

“Unforgiveable Sin?”

Mark 3:20-35

Second Sunday after Pentecost; June 6, 2021

One of the biggest lies we may have learned as children comes from a 19th century nursery rhyme: “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.”

The truth? Sticks and stones can only break bones, and bones are easily set and healed. Words can wound us forever. Some people are never healed.

Do you remember the first time you “cussed?” Of course you do. God knows it and so do you. You probably remember the first time you cursed or said a naughty word in front of a parent. Even in this potty-mouthed culture, curse words still have power. While liberally laced into everyday conversations, commentaries, speeches, and social interactions, cuss-words still get our attention. They mean something. Often it’s mean-spirited. We know that.

In medieval times, people would curse using contractions rather than breaking the third commandment (“Do not use the Lord’s name in vain”) regarding oaths. Hence “gor-blimey” was the Cockney pronunciation of “God blind me!” In a more genteel era it became common to employ “euphemisms” for the harshest, most raunchy curse words. “Shoot,” “shucks,” “pshaw,” “dang,” “darn,” “Jeez,” “egaads.” “Euphemism” comes from the Greek “euphemia” and means “the use of words of good omen” — that is, nice words. More recently we have euphemized “euphemism” into being “politically correct.” Etiologically the opposite of “eupheme” is “blaspheme” — which literally translates as “evil speaking.” It’s this “evil speaking” — this curse of cursing — which is at the center of today’s story from Mark’s Gospel.

It’s ironic that the introductory words to the story sound welcoming and comforting. After Jesus gathered and chose his twelve apostles, “he went into the house” — to relax maybe, but that hardly turned out to be the case. Instead of a La-Z-Boy moment, Jesus’s homecoming quickly became a cauldron of confrontation and conflict.

The crowds followed Jesus home and then they surrounded him. Then Jesus’s family showed up and tried to forcibly “restrain” (*kratesai*) or physically seize him, because they believed (quote): “He’s out of his mind.” This is the same charge that was once upon a time levied at Jeremiah the prophet, being *exestekota*, literally “standing outside of” one’s own mind. Readers of the Bible may remember that Jeremiah had some pretty unusual preaching techniques, but Jesus had simply been healing and preaching as he traveled around Galilee — hardly “out of his mind” behaviors.

Then the legal experts “who had come down Jerusalem” showed up. They chose to add a deeper, more insidiously sinister motive to Jesus’s actions and teachings. Instead of Jesus being mentally ill, they suggested it was spiritual depravity that fueled his mission: “He is possessed by Beelzebul! He casts out demons by the prince of demons!” This fairly obscure name most likely is a derivative of various names which were used for the old Canaanite god, “Baal the prince.” The experts were declaring that Jesus was able to “cast out demons” because he was empowered by the daddy of all demons. The experts, in other words, were saying that Jesus’s ministry and mission were fueled and funded by Satan itself.

Jesus's response was swift, scholarly, and quite sarcastic. Rather than taking their attack personally, he revealed the ridiculous reasoning behind their accusation. Jesus asked, "How can the Accuser cast out the Accuser? If a kingdom splits into two factions, it can't last..." In other words, evil is evil, but evil isn't stupid. Satan wouldn't just hand Jesus the key and glibly ask that his "house" — his power base of misery — be plundered by junior demons. Jesus proclaimed his own divine power over Satan. This power enabled Jesus to "get into [the] strong man's house and steal his property."

But it's this accusation leveled by the legal experts, the provocation that Jesus was working in cahoots with Satan, armed with the powers of evil — this accusation is the focus of Jesus's most penetrating pronouncement. We are not God and so mortals like you



and me are not to automatically jump on the idea that someone is obviously possessed by demons, or somehow cursed by God, or astrologically doomed. Some churches and blowhard preachers will carelessly do that, forgetting that this was a charge leveled against Jesus himself. In the face of this ludicrous and rancorous accusation of demon possession Jesus declared, "I'm telling you the truth: people will be forgiven all sins, and all blasphemies of whatever sort. But peo-

ple who blaspheme the Holy Spirit will never find forgiveness. They will be guilty of an eternal sin."

Whoa! Did you just hear that? In one split second Jesus went from calm and academic to clamorous and partisan. What exactly is this "blasphemy against the Holy Spirit"? Why is it so unforgivable?

There's a long history of theological debate over what this particular heinous sin involved. Augustine, a church bishop back in the 3rd century, declared it to be impenitence and resistance to God's continual outpouring of grace. Several medieval scholars would later say that there were six different components to this unpardonable sin: despair, presumption, impenitence, obstinacy, resisting divine truth, and envy. The "unpardonable sin" for our medieval ancestors was a kind of general smorgasbord of bad behavior.

But here's the problem. All these declarations on what specifically constitutes "blasphemy" against the Holy Spirit have more to do with the concerns of the church at that particular time in history than they do about Mark's telling of a crucial moment in Jesus's ministry. Theories throughout the ages often fail to take into account the actual gospel story in which the words "blasphemy against the Holy Spirit" occur.

The church still needs to be constantly reminded that Jesus's mission on earth was divinely instructed and divinely constructed. The Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus at his baptism as he began his public ministry. Jesus's mission was empowered by the living presence of the Holy Spirit. And it was from out of the Spirit of the living God and the Spirit's power that Jesus's teaching, preaching, and healing poured out. It was the triune power of the relationship among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit that brought redeeming, healing power to fallen, fragile humanity.

And the so-called experts said that divine power is evil? They dared to blaspheme Jesus's Spirit-charged mission by identifying it with Satan? They presumed to reject the

greatest gift God offers to creation, the gift of a redeemed relationship with our creator by labeling the gift as evil? Redemption is evil? Relationship is evil?

Rejecting God's greatest gift is sin against the Holy Spirit. The "unforgivable" sin is not a malicious curse we may utter. It's not a crude word or monstrous deed or mendacious creed. With a humbled heart, that ugly stuff is forgivable. The unforgivable sin is the over and over rejection of a relationship with God as it has been offered to us by the cross of Jesus the Messiah and the gift of the Holy Spirit. The unforgivable sin is the choice a person makes to give away their life to themselves.

God created us as "relational" beings. Notice that I didn't say "religional" beings. God created us as "relational" beings. The prophet Jeremiah, also someone accused of being a "blasphemer," received a word from the Lord, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you..." (Jeremiah 1:5). God created us out of God's own triune relationship of Father, Son, Holy Spirit. This eternal God entered into relationship with each one of us before we were even conceived. You...me...we... are created in God's image. God craves completion of the parent-child relationship with us that existed before the beginning of time. We're God's creation for a relational connection. We're made to bring God joy.

But we're not a bunch of puppets on strings. God's creation includes free will. God's love isn't coerced. We choose to receive it or reject a relationship with our God and Creator, with Christ our Redeemer, with the daily, eternal power of the Holy Spirit. Yes or no — that's our free choice. Refusal is the forever, unforgivable sin of many human species — doubly tragic because it's what we do to ourselves. And we're so arrogant in that we blame God for what we have freely chosen. The "curse" of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is, to reiterate, the decision for disobedience and self-destruction. The decision to blaspheme the gift of the Holy Spirit, as offered by Jesus, doesn't initiate a curse from the hand of God. The curse comes from our own self-absorbed, self-centered, self-worshipping being. What ultimately matters most in life are our relationships — to God, to each other, to ourselves, to creation. This is where "truth or consequences" are played out — where pride-filled humanity will very often choose to lose.

Curses aren't the foul words we utter. Curses are foolishly-chosen life decisions. When you hear Jesus saying that blaspheming the Holy Spirit is the "unforgivable" curse, what immediately pops into your head? Perhaps it's like me telling you, "Don't think of a purple gorilla for the next five minutes." So what do you start thinking about? A purple gorilla, right? Jesus says, "Don't curse the Holy Spirit." What pops into your head? It might have been that cruel word you once said. Maybe you can't stop thinking about it. Actually, if you're concerned about having "committed the unforgivable sin," you probably don't need to obsess over it.

We all say thoughtless, cruel things and abuse words and language to express how we feel at a given moment. That's generally how humans interact. Jesus, himself, has been on the receiving end of that garbage. The "curse," however, is an attitude. It's a life decision. It's a rejection of divine relationship. The blasphemy of the Holy Spirit is something a person has to continually heap-up on themselves throughout a lifetime with the result of being buried under, cursed by one's own cussedness. If someone wants to be godless, God allows their godlessness. And to be godless is to choose death, not life. It's to

choose cursing, not blessing. This is obviously not the reason for which God created the heavens and the earth and all the creatures that inhabit them. Sticks and stones may break our bones, but it's the curse that really hurts us. How could anybody even conceivably look upon the cross of Christ crucified and not be moved toward divine love of God and neighbor? That's the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit.

So what about you? What about me? Here on this earth we're given the choice of living a life of blessing or a dying death of cursing. It's either one or the other. There's no loop hole somewhere in the middle. How did Jeremiah put it? "The LORD says: 'See, I am setting before you the way of life and the way of death'" (21:8). Like Jesus, Jeremiah surely had a good memory of God's story in relation to God's people.

How did Joshua put it? "Now therefore revere the LORD and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. And if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord" (24:14-15).

How did the book of Deuteronomy quote Moses in his final sermon to the people of Israel? "This day I call the heavens and the earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live" (30:19).

The way forward is the way of life with God. You should have heard this before and you probably have, but it bears repeating again and again — today in a roughly 20-minute sermon within a roughly 60-minute service of worship interrupting the other 10,020 minutes of your week. The way backward is the way of death. The gospel moves forward. Choose life. Choose Christ.

"Grace Greater than Our Sin" is a gem of a hymn that's over 100 years old. Here's the first stanza: "Marvelous grace of our loving Lord, Grace that exceeds our sin and our guilt! Yonder on Calvary's mount outpoured, There where the blood of the Lamb was spilt." The refrain goes like this: "Grace, grace, God's grace, Grace that will pardon and cleanse within; Grace, grace, God's grace, Grace that is greater than all our sin!" Those old Methodist camp meetings used to get pretty spirited — and for good reason. Why?

Because all our "unpardonable-unforgiveables" have been pardoned and forgiven. This truth has been sealed, sealed on the heart. Love sealed on the heart has always been a favorite Methodist metaphor: "Savior, Thy Spirit's power exert,/To seal my pardon on my heart."

At Calvary — "Mercy there was great, and grace was free; Pardon there was multiplied to me; There my burdened soul found liberty, At Calvary." Such beautiful words as these will never hurt you. Such words will help heal you.

Unforgiveable sin? That curse? Lay it down before Jesus. Let the Christ the Lord take it away.