

Blaspheming against the Holy Spirit

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Mark 3:28-30 — Jesus said, “Truly, I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin”—for some of the religious leaders had been saying about Jesus, “He has an unclean spirit.”

This morning’s passage is from the gospel reading in our church’s lectionary this week, and I brought it up in a sermon about a year and a half ago. You could say I’ve got a bit of a family history with this passage. When my mom Carrie was nine years old, living in Virginia, attending a small Presbyterian church, she heard a sermon based on this notion of “the unforgivable sin.” That is, if you blaspheme the Holy Spirit (whatever this passage means by that), you can’t take it back. If you do it, you won’t be forgiven—and thus, you won’t be saved. After hearing this message preached at age nine, Carrie went home terrified.

That night, as she lay in bed, she whispered to herself, over and over again, “There *is* a Holy Spirit, there *is* a Holy Spirit, there *is* a Holy Spirit, there *is* a Holy Spirit...” until she fell asleep. The next night, Carrie did the exact same thing, so afraid was she that she would accidentally send herself to hell. “There *is* a Holy Spirit, there *is* a Holy Spirit, there *is* a Holy Spirit...” And so it went, for several nights. Then, Carrie figured that she could shorten the phrase by just saying the first letter of each word—“There Is A Holy Spirit,” T-I-A-H-S. She pronounced this new word that she had invented like “*tea-ice*.” And so, as Carrie tried to fall asleep at night, she began whispering to herself, “TIAHS, TIAHS, TIAHS, TIAHS....” My mom, at nine years old, did this for months, all because of that one sermon.

As I said a year and a half ago, I don’t believe that God is interested in scaring children, or *anyone*, with the fear that a few words they utter could eternally separate them from God. In fact, I believe that God is appalled by the idea that *anything* a person does would make God stop loving them. God doesn’t love us because of anything we *do*; God loves us because God created us, and because God is love, as Scripture says in the letter of 1 John. What’s more, in that same letter, we read, “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.” So, I myself reject any reading of Scripture that relies on spiritually terrorizing people, and I reject any reading that contradicts the truth that God perfectly and eternally loves all of God’s creation.

I’ve shared all that before (and I do think it’s worth repeating)—but what I haven’t shared is an alternative interpretation of this morning’s passage. I’ve told you that I think my mom’s pastor was wrong, but I haven’t told you what I think is right—or at least, what I think is a better way. What *does* Jesus mean by the phrase “blaspheming against the Holy Spirit,” and what does it mean to say that whoever does this can never have forgiveness?

As always, a little context helps. In the lead-up to Jesus's words in this morning's passage, he's been healing all sorts of people in body, mind, and spirit, and the crowds are absolutely swarming him and his disciples. Not everyone is enamored, however. Some of Jesus's own family members try to take him away, because they think that he has lost his mind. Then the scribes—religious leaders who work in Jerusalem's temple—they make a similar accusation, but in a spiritualized form: they start telling the crowds that Jesus is demon-possessed. It's the devil's power, not God's, that enables him to work these miracles, they say. This is the strongest possible condemnation of Jesus's ministry, coming from some of the most well-respected theological authorities.

But Jesus exposes the ridiculousness in their accusation. Essentially, he says, "The devil tries to *hurt* people's spirits, but I am *healing* people's spirits. So, how can the devil be working in me if I'm doing good, not evil? And indeed, the good work that I'm doing in your midst is a sign to you that the devil's hold on the world is slipping. Evil has no power over me, but it is I—it is God in me—who has power over evil." And before the scribes have time to respond to Jesus, he launches right into this morning's passage: "Truly, I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin."

From this passage, we can conclude that Jesus sees the scribes, these religious leaders, as guilty of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. And from *this*, we can conclude that, according to Jesus, blaspheming the Holy Spirit doesn't mean literally saying, "There is no Holy Spirit" or "I don't believe in the Holy Spirit"; rather, blaspheming the Holy Spirit means witnessing the work of God, but calling it the work of the devil. It means coming face-to-face with something that is good and sacred and pleasing to God, something that is a part of God's healing, life-giving power in the world, but refusing to see it for the good that it is and instead denouncing it as evil.

This is the key, I think, to understanding Jesus's words that those who are blaspheming the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness. Because if you are reacting to God's good gifts with contempt, how can you receive God's gift of forgiveness? It's not that God just refuses to forgive certain people; it's that certain people refuse to be forgiven, refuse to open themselves up to the new and beautiful things that God is doing in the world—and thereby close themselves off from the new life that the Spirit brings.

At age nine, my mom was afraid that she would accidentally commit blasphemy against the Holy Spirit—when really, it was her pastor, the religious leader, who should have been afraid. A handful of chapters after this morning's passage, Jesus says that if anyone puts a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believes in me, it would be better for them if a large stone was hung around their neck and they were thrown into the sea. Apparently, God takes what we teach our little ones very seriously. And we are meant to teach them love over fear, forgiveness over condemnation, and openness to the Spirit's ongoing movement over rigid allegiance to the status quo—including the religious status quo. And of course, it's not just our little ones who need to be

taught; it's the rest of us, too. Here at this table, friends, we are taught that Christ is coming to us afresh. Here at this table, we encounter and receive Christ in a sacred mystery. Here at this table, we are invited to be newly nourished by the Spirit of the God who is Love. Let us open ourselves to whatever nourishment God has for us today. Amen.