

The crowd came together again, so that Jesus and his disciples could not even eat. When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, “He has gone out of his mind.” And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, “He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.” And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, “How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. But 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.

“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 they had said, “He has an unclean spirit.”

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

Mark’s Jesus has been busy: teaching and healing and casting out demons. And so many people have heard about what he is doing and have come for help that they have come close to crushing him. Just before this reading, Jesus gathered the Twelve and after a long day, they have come to a house for dinner – probably Simon Peter’s.

But yet another crowd has collected so that they can’t even eat a loaf of bread.

Having heard about all this, a group of Jesus’ friends and family have also come to reel him in a bit. “He is beside himself,” people said. Jesus is, to use the Greek word, “ecstatic.” In other places, interpreters have rendered the same word as “astonished” or “amazed.”

In any case, Jesus’ people are concerned. His extreme inclusion is shaking people up, especially religious authorities. Experts who have come down from Jerusalem are certain that Jesus must be working with Beelzabul, the prince of demons.

After all, the scribes assume, people possessed by demons or who have been maimed or born with some physical limitation or defect – these people *must* have been cursed. Or they must not be natural. Or

they have either sinned themselves or they are paying for their parents' sins.

Jesus fairly easily takes the sting out of the scribes' critiques: "How can the Accuser cast out the Accuser?" And then Jesus says this: "Amen. I am telling you that all will be forgiven the children of humanity. The people will be pardoned, excused, for their transgressions and blasphemies."

That is an astonishing statement.

"All sins and the blasphemies that people may have spoken will be forgiven." Mark's Jesus does not say, "might be forgiven," but "*will be forgiven.*"

Drink that in for a second.

And notice how quickly and easily our minds start looking for loopholes or adding phrases that begin with words like "will be forgiven if we..." or "unless you..." or the ever-popular "will be forgiven except for *those* people who..."

Our experience warns us that nothing comes for free. In our suspicion, we anticipate the fine print that will ruin the moment. What's the catch?

"*But...*" Jesus says. (OK, here we go. Right? We knew it.) Mark's Greek continues: "But whoever blasphemes against the Spirit, the Holy One, has no excuse throughout the age" or "until the Age to come, but is answerable for an age-long transgression."

What is Jesus talking about?

This teaching that began with such astounding good news now feels vaguely threatening. It seems to point toward something that we can do that may put us beyond the reach of God's grace. Seems like if there was One Unforgiveable sin Jesus might be a little more forthcoming...just a bit more clear about exactly what this ultimate sin is so that, if nothing else, we can *avoid* it.

Instead, we get one very confusing sentence. This passage is, in fact, among the most challenging in all Christian scripture to interpret. Consequently, these few, imprecise verses must be among the top five anxiety-producing lines in all of scripture for faithful Christians.

And so before we go any further, let me ease some of the stress. First, we can't commit blasphemy against the Holy Spirit by accident.

And second, sin against the Holy Spirit is not really something that we *do* – some behavior or something we say.

What Jesus is talking about is more like a way that we choose to *be* – a way of living in utter rejection of God. In other words, if you are worried about committing this sin, chances are very good that you haven't.

I can also promise that Jesus is not warning against doubt or questioning. These are, in fact, often the most fruitful paths to spiritual growth. Mark's Gospel, the rest of Christian scripture and our tradition from the earliest days confirm the value of seeking God through periods of doubt; inquiring into larger, more inclusive possibilities, especially when our trust begins to waiver.

In fact, if we use religion to bring our lives into some illusionary steady state where everything is familiar, and we know exactly who we are and who God is, then we have chosen not to meet God in the uncertainty of new life, new perspectives.

The 18th c. founder of Hasidic Judaism, the Ba'al Shem Tov, taught that the greatest trick of evil energies is to get us to worry about some small transgression we have committed. We can feed our worry until it grows into an obsession, occupying our minds and stealing joy away from us.

Eventually, we stop seeing the beauty and truth and goodness that always surround us. We can start feeling empty, the Ba'al Shem Tov warns, unable to pray or feel the warmth of God's presence. Our chosen separation from God – the *best definition* of sin – our chosen separation widens until we find ourselves feeling alone and abandoned, ripe to be picked off by the forces of still greater separation.

That sin *can* be forgiven. We can choose to return to God and decide not to repeat the transgression. We can clean up our mess by seeking forgiveness and then we can show up in service once again with all the joy and wholeness we can muster, even if we continue to struggle.

Or we can decide that we have committed a sin that exceeds God's healing forgiveness and *stop seeking* God's help as a result. It's as if we are saying "You may have created and redeemed the Kosmos, Sir, but in *me*, you have met your match."

And that's a problem.

Like the Ba'al Shem Tov, St. Gregory of Nyssa insisted that God's image was present in the human soul. He trusted the universal salvation of all human beings in what Jesus said: "All sins and the blasphemies that people may have spoken will be forgiven." As early as the 4th c., St. Gregory explained why God allows us the opportunity to sin against the Holy Spirit.

In a teaching for people preparing for baptism, he said that God made humans to share in God's goodness. "In doing so," St. Gregory taught, "it is inconceivable that God would have deprived humanity of the most precious form of goodness, namely, the gift of liberty and free will. For if human existence were ruled by necessity of any kind...the image of God in us would have been falsified at that point...By definition, our nature, which has been endowed with a likeness to the divine at every point, must include this capacity for self-determination and liberty..."

That means we are free, in our doubt, to choose exploration or we can choose self-infatuation. In our faltering through dark nights, we can decide to persevere even when God's presence seems impossible to find or we are free to nurture despair. And we are always free to choose to willfully separate ourselves from God who loves us enough to allow us that freedom.

In both Matthew and Luke's Gospels, Jesus compares himself to a mother hen, lamenting over those in Jerusalem who have chosen hard-hearted willfulness toward power rather than an open-hearted willingness toward the loving God of Israel.

In granting her children free will, God is like a mother hen. She does not – in fact, *cannot*, if Gregory of Nyssa is right – *force* her chicks to take refuge under her wings. She has no way to do that. She can cry to them, call to them, coax them. If they refuse or ignore her calls, when danger comes, they are at risk. They have willfully put them selves at odds with her.

Those of God's children who choose separation, to "sin" against the Holy Spirit, the uniting energy of God's love, will remain separated for as long as their refusal lasts; even eternally. Not by God's choice, but by their own.

The God that Jesus called "Abba," "Papa," does not *force* people into the forgiving, loving and holy relationship that they were created to

enjoy with God and God's family. Instead, God will always respect the human freedom to reject the standing offer of healing love.

The difference between God and an earthly hen – OK, one of a few – is that God will call to her children relentlessly, again and again and again, to invite or entice them into the shelter of a healing, forgiving relationship with God and all the rest of God's children: our brothers and sisters and mothers.

Whenever we are ready to turn to God for forgiveness and healing, no sin or blasphemy of any kind will ever be stronger than God's unconditional love. Even now, God's reconciling power flows through the incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection and ascension of Christ, alive and present here at this table.

Love wins. And always will win.

That's what we proclaim when we chant together: "Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again."

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