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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado  
Proper 5, Series B (2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost)  
Saturday, June 5<sup>th</sup>, 2021  
Sunday, June 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021

Sermon: The Unforgivable Sin  
Texts: Mark 3:20-35

Focus: God in Christ Jesus forgives all repentant sinners.

Function: That they would not despair of their salvation because of past sins.

Structure: Story-Applied

Locus: “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him, but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel...” (SC, 3<sup>rd</sup> Article of Apostles’ Creed).

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord

Jesus Christ. Amen! The words of Jesus:

“Truly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the children of man, and whatever blasphemies they utter, but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin” (Mark 3:28-29, ESV).<sup>1</sup>

Have you ever done something so bad that you were certain God would never forgive you? Perhaps even now it hangs over your head and weighs down your heart with guilt and shame. You try to distract yourself and make the worry go away, but in your quiet, lonely moments, you cannot quiet the accusation that you are unworthy and will not be saved.

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

Yet Jesus reassures us in today's Gospel lesson that there is no sin too great for God's grace. "Truly, I say to you, *all* sins will be forgiven the children of man..." (Mark 3:28). That sounds really good, doesn't it?! What a powerful Gospel proclamation! No matter what you do, God will forgive you. Murder, theft, adultery, divorce, rape, genocide, racism, and substance abuse—all are washed away in the blood of Jesus.

But then comes the caveat, the fine print, the "but." And then all that joy goes out the window. "But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin" (Mark 3:29). *Yikes!* So there *is* one sin that can't be forgiven, after all? Yes! God will not forgive you if you blaspheme the Holy Spirit. And how does one accomplish that?

The classic response of Lutheran preachers is this: "If you're worried about whether or not you've committed the unforgiveable sin, then you haven't." Supposedly, this should ease our consciences, but fear of the unknown prevents us from finding solace. We prefer that the pastor define the terms. After all, isn't that part of the business of theology—to explain the Word of God?

To understand Jesus' warning against the unforgiveable sin, we must first regard the context in which Jesus spoke these words. During a busy day full of healing and exorcisms, Jesus was so busy that he could not even find time to eat (Mark 3:20). Out of their concern, his own family tried to make him come home to rest, because they thought he was out of his mind (v. 31). Yes, Jesus' own family called him crazy!

In my experience, the harshest criticism often comes from home: your parents, siblings, or spouse. I can remember how nervous I felt one time when I guest preached at a congregation whose membership included some of my former high school classmates—people who knew me “back when.” It was rather humbling to speak the Gospel to people who knew what I was like when I was just a nerdy theatre kid.

Jesus himself would later remark that “a prophet is not without honor, except in his hometown and among his relatives and in his own household” (Mark 6:4). When Jesus was the guest preacher at his “home church,” the synagogue of Nazareth, the incident ended with his neighbors trying to throw him off of a cliff. Even Jesus' own brothers

did not believe he was the Messiah until after he rose from the dead (John 7:5; cf. 1 Cor. 15:7).

The scribes too decried Jesus' ministry. Despite the fact that he exorcised demons, they accused him of being himself possessed by demons. "He is possessed by Beelzebul," they said, "and by the prince of demons he casts out the demons" (v. 22). Beelzebul is a nickname for the devil or Satan. The religious leaders claimed that the good works of preaching and teaching carried out by Jesus Christ, the Son of God, were actually the wicked works of hell. That is an outlandish claim.

Jesus pointed out the absurdity of their accusation. "How can Satan cast out Satan?" (v. 23). Then he spoke the parable of the house divided and the parable of the strong man, after which he gave this pronouncement:

"Truly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the children of man, and whatever blasphemies they utter, but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin" (Mark 3:28-29).

There it is again: the unforgiveable sin. But note Mark's explanatory note: "for they were saying, 'He has an unclean spirit'" (Mark 3:30).

The Jewish authorities attributed Jesus' ministry to the work of the devil. It was one thing for Jesus' family to make the momentary mistake of calling him crazy. But the scribes and Pharisees persistently rejected the message and work of Jesus the Messiah. They fumed with anger whenever Jesus would heal somebody on the Sabbath Day or refuse to keep their human traditions. They said he was demon-possessed. Ultimately, by the end of Mark's Gospel, they carried out a plot to kill Jesus by having him crucified. All told, they committed the terrible crime decried by the prophet Isaiah: calling evil good, and good evil (Isa. 5:20).

So to blaspheme the Holy Spirit means more than just a flippant comment such as "I hate the Holy Spirit," or some other such statement. No, to blaspheme the Holy Spirit means to regard the work of the Spirit as evil. And what is the work of the Spirit? To point people to Jesus and his Word. In the Upper Room, Jesus told his disciples, "When the Helper comes..., he will bear witness about me" (John 15:26). He also said, "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all

that I have said to you” (John 14:26). The Spirit always point us to Jesus. He doesn’t want the spotlight for himself. You might call him the “shy guy” of the Holy Trinity. When it comes to the Spirit, everything is about *Jesus*. So to blaspheme the Holy Spirit means to reject the Spirit’s work of pointing us to Christ.

And now we have the classic definition of the unforgiveable sin: not believing in Jesus. The only thing that cannot be forgiven is to die without faith in Christ. Unbelief is the only unforgiveable sin. God will forgive all other manner of sins, as Jesus did on the cross, when he prayed, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). As long as we turn away from our sin and ask for God’s forgiveness, we will be saved. But if we reject Jesus and refuse his grace, there will be no hope, for then we will be “guilty of an eternal sin” (v. 29).

That is why you need to believe in Jesus before you die. Time is running out. “Seek the Lord while he may be found” (Isa. 55:6). “Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation” (2 Cor. 6:2).

I once went to lunch with a Mormon missionary—a member of the Latter-Day Saints (LDS). We had become acquainted over the previous weeks. You might even say we were becoming friends, as we shared questions about each other's faiths. But toward the end of the conversation, my friend asked me point blank: "Chris, do you think that I will go to hell when I die?"

I looked at him thoughtfully and asked, "Do you want a polite answer or honest answer?" (Somebody told me long ago never to ask a question for which you do not really want the answer).

My friend wanted me to be frank with him. So I answered: "I cannot say that you are going to go to hell because you're still alive. As long as you draw breath, you still have time to repent and believe in the true Jesus. But if you keep believing in the Mormon Jesus, then you will go to hell."

There was a sadness in his eyes, but he recovered and tried to save face. "Thank you," he said.

"I am praying for your salvation," I told him.

Mormon missionaries often ask their prospects to pray a strange prayer. They ask you to beg the Holy Spirit to reveal to you whether or not the Book of Mormon is truly another testament of Jesus Christ. And then, if you get a warm, fuzzy feeling (“a stirring in your bosom”), they claim that you are converted to the LDS. Frankly, I think it’s rather silly to rest your salvation on whether or not you get goosebumps.

I always tell the Mormon missionaries who come to my door that I will not bother to offend the Holy Spirit by such a prayer. I don’t want to blaspheme the Holy Spirit. I already know the truth. And the truth has set me free.

There is still time for them to be saved. There is still time for you. But time is running out. For as soon as you die or Christ returns— whichever happens first—then it will be too late. “It is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment” (Heb. 9:27).

The Holy Spirit will always point you to the cross of Christ, where he died to forgive our sins. The Spirit will call to remembrance the words of Law and Gospel spoken by the Lord Jesus. The Spirit always



works to create faith in our hearts so that we believe and receive the gifts of God.

Do not resist the Spirit (Acts 7:51). “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31). In the name of the Father and of the Son and of T the Holy Spirit. Amen.