

The Good News about the Unforgivable Sin

Mark 3:19b-35

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The 2nd Sunday after Pentecost



We return now, in the season of Pentecost, to readings from the Gospel of Mark. We meet Jesus this morning returning home to Nazareth. He has just wrapped up a successful first season in his ministry. Jesus comes home.

Robert Frost, in his poem “The Death of the Hired Man” describes home this way: Home is the place where when you have to go there they have to take you in. But it is pretty obvious that the cast of characters and the narrator of our gospel story had not read Frost.¹

So... Jesus comes home. The crowds follow him, surround him, mob him, making so many demands on him that there isn't even time to eat. His family comes out to meet him with restraints to shackle his body and with verbal charges to tame his outlandish speech: “He's out of his mind; you don't really need to listen to him.”² The scribes, those really religious people who represent the authorities in Jerusalem, add their opinion: “He's working black magic, using the devil's tricks to impress people” (The Message 3:22). Jesus is an embarrassment to his family, and a threat to the really religious people from Jerusalem.

In the world of Jesus, rights and freedoms, vocational opportunities, possible marriage partners — everything even the clothes you got to wear — were determined by birth status. Jesus was an uneducated peasant from a family of laborers from a backwoods village in the back of beyond — and here he was attracting the attention of the really religious people from Jerusalem, who would surely see him as an uppity hillbilly if not worse. So his mother and brothers come to drag him away with sick smile, and a “don't mind him, he's just a mite touched in the head — been out in the sun too long.”

The really religious people from Jerusalem hear the reports of Jesus preaching throughout the villages of Galilee, casting out an unclean spirit, healing a leper, a paralytic, a man with a withered arm. We wonder what's wrong with that? Aren't those good things? But you see, Jesus,

¹ James Boyce, “Commentary on Mark 3:20-35” at http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2468.

² Ibid.

is the illegitimate son of peasant woman now married to a carpenter from the backwoods of Galilee, his disciples are fishermen and a tax collector — riffraff from the bottom of society — and he ignores religious rules about fasting and keeping the sabbath. If Jesus was really a holy man, especially given the circumstances surrounding his birth, he would surely be scrupulous in his observance of Torah and very, very careful of the company he keeps. Since he doesn't do these things it's he must not be a holy man. In fact he must be in league with Satan.

Jesus responds first to the really religious people from Jerusalem with a rhetorical question: How can Satan cast out Satan? In other words, the really religious people are not being logical. Jesus' power over disease and demons demonstrates that he — Jesus — has tied up Satan, and is now entering Satan's house in order to release all those whom Satan has taken into bondage. Jesus' victory over Satan has consequences. It means that “all will be forgiven to the children of humans, all the sins and blasphemies which they might have blasphemed” (Mark 3:28), and that all who do God's will are welcome as members of Jesus' family (3:35). The good news that Jesus' family is not determined by birth, but by one's longing to know, live and share Christ. In Jesus' family all people will be forgiven, released from **all** the sins and blasphemies that that been enacted against them. In Jesus' family, all people will be forgiven, pardoned for **all** the sins and blasphemies they have committed.

The central characteristic of Jesus' family is forgiveness. Here are two quotes to help us understand what forgiveness is. The first from Oprah Winfrey: “Forgiveness is giving up the hope that the past could have been any different.” The second from the late Paul Boese: “Forgiveness doesn't change the past, but it does enlarge the future.” The good news is that Christ offers all people a future here and now, and forever, that is not determined by the brokenness, the guilt, or the shame of their past.

But what, you ask, Pastor do we do with verse 29? ... whoever blasphemes the Holy Spirit does not have forgiveness/release/pardon into the *aion*, but is guilty of an *aionou* sin (3:29). So let's unpack this verse. Blasphemy is speech that slanders, maligns, defames, demeans, denigrates, reviles, puts down. Blasphemy against another human being involves things like lying about them, verbally abusing them to their face and behind their back. Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is lying about the Holy Spirit, for example calling Jesus' life-giving ministry to the poor, oppressed and marginalized the devil's work.

Now Jesus is not talking about an accidental one-time slip of the tongue but about a way of speaking that has the quality of *aion*, of being *aionou*. This Greek word refers to a long, long, long period of time — like forever — even as it refers to the intensity of that experience — like it took **forever** to get through the checkout line. The blasphemy against the Holy Spirit that Jesus is warning us against is an ongoing, constant, determined, unrelenting, stubborn, pig-headed, obstinate refusal to be open to or acknowledge the presence and activity of God's Spirit. It is an attitude, a way of being that expresses itself in speech that is most frequently directed at other people. It looks and feels like verbal abuse, even hate speech, and is rooted in a refusal to see,

acknowledge and honor the image and spirit of God in other people. The damage it causes is long-lasting and intense for both the abused and the abuser.

Rob Bell, in his book *Love Wins*, ponders what happens when the image of God within each person is willfully ignored, denied and stifled. He asks, “Would a person’s humanity just ebb away eventually? Could a person reach the point of no longer bearing the image of God? Could the divine image be extinguished in a person, given enough time, neglect [and abuse]?”

So we meet Jesus this morning and get to watch as he is verbally abused, slandered, maligned, and put down by his own family, and by the really religious people from Jerusalem. We see Jesus standing in solidarity with every human person whose family has misunderstood them, every person whose family has called them crazy or worse. We see Jesus standing in solidarity with every person who has ever been judged, condemned or demonized by really religious people. The good news for each of us is that when we are misunderstood, labeled, slandered, lied about, verbally abused, judged, condemned, or demonized because we don’t fit someone else’s idea of who or what or how we should be – Jesus is in our corner, standing with us. Jesus stands with us reminding us that each of us is created in God’s image, just as he was, that each of us is claimed in the waters of baptism as a beloved son or daughter of God, just as he was, and that each of us is worthy of love and respect, capable of making a positive difference in the world.

The challenge for us, who call ourselves disciples of Jesus is to do the same for each other, and for all the people we meet in our daily lives.

The most amazing thing is that the Jesus who stands here this morning taking the verbal abuse of his family and from the really religious people promises that God will forgive, release and pardon the children of humanity for all the sins and all the blasphemies they have been subjected to and have heaped on each other. Jesus promises all persons, without exception, a future in his family that is not determined by their past. To help us seize that future and make it real, Jesus warns us avoid developing a habit of blaspheming the Holy Spirit, of engaging in verbal abuse and hate speech, because the consequences are so intensely negative and so long-lasting. For the abused and the abusers, getting to the point of forgiveness, release and pardon will seem like forever.

The good news about the allegedly “unforgivable sin” is that you can’t do it by accident, and if you’re at all worried about committing this sin, you haven’t.³

³ David Lose, March 3:28-30 at <http://www.davidlose.net/2012/05/mark-3-28-30/>.