

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
The Midweek Liturgy, Wednesday, December 13, 2023
Matthew 12:22-32
Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit

HOLY GOSPELMatthew 12:22-32, RSV
Last week we read about both the gentleness of Jesus and his determination to continue his work until he brings justice to victory. Now we read about blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

²²Then a blind and dumb demoniac was brought to him, and he healed him, so that the dumb man spoke and saw. ²³And all the people were amazed, and said, "Can this be the Son of David?" ²⁴But when the Pharisees heard it they said, "It is only by Be-el'zebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons." ²⁵Knowing their thoughts, he said to them, "Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand; ²⁶and if Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself; how then will his kingdom stand? ²⁷And if I cast out demons by Be-el'zebul, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they shall be your judges. ²⁸But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. ²⁹Or how can one enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man? Then indeed he may plunder his house. ³⁰He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters. ³¹Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. ³²And whoever says a word against the Son of man will be forgiven; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

If we humans are not careful, we are capable of giving the worst interpretation of things. That is what the Pharisees do in this evening's reading. Instead of rejoicing at the healing of the blind and dumb demoniac, they mutter that Jesus healed the man by way of Be-el'zebul, the prince of demons. Pause for a moment to consider the plight of the poor man. He was both blind and dumb. If I were blind, then I could not read, which would be a real sorrow for me. By this age, I doubt that I could learn to read Braille. And if I were dumb, then I could not speak, and where would this preacher be then? This poor man could neither see nor speak, and Jesus sets him free. Folks should have been rejoicing at this healing, but instead these particular

Pharisees make the downhearted charge that Jesus healed by way of the prince of the demons.

Jesus answers that that makes no sense. It is the nature of civil war that it devastates the nation. It is worse than being attacked by an outside force. When brothers and sisters in a land are fighting against one another, there is both heartbreak and danger for that land. But the devil and his lieutenants are smart. They do not fight one another. If they did, Jesus points out that their kingdom would fall. Alas, it is not falling. The prince of the demons does not cast out his own lieutenants.

But then Jesus goes on to talk about blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. It appears that that is what Jesus believes the Pharisees are in danger of doing: they are close to blaspheming the Holy Spirit. And Jesus says that that would be an unforgivable sin.

Pastor Lara pointed out to me that this possibility of an “unforgivable sin” causes much anxiety among evangelical Christians. It might cause anxiety among us Lutherans too. There is something perverse about the human mind such that if it is determined to *not* think or say something, it is tempted to *do* that very thing! The mind plays around with the temptation. The mind has trouble simply dropping the idea and moving on. And then the Christian might be left anxious, wondering whether he or she has already blasphemed the Holy Spirit or might do so down the road. And that would be awful, to have committed the unforgiveable sin.

Let me offer my thoughts about this matter of the unforgiveable sin — my thoughts about two different cases. In both cases, I want to reassure you and comfort you. But they are different cases, at least to my way of thinking.

The first case is when the person speaks words against the Holy Spirit. The person up and does it: he or she blasphemes the Holy Spirit. We certainly ought not to do so! What has the Holy Spirit ever done that would deserve insult? Throughout the Bible, the Holy Spirit is always a force for the good and for life. It is hard to imagine why someone would speak words against the Holy Spirit. But it seems to me that if someone does that... if the person actually utters words against the Holy Spirit, that that is a sin — given the whole sweep of the Bible — that *can* be forgiven. Otherwise, it is just one more case of works righteousness. It would be to suppose that our fate is determined by our deeds rather than by our Saviour Jesus. With the Lord, there is forgiveness. To me, it is incompatible with the Gospel to imagine that the mere speaking of words could seal our fate. And so, when the penitent and I reach the end of the Private Confession service, I believe that I am speaking earnest words authorized by Jesus himself when I grant the absolution:

The pastor lays both hands on the head of the penitent.

☐ God is merciful and blesses you. By the command of our Lord Jesus Christ, I, a called and ordained servant of the Word, forgive you your sins in the name of the Father, and of the † Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

☒ Amen

The other case is the one I suspect Jesus is really talking about. And for this other case, I do not think it is *possible* for you or me to blaspheme the Holy Spirit. The devils might be capable of that, and if so, that would be a measure of how low they are. But I am not sure a human being can do it.

Certainly a human being can blaspheme *Jesus*. I mean, there he stands before the Pharisees. He is somehow ambiguous. We believe that he is fully man and fully God, but the Pharisees might have their doubts about that. Especially they might doubt that Jesus is fully God. He does not look like they imagine God to look. He is not there commanding the thunder and the lightning. He is not surrounded by angels and archangels who adore him. He just stands there looking like a man. People can speak against him and insult him, even curse him, without thinking that they are blaspheming against God.

But can a human being blaspheme against the Holy Spirit? To me, that is hard to fathom. Remember that the Holy Spirit is the very Spirit of Jesus. We might blaspheme Jesus, but can we blaspheme his Spirit? To do so, would mean that we are *within* the holy influence of Jesus and yet reject it. We are being swept along by the goodness of Jesus — his compassion and his patience and his willingness to forgive — and yet somehow we reject it. I mean, we *want* the Spirit of Jesus. We want the very life and character and spirit of Jesus to take over our lives, conforming us to him. We sing and we pray that the very Spirit of God would descend upon our hearts (LBW 486). How, then, could we blaspheme that Spirit while we are being moved by it? If we could, I think that would be devilish. If someone could understand Jesus perfectly, even have Jesus come into his or her heart, and then reject that spirit, well, I think that would go beyond human ability. I guess the devils could do it, but that reveals their difference from us humans. Let us not, then, make ourselves into devils!

So I hope we will not worry overmuch about blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. Rather, we should pray for the Holy Spirit. We should pray that that Spirit somehow conquer us, subduing our sinful impulses, and replacing them with the holy impulses of our Saviour Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.