

## Truth Matters

I have never preached on this Gospel text before. I would like to think it's because I've always been on vacation when this one came up, but I really don't remember. It could be that I just didn't want to preach on it. I mean, who would?

This is the passage where Jesus seems to disown his family and where he talks about the unforgivable sin. "Whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin."

We emphasize so much and depend so heavily on the promise of God's love and boundless forgiveness. This passage seems to contradict that. It sets a condition on God's unconditional love, and says that, in this case, there is no possibility of forgiveness no matter how sorry you are.

It would be so easy to just skate past this passage, pretend it doesn't exist, and never have to deal with it again. But that isn't right. We can't just avoid Jesus' words just because we don't like them.

Actually we can. Thomas Jefferson had his own Bible in which he deleted every verse he didn't like. By the time he finished, there were a lot of holes in his Bible. But that's a dangerous thing to do with the Word of God. So let's wrestle with this, and try to figure out what Jesus was saying.

First of all, it is crucial to find out exactly what is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. If that is something that God cannot forgive, we absolutely need to know what it is so we can recognize and avoid it at all costs. The stakes are just too high for us to guess.

So we need look closely at this passage, which occurs in the midst of a whirlwind of action. In this chapter, Jesus has been healing so many people in so many places that no one can keep up with it. No one quite knows what to make of him.

Mobs of people follow his every move. Most of them, especially the desperate and the downtrodden, are beyond thrilled by this unexpected outpouring of compassion and hope. Really, life doesn't get any better than watching new life spring up in dying places.

But not everyone is enjoying Jesus' act. That includes his own family. When they see what Jesus is doing and saying, and all the unbelievable things that are happening around them, their conclusion is that Jesus has lost his mind.

If this were in modern times, we would say they are planning an intervention, and may even seek treatment for Jesus who they believe is suffering from severe mental illness.

That rejection of his message is bad enough. But on the heels of this comes an even worse reaction of an elite group of Hebrew scholars known as the scribes. They come all the way from Jerusalem to see what's going on with this Jesus phenomenon. After studying the situation, their professional conclusion is that he is possessed by the devil.

It is to this group of people that Jesus addressed his comments on the unforgivable sin. The relevant question for us is, of all possible sins, including mass murder and the most depraved of crimes, why is this the one and only sin that can never be forgiven?

The reason, I think, has to do with the nature of truth. The concept of truth is so crucial to Jesus' ministry that he speaks of it more than 100 times in the Gospels. We correctly think of love as the basis of Jesus' ministry, and yet he refers to the word truth far more often than he does love.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus says, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and *the truth will make you free.*"

Look what has happened to the truth in this incident. Jesus has been healing people. He gives the blind their sight. He cures diseases and disabilities. He causes the lame to walk. He lifts up the downtrodden, and gives hope to the hopeless.

In short, by any objective measure, Jesus is doing more to help the lives of those around him than anyone in the world.

Yet somehow when the family looks at those facts they reach the conclusion that Jesus must be insane. The Scribes look at those same facts and, with a straight face, these learned men declare that Jesus must be the spawn of the devil, in league with Satan.

Just in case anyone misses the absurdity of what the Scribes are claiming, Jesus makes it crystal clear. The devil represents all that is wrong with the world. The agents of evil fill the world with suffering, despair, division, fear, hatred, oppression and helplessness. That is what evil wants. Evil has no compassion, no love for anyone, no desire for peace and tranquility. No interest in redemption.

This cannot be disputed; it is true by definition. So if you can look at all the positive, loving, life-giving things Jesus is doing, and conclude that this is the work of the forces of evil, then you are the one who is truly insane.

If you can look at Jesus' work in the world and draw the conclusion that he is demon-possessed, there is no possible help for you. You have so blinded yourself to the truth that there is literally nothing anyone could say or do, there are no facts in existence that could possibly get you to see the truth—the truth that you need to set you free.

Jesus referred to Holy Spirit as the Spirit of Truth. One of the key functions of the Spirit of God is to reveal truth, preserve the truth, keep Christians aligned with the truth. By their willful and blatant disregard of the truth in this situation, the Scribes are attacking the work of Holy Spirit. They have so distorted reality that up is down and down is up.

When you cannot distinguish the healing, renewing work of the God from the work of the forces of evil, how can you possibly live in the kingdom of God?

Why is there no forgiveness of this? Couldn't the scribes suddenly see the light and say, "Oops, my bad. I don't know what we were thinking. That was incredibly stupid. We are truly sorry. Please, please, forgive us."

Why can God accept repentance and offer forgiveness in all other cases, but not in this one? Because once you have destroyed the truth, you have destroyed any possible path to forgiveness.

Change requires recognizing the need to change. If your vision is so damaged that when you look at the most wonderful gift in all of creation and all you see is the worst nightmare in all creation, how can you possibly come to see the error of your ways. How do you change?

If you are surrounded by the light of Christ and the love of God, and the more brightly the light shines, the more you see only darkness, what good is more light going to do? If the Spirit of Truth cannot break through the darkness you have created, what possible force can?

It is not that God doesn't want to forgive. But if God offers me forgiveness and I see that forgiveness as just another scheme of the devil, I make it impossible for that forgiveness to reach me.

The truth is what sets us free. When we lose the ability to recognize the truth, when we can no longer distinguish evil from good, the result is a catastrophe of epic proportions.

This was not just a warning for Jesus' enemies over 2000 years ago. It is aimed at us in our time, more so now than any time in my memory--perhaps more than at any time in our history.

Right now, the truth is under attack from many sides. Postmodern relativism says that there is no such thing as objective truth; that it's all subjective. If there is no such thing as objective truth, then Jesus was wrong to criticize the Scribes. They were just expressing the truth as it looked from their perspective.

Elsewhere, truth is viewed as unimportant. Our legal system depends on this question of witnesses: Do you promise to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth? Increasingly, it seems that people pretend to promise that while in their hearts, their answer is "Why should I? I'll say whatever I need to say to promote my own self-interest."

From the lowest dregs of society to the very top, truth is under attack. Lies are told because the truth is inconvenient. Lies are tolerated as the cost of doing business. Lies have become accepted strategy for negotiating, for gaining power, keeping power, and promoting agendas.

The forces of evil have a great interest in obscuring the truth. Because if the truth prevails, they will be seen as what they are. If the truth prevails, evil will be recognized and rejected. Therefore, the truth must be destroyed.

Doesn't it seem like we are very close to that in our society? Regarding news, claims of fake news, hysterical accusations, and propaganda, I've had so many people

tell me, in frustration, how can we tell what's true anymore? How can we believe anyone?

*That is exactly the environment in which evil thrives.*

Recognizing the truth that will set us free is not easy. If the truth were so easy to figure out, we would not have any tense, courtroom thrillers, or mystery plots. The whole idea of truth gets overwhelmed when people mistake their opinions for truth.

Exposing the truth, making sure that we live in the light of the truth, keeping us from straying from the truth—these are the works of the Holy Spirit. Obscuring the truth is an attack on the work of the Holy Spirit. That, says Jesus, is not a trivial offense.

Now we've probably all bent the truth at one time or other. In some situations, it may spare someone unnecessary hurt feelings. Telling an untruth may be done to advance a good cause. Even the worst lie told for a malicious reason can be forgiven if there is repentance.

The danger in telling lies comes when they become habit, or a deliberate strategy, or become accepted as minor character flaw, or just something everybody does. Because when that happens, we begin to lose sight of the truth. We lose the ability to distinguish between good and evil.

When we can no longer tell the difference between good and evil, or worse, when we start to believe that good is really evil and that evil is really good, there is no possible avenue for forgiveness, for change. There is no room for God's spirit to work.

*If you continue in my Word, you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.* Even if the truth hurts, even if the truth is inconvenient. Even if the truth costs us something, it is still the path to freedom, to living as God wants us to live.

Yes, this is a law sermon. This is a call to live in the truth, to tell the truth ourselves, to resist forwarding e-mail claims or liking tweets or blogs, the accuracy of which we cannot verify.

We are called to insist that honesty and truth be a nonnegotiable. We are called to learn the difference between our opinions and truth—and to set aside our own opinions and seek the truth, wherever that search may take us. We are called to name and reject falsehood when it occurs.

We need to do this so that we can always tell the difference between good and evil; so that we do not get sucked into doing things in the name of God that God hates. So that we can always recognize God and God's will. So that when we fall short of God's will, we can recognize that, and ask for the forgiveness that will restore us.

All that is law; yet there is Gospel here as well. God has given us the Holy Spirit to guide us in the truth, because God wants us to be free, to live and actively participate in wonderful reign of God in this creation. That gift is available to us.

Sanctify us in your truth, Lord. Your word is truth. Amen.

### Truth Matters

Today's Gospel reading is where Jesus talks about the unforgivable sin. "Whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin."

We emphasize so much and depend so heavily on the promise of God's boundless forgiveness. This passage seems to contradict that. It sets a condition on God's unconditional love, and says that, for this sin, there is no possibility of forgiveness no matter how sorry you are.

It would be so easy to just skate past this passage, pretend it doesn't exist, and never have to deal with it again. But we can't just avoid Jesus' words just because we don't like them.

First of all, it is crucial to find out exactly what is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. If that is something that God cannot forgive, we need to know what it is so we can recognize and avoid it at all costs. The stakes are just too high for us to guess.

So we need look closely at this passage, which occurs in the midst of a whirlwind of action. In this chapter, Jesus has been healing so many people that no one quite knows what to make of him.

Mobs of people dog his every move. Most of them are beyond thrilled by this unprecedented outpouring of compassion and hope. Really, life doesn't get any better than watching new life spring up in dying places.

But not everyone is enjoying Jesus' act. An elite group of Hebrew scholars known as the scribes come all the way from Jerusalem to see what's going on with this Jesus phenomenon, and after studying the situation, their conclusion is that he is possessed by the devil.

It is to this group of people that Jesus addressed his comments on the unforgivable sin. The relevant question for us is, of all possible sins including mass murder and the most depraved of crimes, why is this the one and only sin that can never be forgiven?

The reason, I think, has to do with the nature of truth. The concept of truth is so crucial to Jesus' ministry that he speaks of it more than 100 times in the Gospels. In the Gospel of John, Jesus says, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and *the truth will make you free.*"

Look what has happened to the truth in this incident. Jesus has been healing people. He gives the blind their sight. He cures diseases and disabilities. He causes the lame to walk. He lifts up the downtrodden, and gives hope to the hopeless.

By any objective measure, Jesus is doing more to help the lives of those around him than anyone in the history of the world. Yet somehow the Scribes look at those facts and declare that Jesus must be the spawn of the devil, in league with Satan.

In case anyone misses the absurdity of what the Scribes are claiming, Jesus makes it crystal clear. The devil represents all that is wrong with the world. The agents of evil fill the world with suffering, despair, division, fear, and helplessness.

That is what evil wants. Evil has no compassion, no love for anyone, no desire for peace. No interest in redemption.

This cannot be disputed; it is true by definition. So if you can look at all the positive, loving, life-giving things Jesus is doing, and draw the conclusion that he is demon-possessed, there is no possible help for you.

You have so blinded yourself to the truth that there is literally no facts in existence that could possibly get you to see the truth.

Where does the Holy Spirit fit into this? Jesus referred more than once to the Spirit of Truth. One of the key functions of the Spirit of God is to reveal truth.

By their willful disregard of the truth, the Scribes are attacking the work of Holy Spirit. When you cannot distinguish the healing, renewing work of the God from the work of the forces of evil, you have made it impossible to live in the kingdom of God.

Why is there no forgiveness of this? Couldn't the scribes suddenly see the light and say, "Oops, my bad. I don't know what we were thinking. We are truly sorry. Please, please, forgive us."

Why can God accept repentance and offer forgiveness in all other cases, but not in this one? Because once you have destroyed the truth, you have destroyed any possible path to forgiveness.

Repentance requires recognizing the need to change. If your vision is so damaged that when you look at the most wonderful gift in all of creation and all you see is a

nightmare, how can you possibly come to see the error of your ways. How do you change?

If you are surrounded by the light of Christ and the love of God, and the more brightly the light shines, the more you see only darkness, what good is more light going to do?

It is not that God doesn't want to forgive. But if God offers forgiveness and you see that forgiveness as a scheme of the devil, you make it impossible for that forgiveness to reach you.

The truth is sacred. The truth is what sets us free. When we lose the ability to recognize the truth, when we can no longer distinguish evil from good, the result is a catastrophe of epic proportions.

Right now, the truth is under attack from many sides. Postmodernists say there is no such thing as truth; that everything is relative. Our legal system depends on this question of witnesses: Do you promise to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?

Increasingly, it seems that people pretend to promise that while in their hearts, they say "Why should if it's not in my own self-interest?"

From the lowest dregs of society to the very top, truth is under attack. Lies are told because the truth is inconvenient. Lies have become accepted strategy for negotiating, for gaining power, keeping power, and promoting agendas.

The forces of evil have a great interest in obscuring the truth. Because if the truth prevails, they will be recognized and rejected. Therefore, the truth must be destroyed.

Doesn't it seem like we are very close to that in our society? Regarding news, fake news, hysterical accusations, and propaganda, I've had so many people tell me in frustration, how can we tell what's true anymore? How can we believe anyone?

**That is exactly the environment in which evil thrives.**

Proclaiming the truth is the work of the Holy Spirit. Obscuring the truth is an attack on the work of the Holy Spirit. That, says Jesus, is not a trivial offense.

Now we've probably all bent the truth at one time or other. In some situations, it may spare someone unnecessary hurt feelings. Telling an untruth may be done to advance a good cause. Even the worst lie told for the most malicious reason can be forgiven if there is repentance. These are not unforgivable sins.

The danger in telling lies comes when they become habit, or a deliberate strategy, or just something everybody does. When that happens, we lose sight of the truth. We lose the ability to tell the difference between good and evil.

When we can no longer tell the difference between good and evil there is no possible avenue for repentance, for change. There is no room for God's spirit to work.

*The truth will set you free.* Even if the truth hurts, even if it is inconvenient. Even if the truth costs us something, it is still the path to freedom, to living as God wants us to live.

We are called to live in the truth, to tell the truth ourselves, and insist that honesty and truth be a nonnegotiable. We are called to call out and reject falsehood when it occurs.

We need to do this so that we can always tell the difference between good and evil; so that we do not get sucked into doing things in the name of God that God hates. So that we can always recognize God and God's will. So that when we fall short of God's will, we can recognize that, and ask for the forgiveness that will restore us.

God has given us the Holy Spirit to guide us in the truth, because God wants us to be free, to live and actively participate in wonderful reign of God in this creation.

Thanks be to God for that spirit.

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Actually we can. Thomas Jefferson had his own Bible in which he deleted every verse he didn’t believe. By the time he finished, there were a lot of holes in his Bible. But that’s a dangerous thing to do with the Word of God. So I decided to wrestle with this, and try to figure out what Jesus was saying.

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Where does the Holy Spirit fit into this? Jesus referred more than once to the Spirit of Truth. One of the key functions of the Spirit of God is to reveal truth, preserve the truth, keep Christians aligned with the truth.

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healing, renewing work of the God from the work of the forces of evil, you have made it impossible to live in the kingdom of God.

Why is there no forgiveness of this? Couldn't the scribes suddenly see the light and say, "Oops, my bad. I don't know what we were thinking. We are truly sorry. Please, please, forgive us."

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The danger in telling lies comes when they become habit, or a deliberate strategy, or become accepted as minor character flaw, or just something everybody does. Because when that happens, we begin to lose sight of the truth. When that happens, we lose the ability to tell the difference between good and evil.

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