

Readings

Gn 3:9-15

Ps 130:1-2, 3-4, 5-6, 7-8

2 Cor: 4:13-5:1

Mk 3:20-35

Francis J. Caponi, O.S.A.
Villanova University
Villanova, Pennsylvania

“Amen, I say to you, all sins and all blasphemies that people utter will be forgiven them. But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an everlasting sin.”

Today’s gospel comes from the third chapter of Mark. Prior to Jesus’ encounter with the scribes, we are told that “he had cured many and, as a result, those who had diseases were pressing upon him to touch him And whenever unclean spirits saw him they would fall down before him and shout, ‘You are the Son of God.’” As a consequence of all these wonderful deeds, so many people want to see and hear and touch Christ that he cannot even have dinner with his disciples.

How do the scribes respond? “‘He is possessed by Beelzebul’ and ‘By the prince of demons he drives out demons.’” They witness exorcisms and healing. They hear scalded demons confessing Jesus’ sonship. And the conclusion they come to is that Jesus himself is possessed! Not by the Holy Spirit, but an unclean spirit. Not the Spirit who descended upon Christ at his baptism in the Jordan, but an ally of Satan. They conclude that Christ’s miracles are a false flag operation, a cynical ploy by the prince of lies.

Jesus’ response is twofold. First, he points out that their interpretation is illogical – indeed, downright silly. Why would Satan give him the power to drive out demons? What is the devil’s

endgame here? Lots and lots of healthy, happy people? His second response is deadly serious: “If you can look at people who have been healed of sickness and freed from demons, and conclude that this is the devil’s work, then you are endangering your own salvation.” That is what it means to blaspheme against the Holy Spirit. To deny that the Holy Spirit is at work in Jesus’ preaching and healing is to license your own disobedience. “This man works for the devil. I will not heed his call.” Further, you can justify telling others to stay away, on the grounds that Jesus is a diabolical tool. It is like telling people dying of thirst that the desert spring they are crawling towards is poisoned.

Jesus is clear: “all sins and all blasphemies that people utter will be forgiven them.” But denying the Holy Spirit cannot be forgiven because it cuts a person off from the means of forgiveness. It’s as if a doctor had the power to cure every illness of body and mind from the common cold to muscular dystrophy, from insomnia to insanity. The only limitation to his power is that he can’t cure people who won’t come to him. The only real obstacles to healing are self-imposed.

Is there anything Christ will not forgive? No. His mercy is infinite. Infinite, but not automatic. It is freely given, but it must be accepted. We must ask for forgiveness, we must be genuinely sorry, we must be determined to avoid future sin. Otherwise, Christ’s mercy is like a flood that rushes over hard, dry soil without soaking in. Christ cannot forgive the man who will not be forgiven.

How do we know we have prepared our hearts properly to receive the gift of forgiveness? It is just as we say at every Mass: “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” The person who truly desires forgiveness forgives others. The person who has accepted forgiveness forgives others. The person grateful to God and determined to avoid sin forgives others.

In all of this, do not trust your emotions, which are easily influenced and transitory, thus poor gauges of our obedience. Forgiveness is a choice which only sometimes feels good. Instead, examine your intent and your actions. That is where the challenge of Christian obedience must be met. Do you *choose* to forgive a person or are you pretending, making empty sounds without true hope? Do you act accordingly – not cursing or gossiping or plotting revenge, but forswearing retaliation and praying for the offender?

The Holy Spirit is the power of forgiveness. Recall the appearance of the risen Lord to the apostles recorded in the Gospel of John: Jesus said to them, “‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained.’” To deny the Holy Spirit is to cut ourselves off from forgiveness. The Church has received this power from the risen Lord, and each of us has received this power in baptism. *We* blaspheme the Holy Spirit when we refuse to forgive, and when we hold the sacrament of reconciliation in contempt. If we claim that we cannot forgive, we deny the Holy Spirit. If we think, “I don’t need to go to confession. I can tell God I am sorry in the silence of my heart,” we blaspheme the Holy Spirit. If we wait to forgive until we *feel* forgiving, if we insist that we will obey Christ’s command only if God first heals our wounds and cools our anger, we grieve the Holy Spirit and risk our own damnation.

Take note: the scribes blaspheme the Holy Spirit without mentioning His name. The number of people who reject the Holy Spirit explicitly is negligible; the number of those who deny the Holy Spirit in practice is terrifying. We are included in their number, when we refuse the power of the Spirit, when we speak as if only great saints can forgive. But when we forgive, we know that the Spirit is at work in us, enabling us to do for others what we pray God will do for us.