

Sermon - Proper 5, Year B
Mark 3:20-35
6/9/24

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Quite a few years ago now, I was a student in a religious education class with a rather rowdy group of middle school students. One day, our teacher was reading to us from the Gospel of Mark, and we arrived at the third chapter. She read to us that mysterious twenty-ninth verse: “whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness but is guilty of an eternal sin.” And then she continued to read. I remember thinking: “wait a minute...Jesus died on the Cross to forgive *all* sins. What do you mean ‘unforgivable sin’?” It didn’t take long for a group of boys in my class to crowd around one another after the lesson: “I *dare you*.” One said, “I *dare you* to blaspheme the Holy Spirit.” One of the boys went to open the window. He paused for a moment as if at the edge of a cliff and shouted with gusto: “I BLASPHEME AGAINST THE HOLY SPIRIT.” Our teacher just laughed. The boys whooped and hollered. The girls were horrified. I remember that day well, and while I was horrified at the time, I will tell you that I have never once since wondered about the state of that shouting boy’s eternal soul.

This twenty-ninth verse from the third chapter of Mark’s Gospel can seem to be a puzzling one. It has been the subject of countless commentaries and works of theological contemplation. I imagine it has been the source of much anxiety as readers, perhaps late into the night, read about this unforgivable sin and wonder if they themselves have committed it. What does it mean to “blaspheme” something anyway? Have I done it? Have I done it against the Holy Spirit? Is all hope lost for me if I, too, was once in middle school and wanted attention in a rowdy religion class?

It turns out that in this one startling verse, we encounter a treasure trove of very good news for all creation. Firstly: if you have ever wondered at all about whether or not you have blasphemed the Holy Spirit, I can assure you with confidence that you have not. If you care, even in the slightest, for whether or not you have been forgiven, you have. To blaspheme the Holy Spirit is not like taking the Lord's name in vain. It is not a one-time event – an insult, a fight, or a disaster. It is not a period of time where you might have felt lost or abandoned by God or even when you may have rejected God outright or denied that God exists. To understand this verse, we need to take a step or two backward, beyond this singular verse, and understand a few things about the nature of God and the Trinity himself.

According to the Bible and to the Oxford English Dictionary, “blasphemy” is the act of speaking or behaving profanely to offend or diminish the sacred. It involves insulting something holy so much so that this holiness is mocked and met with contempt. Jesus declares that “Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter,” because he is well aware that God's power cannot be reduced by insult or even denial. God is God. Words and sentiment, however offensive, cannot change God. God is love. And our act of loving or not loving, in word or deed, does not change that.

But when Jesus speaks about blaspheming the Holy Spirit, he is speaking about something different. The Holy Spirit, all throughout scripture, is shown to be that Person of the Holy Trinity that carries forth God's love, mercy, and forgiveness out into the world and into the Church without limit or measure. The Catechism in our *Book of Common Prayer* proclaims that the Holy Spirit is “God at work in the world and in the Church, now.” In the eighth chapter of the letter to the Romans, Paul articulates the work of the Spirit in one of the most remarkable texts of the entire Bible: “Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For

the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death... If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you... Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with groanings too deep for words.” All throughout this chapter, Paul is almost singing about the beauty of the Holy Spirit who intercedes for us, uniting us to God in love, mercy, and forgiveness.

To blaspheme the Holy Spirit is to refuse to accept this love, this mercy, and this forgiveness. The only way to truly offend the Holy Spirit is to continually, repeatedly, and willfully reject being forgiven – to reject being set free. Blasphemy is not an insulting word or a lewd behavior, it is the willful preferring of one’s own isolation. It is perhaps the serious version of an angry child who would rather miss his dinner than apologize to his brother. And so this sin of blasphemy is not so-called “unforgivable” because God does not offer forgiveness. It is only “unforgivable” because the person who does this refuses to receive forgiveness.

In 1945, *The Great Divorce* by C.S. Lewis was published as Europe picked up the pieces after the second world war. In it, Lewis describes the journey of a group of ghosts from hell traveling on a field trip to see heaven. The work describes hell as a series of bombed out suburbs where neighbors grow farther and farther away from each other. He writes, “I willingly believe that the damned are, in one sense, successful, rebels to the end; that the doors of hell are locked on the inside. They enjoy forever the horrible freedom they have demanded, and are therefore self enslaved: just as the blessed, forever submitting to obedience, become through all eternity more and more free.”

The doors of hell are locked from the inside. God is so merciful, that even after death, that mercy pursues us. God is so loving and so good that he will not take away even our final choice to accept his love or reject it. It is only the most stubborn, bitter pride that keeps us locked in hell, in both this life and the next. It takes only the slightest hope to know real love that begins to turn the handle and open the door.

And so this twenty-ninth verse of the third chapter of Mark is genuinely good news, for all of creation and for us. We can be assured that if we are even worried about the possibility that we might have blasphemed against the Holy Spirit, we have not done so. In this verse, we see the fullness of God's perfect and abundant love – God's continual call to let God love us. This verse speaks the truth that no matter what is going on in our heart, no matter how uncertain or bitter or even angry we might be, the Holy Spirit pursues us, longing for us to receive the fullness of grace.

Amen.