

Tenth Sunday of Ordinary Time

Sinning Against The Spirit

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When I was a kid, this Gospel passage really rattled me. Jesus warns that there is an unforgivable sin. A sin that will send me straight to hell with no hope of reprieve. But I did not understand what the sin was. "All sins and all blasphemies will be forgiven, but whoever blasphemes against the Spirit will never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an everlasting sin." OK so don't do that. But what is that? What does it mean to blaspheme against the Spirit? I felt myself in the middle of a mine field.

So what does Jesus mean? Let's look at the context. There is a crowd surging around Jesus. He is performing miracles, casting out demons. But the religious leaders claim that this is not because he is from God, but because he is himself a demon. It's by the prince of demons that he casts out demons. Its at that point that Jesus issues his warning about sinning against the Spirit.

Let's take another step further back. What does it mean to cast out a demon? Just what is a demon anyway? The demonic is the opposite of the sacred. What we hold sacred is what's most important, what defines the meaning and value of our lives. It is that polestar gives our lives direction and purpose. It is the horizon against which everything else appears as meaningful and valuable. Our word "religion" itself comes from the Latin reconnect or re-gather. Our religions just are the beliefs and practices that reconnect us with what we hold sacred. This place is sacred. This Mass is sacred because it gathers us together and reconnects us with God. This mass reminds us of what matters, of what gives our life its meaning and purpose.

In this sense everyone is religious. For everyone holds something sacred, something that gives their lives meaning and purpose, something that inspires them, something that defines their journey in life. And everyone has ways to get in touch with what they hold sacred. It may not happen in a church, they may find the sacred in nature, or romantic love, or in the fight for justice, but everyone believes in something, something that defines who they are, that expresses what gives their life meaning and purpose. They may not think of themselves as religious because they do not go to church, but everyone

believes in something, and has rituals that remind them of what they hold sacred, that grounds them, or restores their balance in times of suffering.

So if that is what we mean by the sacred, the demonic would be the opposite, anything that undermines the meaning and purpose of life, that undercuts someone's self worth. Like sin, like injustice, like disease, like mental illness, like death. Jesus has been walking through the countryside casting out such demons. Performing miracles, ie wonders that restore meaning and purpose to the lives of those afflicted by demons of all kinds. And yet the religious leaders, whose calling is precisely to lead people to the sacred, are claiming that Jesus is exorcizing these demons because he is himself a demon. It might seem that he is saving you, but he is really destroying you.

This is what Jesus is calling the unforgivable sin in today's Gospel. And it's unforgivable not because God is too angry but because God cannot get through to forgive. If one is blind to the sacred, if one holds nothing sacred, how can one ever find anything of meaning and value. If one refuses to believe in someone, not matter what they do, loving them is impossible.

At least as long as one's cynicism remains. Jesus calls the sinning against the spirit an everlasting sin. Which is not to say that my belief in someone who has hurt me cannot be restored. But that to restore that trust itself requires an act of trust. It requires me dropping my cynicism, lowering my guard, giving someone a second chance.

After all the story today is book-ended by his mother and family not believing in him, but have come to take him away claiming that he has gone mad. In other words, that he has been possessed by a demon. What Jesus is doing is so new, so unheard of, so disruptive to the powers that be, that even his family thinks at first that he is possessed. But they will come around. Once her belief in her son is restored, she will become one of the most faithful of all, staying with him even at the foot of the cross, when all others had lost faith in him.

So everlasting does not mean forever, but lasting as long as the cynicism lasts. You cannot put your faith in what you refuse to believe in. You cannot hold sacred what you are deaf and blind to. Which is why Jesus often ends a parable, or a miracle with the words, "let him who has ears, hear, him who has eyes, see. Salvation comes from opening our eyes and ears. It comes from listening even to those whose words may at first glance sound demonic, from

attending even to those whose ways may at first appear to destroy everything we hold sacred. They may indeed be possessed by demons. But they themselves are not demons. For we also believe in Jesus words that no one is beyond the saving power of God.