

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως: Proper 5-B (6 June 2021)

St. Thomas', Glassboro

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Collect

O God, from whom all good proceeds: Grant that by your inspiration we may think those things that are right, and by your merciful guiding may do them; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

1 Samuel 8:4-20, 11:14-15, Psalm 138, 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1, Mark 3:20-35

1 Sitting at Jesus' Feet

Sitting at Jesus' feet must have been a challenging thing! Jesus would say and do things that were surprising, shocking! Crowds would gather for long periods of time without any rest, without anything to eat. Jesus' family heard about it and thought maybe he was getting carried away, going off the rails. The scribes from Jerusalem took a darker view: they saw what Jesus said and did, and they felt *their* authority threatened by Jesus. So they labeled what he did as evil, demonic.

Jesus' response sounds strange to our ears. He said, *"Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin."*

2 Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit

Notice that Jesus is making two big statements here.

First: *"Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter."*

Jesus is issuing a blanket pardon here. Where there is sin, Jesus meets it with forgiveness. Jesus doesn't say people will be forgiven *some* sins or *certain* sins. Even blasphemy, arguably the worst of sins, will be forgiven.

Second, though, Jesus carves out an exception in this blanket pardon. There's a situation where the blanket pardon won't work. That is when one blasphemes against the Holy Spirit. What is the Holy Spirit and how do you know when you are blaspheming against it?

The Holy Spirit is God's active, working presence in and among and around us. The Holy Spirit is God at work in the world. The Holy Spirit is that which we don't see, we don't know where it comes from or where it is going to, but, like the wind, we can see its effects. The Holy Spirit is seen in the good things that happen in the world.

Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is to take what is good, what God is doing in the world, and calling it evil. It is accusing God of evil. That is what the scribes are doing. Jesus is doing good so that God's works may be seen, and they are calling it evil. This is a problem *not* because it makes God angry. This is a problem *not* because some particular rule or regulation has been broken. This is a problem because when a human being chooses to call "good" evil and "evil" good, a person is rejecting that which is good. In choosing say of *good*, "that is my evil, that which I reject from my life," one is rejecting the very definition of good, who is God. So if God and God's good works become evil in my sight, become the things I want no part of, then God will not force God's self on me. Forgiveness will not be foisted on me like a vaccination on a squirming child. Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will be a choice I consciously make, choosing to make evil my good, choosing to reject God. And in rejecting God, I reject the gift of life God wishes to give to me.

Now, there's a fascinating corollary to this idea that we can reject God and refuse God's forgiveness. This is the fact that God wants better for us. God is so desirous of loving us, providing us with forgiveness and wholeness, that sometimes God will allow us to suffer the natural consequences of our choices. Have you ever seen a parent do that with children? A child makes an obstinate choice, say, refusing to eat the food that is on offer when the family eats out. Sometimes my parents would pick up drive-through from McDonald's for me. Sometimes they would just let watch them eat and experience my own growling tummy!

This is the experience the people of Israel were signing up for in our first reading today. They want a king – because everybody's doing it. It was the conventional choice. It was a standard best practice of all the nations in the neighborhood. God tells Samuel to warn the Israelites about all the bad things a king will do to them. This isn't prophecy, exactly: it was the obvious norm from observing other kings in the surrounding nations. But God wasn't going to step in and prevent these things from happening: God allowed the people to make their own choice. To render that choice without effect would be to take away their power to choose. To let them suffer both the good and the bad of that choice would be to allow God's people the agency to choose their own way and, hopefully, to learn from it. Thus it was the legacy of kings going from bad to worse that left God's people in bad shape, carried away into exile, and led them to consider swallowing their pride in order to make a different choice.

3 These are my brothers and sisters and mother

It is those who made a different choice, says Jesus, that are his true sisters and brothers and mother. It is those who acknowledge Jesus as the true and good king for whom God's people had hoped all along.

So today we study the scriptures, we place ourselves in the traditions of the church, so that we may be formed and recognize for ourselves that which is good, what God is up to in the world around us. We gather to hear Jesus' words, just as the people did in the house in Nazareth. We sit at Jesus' feet and learn from each other how to see the Holy Spirit at work, how to notice God's activity among us. There is a lot we don't understand in the world, including a lot of what God is doing. But as a community, experiencing the different ways God encounters each of us, we gain a wider perspective, a growing capacity to recognize God's Holy Spirit in action.

Avoiding "blasphemy of the Holy Spirit" means just keeping our eyes open and receptive to witness the beauty of God's activity. It means acknowledging the different ways God is at work in each our lives, and giving thanks for each of those manifestations of God's Holy Spirit. In doing this we join those earliest disciples in the room at Jesus' feet, becoming ourselves the sisters and brothers and mothers of Jesus. **Amen.**