works of the Spirit of God and called them the works of the devil, they were blaspheming the Spirit.

In effect, they were saying that God was evil.

So Jesus was warning that when people witness an act of God and claim that it’s evil, when they lose their capacity to distinguish between God and Satan, they can’t be forgiven.

Not because God doesn’t want to forgive them, but because God is unable to forgive them. You see, even God can’t forgive someone who rejects His forgiveness by perceiving God and God’s works as demonic.

The religious leaders of Jesus’ day had become so insensitive to the will and works of God, they didn’t recognize it when it was happening before their very eyes.

Their blindness to who Jesus was—and their refusal to even try to see God’s presence and activity right in front of them, was the unforgivable sin that Jesus warned about.

Now I want to hold up this very important point. Even though Jesus strongly warned the Pharisees that they were in danger of committing the unforgivable sin, he never told the Pharisees they had sealed their doom and God would never forgive them for their ignorance and rejection of what God was doing in him.

Rather, Jesus’ confrontation with the Pharisees was actually an opportunity for them. Jesus was warning them about how dangerously close they were to declaring that God’s work was the devil’s work. And Jesus was calling them to repentance. He was urging the Pharisees to stop being blind and hard-hearted and see what God was doing right in front of them so they could be forgiven and saved.

A noted Swiss psychiatrist named Paul Tournier, in his book called *Guilt and Grace*, held up the difference between God’s love and human love. He wrote, “It’s not enough to say that God’s love is a very, very, very great love—as though the only difference between divine and human love is the amount of it.”

Tournier argued that it’s not the quantity, but the unique quality of God’s love that makes it greater. It’s the qualitative difference, the uniquely higher excellence of God’s love that allows God to forgive the sins and wrongdoings that human beings aren’t able to forgive.

That's why it's actually more difficult for God to not forgive than to forgive, because it's contrary to God's loving nature not to forgive us.

The uniqueness, the perfection of God's love, and our willingness to receive it, it's the most freeing and joyous thing that can ever happen to us. It transforms our perspective about everyone and everything in our life.

It allows us to live without fear, love without limit, and die without regret, because no matter what happens to us in this life, God's love will never be lost to us.

Yes, the Good News of our faith is that we're never out of reach of God's love. And we're never so far gone that we can't be forgiven for our sins and reconciled to the Lord.

Because God so loved the world that God sent His only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but may have Eternal Life.

And thanks to God's Son, Jesus Christ, and our trust in him, nothing we have ever done or ever will do is able prevent God from loving and forgiving us.

I pray that all of you will experience the peace and blessed joy of God's grace in your life, by believing that when you turn to God with humility and repentance, and with Jesus' name on your lips, the Lord will pour out His mercy and love on you.

Because it's God's very nature to do so.

Thanks be to God. Amen.