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Unforgiveable

Text: St. Mark 3:20-35

The English writer of Victorian vintage, Edmund Gosse, is best known for his memoir, *Fathers and Sons*. There he tells what it was like growing up with his father Phillip, an eminent naturalist, but also a committed member of the Plymouth Brethren. The religious expectations of this deeply conservative nonconformist sect wore heavily on Gosse and his struggles with his father's religion form the center of his tale. He also recounts his father's own impossible struggles to reconcile his very literal faith with his field after the rise of the new theories of Darwin. But it is one very early episode that is particular worth noting. In it, Gosse tells about how as a boy he became especially curious about the sin of idolatry, which was always severely censured at meetings of the Brethren. In querying his father as to the nature of the sin, he managed to pin him down to the categorical statement that idolatry consisted in praying to anything other than God himself. The heathen were particularly noted for this sin as they would bow down to objects of wood or stone and give them worship. Anyone in a Christian country, Edmund was assured, who did such a thing could not fail to meet God's very specific anger.

Determined to test the matter for himself, Edmund waited for a moment when his parents were out of the house. When such a day came, he then hoisted a chair up onto the table. Kneeling down before it, he said his daily prayers, but at such places where he would normally say, "O God..." he substituted the words, "O Chair!"

And then he waited. As he writes: " God would certainly exhibit his anger in some terrible form, and would chastise my willful and impious action. I was very much alarmed but

still more excited; I breathed the high, sharp air of defiance. But nothing happened; there was not a cloud in the sky nor a sound in the street. Presently, I was sure that nothing would happen. I had committed idolatry, flagrantly and deliberately, and God did not care.”

Now, the conclusion that Gosse drew from his experiment was not one that impinged on the reality of God; that did not cross his mind. But it did lead him to lessen his confidence in his father’s knowledge of the divine personality and will. Clearly, his father, who had said God would punish the idolater, did not know what he was talking about, a point that Gosse then continued to push for the rest of his memoir.

I suspect that many of us would agree with Gosse’s assessment of his father’s knowledge of God’s personality. Some might even go so far as to say that God does not care. Others, more biblically based, might instead stress that God is love, that God does not lash out fitfully, nor rule like an Oriental despot, leaving his subjects in abject fear of what is or is not his pleasure. But in any case, God does not immediately punish our sins; in fact, God may not in the end punish sins at all, at least not severely. God may well forgive all sins, for there are no sins that are unforgiveable. Of course, there is support for something like that view in the New Testament which in more than one place strongly suggests that this is the way it is with God.

Yet, Jesus, who is the one who assuredly and fully reveals God’s will and personality, and who is the one who teaches us that God’s mercy is infinite, says something a bit different. As our Gospel lesson for this morning reads, Jesus very pointedly says that there is one sin that is not forgiveable, namely, the sin against the Holy Spirit.

Obviously, this is serious. Therefore, quite understandably, numerous theologians and numerous ordinary pew sitters for two thousand years have tried to figure out just exactly what this sin against the Holy Spirit is, and when one has committed it. I presume that they have done

so in order to avoid committing it, but sometimes some of those discussions have had the flavor of trying to figure out just how close to the edge one can come without actually going over.

Now, such discussions have often been an attempt to determine this unforgiveable sin against the Holy Spirit as a specific form of blasphemy – something said out loud that impugns the dignity of the Holy Spirit and that God takes offense at. Yet, I want to suggest that the sin against the Spirit that Jesus is talking about is not what one might call an objective sin, it is not a word, or a phrase, or even a specific act, serious as any of those things might be, but, rather, it is a subjective sin. It is something that takes place deep inside us.

What could that possibly mean?

Well, consider in the first place, what prompts Jesus to make this claim. Jesus has been healing in his hometown. The scribes from Jerusalem who come to investigate what is going on don't deny that something unusual and wonderful is happening, but refusing to give Jesus credit for it by allowing that he might be sent by God, they claim that his power to heal is demonic, coming from Satan. It is after pointing out how ridiculous this is – why would *Satan* give anyone power to drive out people's *demons*? – that Jesus brings up the point about the unforgiveable sin against the Spirit. If it is those scribes who have committed this unforgiveable sin against the Holy Spirit, then it stands to reason that their unforgiveable sin against the Holy Spirit consists in denying that God does what God in fact does do; it consists in claiming that this healing of people's diseases and driving out of their demons, that this unusual and wonderful activity that makes the world better is demonic.

What's the problem here? Why is this blasphemy? It is not simply because it impugns the dignity of God, and misrepresents it, although it, of course, does do that. It is blasphemy because it simply denies that the Spirit does what God sends it to do, which is to heal and to renew. In

short, the unforgiveable sin against the Holy Spirit is denying that renewal and transformation can take place.

Now, what I mean in suggesting that this is a subjective sin, one that takes place deep inside us is this: the issue is not really what one says *about* the Spirit. Although words really are important, this is one place where the problem isn't the words at all, but it is the attitude that stands behind them that counts. For to deny, really to deny that renewal and transformation take place is to deny that the world can change, or that God can change the world. It is also to deny that we can change. It is in, short, to refuse to change and to refuse to be renewed when the Spirit moves us, and when we are given opportunity. So the problem is that the denial comes from the very place within us that ought to be the home of the Spirit, namely, our hearts. John Calvin put his finger on the problem exactly when he observed that this sin is not committed by those whom the Spirit has not touched, or even by hardened opponents of God wherein the Spirit does not dwell; rather "sacrilege is only committed when we knowingly endeavour to extinguish the Spirit who dwells within us." Martin Luther for his part once observed in a way that underlines that point, that the devil doesn't push us towards evil, because he already owns us. What he does is try to get us to deny Christ who is the only one who can help us and change us.

Anything else is forgivable, but this attempt to extinguish the Spirit as it seeks to move us is not. Why? It is for the simple reason that it refuses forgiveness when it is offered. It refuses opportunity when it is given; it refuses transformation at the very moment we are about to be transformed. The English novelist Iris Murdoch says of one her characters that he had committed the sin against the Holy Spirit because he had denied the possibility of perfection in himself. To be moved to see that we are to be perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect is to be moved by the Spirit; to walk away from that and deliberately choose moral and spiritual mediocrity and

stupidity is to sin against the Spirit. So all told, the unforgiveableness that Jesus is talking about is not that God refuses to forgive us because of what we have said or done, it is that we knowingly refuse to embrace the forgiveness that is already moving within us, it is when we knowingly refuse to be made better when the opportunity arises.

Now, there is some very good news here. As it turns out, it is actually pretty hard to commit this unforgiveable sin, or at least to commit it unforgiveably. This is not the sin of an unguarded mouth that says, "Damn!" So, at least with respect to this specific sin, there is no need to examine one's life to see if one may have uttered offensive words inadvertently in the deep worry that one may have put his or her eternal future in jeopardy by an ill considered phrase. In fact, as many a pastor has advised many a soul who has worried about his or her salvation on this score, if you are worrying you clearly haven't committed the unforgiveable sin against the Holy Spirit. For to worry is still to be concerned how you stand with God, and if you are at all concerned about that then the Spirit is still alive within you. The ideal of what God is aiming at is still alive within you, and that worry is the sign of God's care for you. It is therefore hard to commit this sin because to do so is to coldly wish against yourself and against the best sort of life that the Spirit offers.

But along with the good news is also a challenge because when the offer of the Spirit for a good life is in front of you, you have to let it move you. For to recognize, instead of denying, that God moves within us and within the world to move us to something better means that we need to respond. You just can't sit still when a new world is coming to birth in front of you, or when it is offered. Hopefully, that response will not just be worry and it will be joyful. But, in any case, to recognize and to keep alive the belief that God does work among us, healing us, raising us up in hope, and bringing us all into God's life and that this is not the work of demons

is to have to recognize that we are being offered something new and challenging. It is to recognize that we cannot walk away from it. Karl Barth captured this twofold sense of forgiveness and challenge when he said uttered this prayer: “O Lord, say and show to all that they are not lost to you, but that they cannot run away from you.”

That twofold sense above all is the point that our Lord is trying to make in this passage. In talking about the sin against the Holy Spirit that is unforgiveable, he is not outlining a method to determine who is in and who is out. Rather, he is making forcefully clear, and doing so by noting that our destiny depends on it, that when the opportunity is presented you have to choose for it. You can't settle for good enough, you can't settle for complacency, you can't blow the wonderful off because it is going to make a change in your life and you don't happen to have the time for it. You can't call the new and challenging demonic.

For that reason, what he is trying to get his hearers to understand is that when the Spirit blows, one has to be moved. But what exactly does that mean for us?

It means that we are to be moved as the Spirit moves us to be moved. Sometimes that is for very big things. But most of the time, if one pays attention to what Jesus told folks in his day, it starts in smaller things, and if we are found faithful in those small things, we are called to bigger ones. Thus Jesus told tax collectors to take no more than was due to them; he told soldiers to cease from extortion and terrifying people; he told people to tell the truth about themselves and about the world they lived in; he called them to be generous and not to seek advancement in the world first. Each of these points is easily applied to us: be honest in word and in money; be generous, be truthful even when untruth reigns among us, be ambitious for goodness, avoid violence, wait patiently for God, learn humility.

But it also means to move in our daily lives in the way that the Spirit starts to move us in

our lives. For example, it means that when we are moved to pray – to give thanks, to ask for help, even to complain -- that we do so, even if it is only a few words, and that we don't stifle the urge or put it off until later. It means actually to read the Bible, and when you don't know something and are curious about it, that you go and look it up or ask somebody who does know. The desire to know what God wants is a movement of the Spirit; act on it. It means that when a generous thought comes upon you that you act upon it, too, and that you don't rationalize it away by trying to compute the economics of the kingdom against the economics of a lifestyle. It means trying to sing that hymn, even though you don't believe God is glorified by your voice. It means slowing down and being silent when there is too much noise in your life. It means letting the voice and thinking and the very presence of others penetrate you, for it is almost always by others that the Spirit presents itself.

If you do these things when the Spirit comes upon you to do them, you will have begun to accept the challenge that God puts in front of us as God seeks to try again to bring the world into God's life. And if you begin to accept that challenge, if you don't resist it and commit the sin against the Spirit of refusing the Spirit, you will be offered even greater challenges. And with every one of those challenges you will be offered every gift that God has to offer to be part of the kingdom that God is bringing about.

