

I think I need to include another “mini-sermon” today because I know many of us struggle with something Jesus says in this story. We believe that every sin can be forgiven, but here Jesus says that blaspheming the Holy Spirit is an unforgivable sin, so how can that be? Well, while it is true that all sins can be forgiven, the sin must be acknowledged and then forgiveness asked for. It is that same Spirit that reveals our sin to us and also moves us to ask for forgiveness. So it stands to reason that if someone curses the very power that calls them to repentance, it cannot happen. So, what Jesus is saying is that sins not confessed cannot be forgiven.

OK, on to sermon #2. The Gospel today is about division and the chaos and pain it causes. Therefore, it is about one thing: sin. It is so clear in the Bible and even in our own personal experience that the point and the power of sin is one thing: to divide, to take what is God-given and whole and healthy and good, and to tear it apart, to render it into pieces. And guess what.....that is also what can happen to God’s people, you and me.

This battle and interior conflict in our lives has been around since the story of Adam and Eve when sin separated them from God and from one another. This division and inner conflict is a reality in this world and in our own lives. A marriage divided is a divorce. A nation divided results in vitriolic politics and, in the extreme, civil war. An economy divided yields poverty and injustice. A community divided becomes filled with individualism and tribalism, prejudice and violence. Humanity divided is all of these things on a global scale. Again, the power of sin is to always cause separation, division, alienation, and pain. And in all of the examples I have just listed, how do they begin? They begin with individual human beings making choices that divide us from one another and from Almighty God. It begins with one person’s anger or frustration or jealousy or resentment spreading to another, and then another, and then spreading like a lethal cancer throughout the world. What is the only thing that can heal this cancer? Again, it begins with one person’s love and forgiveness and humility and joy spreading to another, and then another, and then spreading as the power that will cause God’s will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. Although it may not look like it at first, the truth is that the good and the evil in this world always begin with one individual. The Bible makes this point in Romans 5:12 which says, “Sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and death spread to all because all have sinned.” Of course this refers to Adam as representing the first man, but the point is that it just requires one person to begin the problems in our world. To use graphic examples, look at the horror and human suffering brought about by one sick individual, Adolph Hitler. Compare that with the love and healing and good works brought about by one faithful person, Mother Teresa of India.

It is clear that the teaching in the Gospels and in the other readings that the message of God to his creation is aimed at individual men and women. We have been created one at a time, and God speaks to us one at a time. Of course, they were often in groups as they heard the message, but its power was in calling each of them to choose to live their lives in a different way. That message spread from one person to another over the next 2,000 years as Christianity grew to cover the earth. While it is obvious that this conversion

is not complete, the point is that it is only through individual human beings that the world is changed, for good or evil.

We all know what it is like to live divided lives. We know those times when our outsides and our insides don't matchup. That is what is meant by a house divided. We can be one person at work, another person at home, and maybe another at church. We sometimes act one way with certain people and a different way with other people. Life gets divided into pieces. Our behavior, beliefs, and ethics can become situational. There is the work life, the personal life, and the public life. After awhile we are left with a bunch of disconnected pieces. So why do we do that? Isn't it because we want to be accepted by whatever group we are in at the moment? Some of us, and I won't use names, might use certain language on the golf course or when we hit our thumb with a hammer, but we would never use that language in church or with a bunch of children. We might say or do particular things with long-time friends that we would change when we are with people we are meeting for the first time.

What this reveals is that who we are to others is sometimes situational, depending upon who we are with and the particular setting. In a way, we sometimes allow other people to determine who we are. Where do we look to see a perfectly integrated and undivided person? We all know that there has only been one, and that is Jesus Christ. He spoke his truth and behaved in a way totally consistent with who he was, regardless of the situation or who he happened to be with. He also showed quite dramatically that there is a cost for refusing to allow the world to have a hand in determining who we are.

And there is a cost for you and me to try to follow his example. We may upset someone or be misunderstood or even be ignored or excluded if we say or do something that does not fit comfortably into that particular situation. Actually, that is probably the most accurate test to see if we are living out of our identity as Christians. In other words, there are times when we should not fit in, times when we are on the outside, times when we disturb or even anger other people. A simple example is when one of your friends tells a racist or homophobic joke, and while others laugh, some probably uncomfortably, you say, "Bill, that is not funny and is hurtful to many people." Which of our parts calls the shots? The one that kind of smiles and tries to change the subject, or the one who tells the truth for a Christian?

I think the goal for us Christians is to always be working at becoming a person who lives out of that identity instead of living how others would find acceptable. It only happens with God's help, and we will never achieve perfection. It is all about the journey, the process, not a final goal. You know that part of yourself that you wish was not part of yourself? Come on, you know exactly what I mean. Let's face it, we all are pieces of work. None of us is perfect and all of us are made up of parts that are good and healthy and other parts that are not. So, what are we to do about this complicated situation?

I think it goes right back to the beginning, our own beginning. Scripture tells us that we have been created in the image and likeness of God. But that God-given perfection has been diluted or tainted by living in a fallen, sinful world where God's will is not yet being done as it is in heaven. I believe it all begins when we are courageous enough to see and acknowledge the division in our lives. Then we commit to living a life whose goal is to eliminate what is not God-given and strive to increase, improve, and live out of those parts that are God-given. Our model, of course, is his Son. Our goal each day is to grow, even just a very little bit, into his likeness, and hopefully spread that likeness to another person.

That gives us the power to change the world, at least to do the very most each of us can to bring about God's will being done on earth as it is in heaven. Each of us, as representatives of God, passes what we learned and how we live to another person, and then another person, helping to spread the truth and the power of the Gospel throughout the earth. Will we see the final result? I doubt it, but that is not our call. Our call is to do our unique part, facing the division in our lives and, with God's help, to work lessening the worldly parts and increasing the Godly parts, a role no one else alive can do as we can. One at a time we change the world. Amen