

Mark 3:20-35

²⁰and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat.²¹When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, “He has gone out of his mind.” ²²And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, “He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.” ²³And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, “How can Satan cast out Satan? ²⁴If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. ²⁵And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. ²⁶And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. ²⁷But no one can enter a strong man’s house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered.

²⁸“Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; ²⁹but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin”— ³⁰for they had said, “He has an unclean spirit.”

³¹Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. ³²A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, “Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.” ³³And he replied, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” ³⁴And looking at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! ³⁵Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”

“Whoever blasphemies against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin.” These words of Jesus caused me a good bit of angst when I was a teenager – I remember having a good bit of worry from time to time as to whether I had committed this unpardonable sin. It was (and still is) a line I could not quite mesh with the rest of my picture of Jesus – I had been told that God was love. I had been assured that if I welcomed Jesus into my life/heart and asked for forgiveness for what I had done wrong, that I would be safe. But this word of Jesus made it seem like there was an exception, that there was one thing which would not be forgiven, to the blaspheme against the Holy Spirit. And what does that even mean, to blaspheme against the Holy Spirit – it is just obscure enough to make me uncertain if I had ever done it.

Part of why this unforgiveable sin sticks out to me had to do with religious discussions that my friends and I would have. One of those good friends was LDS, and he told me about his view of eternity being that everyone will be in heaven, just at different levels – this is how I remember him explaining it to me when we were kids – everyone will be in heaven, except for that small handful of people who have committed this unpardonable sin, those who have blasphemed against the Holy Spirit.¹

This just fueled my angst – how do I avoid being one of these few people?!

¹ This notes what I remember being told as a junior high student, not that this represents an accurate teaching of the LDS church of today.

Luckily, somewhere along the way, some adult told me (and I don't even remember who said this), if you are worried that you have committed this unforgiveable sin, then you are probably okay – if you are really trying to not blaspheme against the Holy Spirit, then you probably won't. That made sense to me. And I haven't worried about it too much since. Until this week, when reading this scripture again.

I read this scripture and probably for the first time ever, I put it into context – not just as a line that Jesus says as a warning. But something Jesus says with great specificity and to a particular group of people. And reading these words in their biblical context/setting, I think I have to say, I am renewed in my angst as to whether or not I have committed this unforgiveable sin.

Here is the context to these word's of Jesus:

Word of Jesus' work has spread, the reach of these stories/rumors had traveled far and wide so much so that Jesus' family in Nazareth had heard these rumors of what their son and brother have been up to. And word had spread even further to the capital, to Jerusalem – the seat of power for the Israelite people, the home of the temple – the denominational office. And what they have heard, both Jesus' family and the religious authorities back in the denominational offices, is disturbing – so disturbing, in fact, that they *both* go to try and put an end to Jesus' ministry.

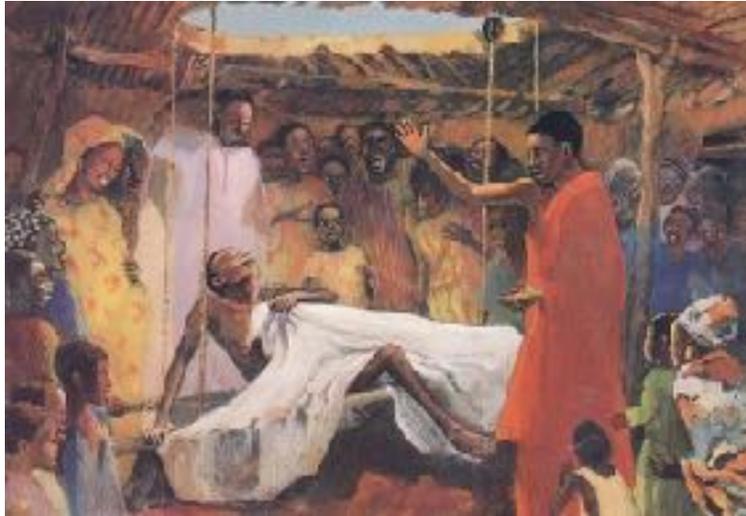
Jesus' family comes to stop him. They come to restrain him from all they have heard about what he is doing, it seems he must be out of his mind. This shocked me – Jesus' family tried to stop his ministry – to stop his teaching and his healing – to stop him from the vocation to which he has been called. I did not remember this at all – that there was a place in the Bible

where Jesus' family tries to put an end to his ministry – that Mary the Blessed Virgin, tries to get her son to end or change the work of his ministry? I had to read this a few times before I actually realized what I was reading; it was not until I read it in different versions that it truly dawned on me – Jesus' family was trying to intervene and keep him from his work. The Message says, “they went to rescue him, by force if necessary. They suspected he was getting carried away with himself.” They did not just come to see him, they came for an intervention. They come to restrain him.

And the scribes all the way from Jerusalem. They were also sent to stop him. To put an end to his work. And when they see all that he is doing and what huge crowds he is drawing, they try to discredit him, saying “he is using the power of Satan to do all of this!”

What is it that Jesus has been doing that causes such a strong reaction – what he has been doing that his family would come to try and talk some sense into him; what has he been doing that authorities of the temple would send scribes over sixty miles to the country-side to put an end to this man's work?

Here is some of what has happened that has caused such an uproar.



Some people came and lowered their friend who was paralyzed through a roof to get him to Jesus. And Jesus said, “son, your sins are forgiven...take up your mat and walk.”

And the religious leaders – the holders of the traditional power said, “blasphemy!” Who is he to offer forgiveness.



He called Levi, a tax collector to be one of his followers,

And the holders of traditional power said, “why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?!”



He and his disciples did not fast in the same ways that other pious religious people did, they even picked grain to eat on the Sabbath when they were hungry.

And, the holders of traditional power said, “why aren’t they following the laws as we do...this is the slippery slope!”



He saw a man whose hands were terribly withered, perhaps from birth, perhaps from an accident, or perhaps from years of hard manual and now arthritis is setting in. His hands, keeping him from making a living, keeping him from being welcomed fully into the community because any abnormality caused one to be seen as unclean. And so Jesus healed his hands, even though it was the Sabbath.

And from a distance, the holders of traditional power said, “he must be stopped!”

This is the setting in which our story begins. These are the rumors that have summoned his family and the scribes to try to stop him:

He is speaking blaspheme

He is undisciplined – if he doesn’t fast properly, where will it end?!

He is welcoming in those who have been pushed out, even calling them as his disciples

He is breaking our most sacred of laws.

Those who have been pushed out to the margins, Jesus is drawing in close.

Those who have been considered great sinners – Jesus is walking among them, touching them, dining with them – calling to them, come be with me.

And so when Jesus says, there is one thing that is not forgivable, he is speaking directly to these scribes who are criticizing this new work he is doing – he is speaking directly to those who are saying that his work of restoring people to the fullness of their community, of restoring people to hope, of assuring people that they are forgiven by the God of love – that those who say such work is not of God – well, that is unforgivable.

Jesus is saying to them – all the things you are holding up as essential to ‘the law’, all these things for which you are judging and condemning others that you think is so vital – all of that is nothing – it will be forgiven.

But when the creative and loving work of God is here in your midst, and you call it Satan;

When you see someone healed and you call it the work of darkness;

When you try to cast doubt and shame and hatred on the work of welcoming, of including, of breaking down barriers – when you try to dismiss the transformative work of God by calling it satanic – this is unforgivable.

This is what made me nervous once again as to whether I have ever blasphemed against the Holy Spirit – as one who has a position of power – have I squelched the creative and transformative work of the Spirit by saying, “not now” or “let’s go more slowly” or “that is too radical for us – too new.”

Have we, as a people of power and wealth, dismissed some of the life-giving work of the Spirit happening around us because it looks different, because it speaks from a different perspective, because it is showing us things we don’t want to see or hear? Have we dismissed the work of the Spirit by labeling it too liberal or too conservative; as socialist or communist or freedom hating; have we labeled it too showy for church; too eastern; too new age; too traditional; too angry; too in your face?

This is what we do, we so often and so easily criticize one another – when we see people out there trying to bring God’s creative and restorative power to bear somewhere in our world – it is so easy to stand back and be the critic. And we often criticize those with whom we largely agree, but we see they aren’t doing it quite perfectly – not quite right – not quite how we would do it. So we lob a critique. Instead of encouraging people who are out there trying to bring healing and hope, we stop to point out the ten percent that they could be doing better, even though we agree with 90% of what they are doing.

The people who criticize us the most at Corpus Christi House² are others who are trying to do something in the homeless community. Typical community members usually come in and say, ‘thanks for all you do.’ But others who are homeless advocates, they often say:

Why aren’t you getting people into housing?

Why aren’t you advocating more to the city for change?

Why aren’t you collaborating more?

Why are you only open 7a-4:30p?

Why do you close for two weeks in the summer?

This is what we so often do to one another, we say:

Why do you do it this way?

Why don’t you attend more to your own family?

Why can’t you be less angry?

Why are you taking a knee and disrespecting the flag?

Why are you getting arrested?

And yes, we could all do what we are doing better – but who I want us to be is not a people who point out how you are doing about a 90% good job not 100%. I want to be a people who, when others have an idea they are passionate about – we throw gasoline on the fire of their passion. We say, “how can we help you? How can we empower you? How can we come alongside you to support this creative work of the Spirit that you are trying to bring to the world?”

² A homeless day shelter of Boise that our congregation helped establish and run.

When we don't, this seems to be the one thing Jesus say is not okay. This is one thing we must not do to each other – trying to squash the life-giving and transformative work others are about. To not be a people who point out where the strong have stumbled, but to be in the arena of life being agents of God's love and transformative power.

And this is where creativity is born, when we encourage and are champions for one another. I often tell people that in my six years here as pastor I have never come in to find an angry email or phone message about something I said in a sermon. And I think of how much I have grown in my preaching because of that – how much I feel I can experiment and be imaginative because I don't have to worry about those who will be waiting to critique me or point out where I stumbled – because I don't even say, "I can't say that, because this person or that person will be upset." Creativity and imagination can be fueled or they can be squelched.

And sometimes as church communities and institutions and even as families, we throw up barriers for one another.

And to this, Jesus says, you who seek to be faithful to God;

You who seek to align yourself with my ways, with my words, with my paths;

You who seek to draw in close to those on the margins, to those who are hurting and in pain;

You who seek to be agents of healing and hope;

you are my sisters and my brothers.

Amen and amen.