

Rev. Dr. Camille Cook Howe June 25 th , 2023

Georgetown Presbyterian Church Matthew 27:1-10

Pew to Pulpit: Is there an unforgivable sin?

Mark 3:20-30

Matthew 27:1-10

27 When morning came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people conferred together against Jesus in order to bring about his death. 2 They bound him, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate the governor.

3 When Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he repented and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders. 4 He said, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." But they said, "What is that to us? See to it yourself." 5 Throwing down the pieces of silver in the temple, he departed, and he went and hanged himself. 6 But the chief priests, taking the pieces of silver, said, "It is not lawful to put them into the treasury, since they are blood money." 7 After conferring together, they used them to buy the potter's field as a place to bury foreigners. 8 For this reason that field has been called the Field of Blood to this day. 9 Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah, "And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of the one on whom a price had been set, on whom some of the people of Israel had set a price, 10 and they gave them for the potter's field, as the Lord commanded me.

Mark 3:20-30

20 Then Jesus went home, and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. 21 When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, "He has gone out of his mind." 22 And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, "He has Beelzebul, (BEE-ehl-Zuh-Bul) and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons." 23 And he called them to him and spoke to them in parables, "How can Satan cast out Satan? 24 If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. 25 And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. 26 And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. 27 But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered.

28 "Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter, 29 but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness but is guilty of an eternal sin"— 30 for they had said, "He has an unclean spirit."

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

2

Today, after eight weeks, we conclude our Pew to Pulpit sermon series. We received dozens of questions from young and old. Pastors Jessica, Meghan, and I enjoyed wrestling with some of your queries. Thank you for participating and for following along. Apologies to those of you whose questions we did not tackle, either we ran out of time, or they were too hard for us. Maybe someday we will pull them all together in a book for you. We conclude today with a big

question. I would like to read the question in its entirety so you can see what we are dealing with.

The author wrote this:

I have two questions that are related. The first is: Could Judas have been saved? Is it possible that he could have returned to the resurrected Jesus and been reconciled, instead of committing suicide in shame and despair over his betrayal of everything and everyone that had once mattered to him? Dante puts Judas in the innermost circle of hell, but could we imagine a different ending for him?

The second question is: What is the "blasphemy against the Holy Spirit" that Jesus in Mark 3:28-

30 calls an "eternal sin" that can never be forgiven? Both these questions are getting at a deeper

one: Is there an unforgivable sin? Is there a point of spiritual no-return? I think that's a crucial

question in our time when depression and even suicide are on the rise, when many people (like Judas) think there's no way out of the hole in which they find themselves--a hole they may have

had a part in digging. I'd be interested to hear your thoughts.

Is there an unforgivable sin?

This is a hard one. I admit that there are parts of me hoping that the answer is yes. That part of me thinks that there are some sins which are so hideous that not even God could not find it in

Godself to forgive them. There just are unthinkable acts which occur, and it is truly hard, for me, to think about forgiveness in connection to those who committed such acts. In the two categories of commandments love of God and love of neighbor, I would imagine that God might be more inclined to forgive the sins made against God's own self than against God's people. Just like I might be more forgiving if you hurt my feelings than if you hurt my child's feelings. I wonder if God could forgive the blasphemers much easier than the child abusers. Never mind the child abusers who don the religious vestments while preying on the young and vulnerable but that is another sermon. The point is that there some sins which feel to me like they should not be forgiven!

But the other part of me really hopes the answer is no. That there truly is nothing that we can do that can fully remove us from God's love and grace. If you think about biblical examples — Moses was a murdered, King David committed adultery, and St. Paul tortured and murdered Christians before his conversion — but Moses, David, and Paul we assume are all in heaven. We believe these sins can be forgiven. It gives us hope to know they were sinners like us. We can get caught up on this verse about the unpardonable sin because we worry about things we have done, or we worry about things that have been done or not done by people we love. The sins they have committed or the faith they have professed and not followed or the faith they have

3

refused, denied, or doubted. Many a troubled conscious has agonized if what they have done will separate them from God's mercy forever. Gospel writer Mark states that the unforgivable

sin is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, which we don't exactly know what that is. Lots of ink has been spilled over trying to define what blasphemy against the Holy Spirit looks like. The late Lamar Williamson, a biblical scholar, said that the intention of the text is not to define the unpardonable sin and even less to equip us to decide who has committed it. When it comes to judgment, one thing is sure, we are not in charge. Thanks be to God!

There is something important for us to know in the biblical witness of Jesus about forgiveness. Whenever the New Testament talks about the impossibility of forgiveness it is always in the context of a warning; it is never in response to a specific sinner. It is like two different modes of communicating for Jesus. One mode is the warning that there will be a day of judgment and a separation between the sheep and the goats, and there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth for those cast off — that is the warning mode. And the other mode is in conversation with the sinners who Jesus calls to, and welcomes, and seeks to forgive. In the Bible, all who approach Jesus are welcomed. Even those who don't approach Jesus, are sought out and made whole. There is not one story in the Bible of a sinner who is turned away or rejected by Jesus. People rejecting Jesus, yes. Jesus rejecting people, no.

Jesus warns the people in the most serious of terms. Jesus also forgives them in the most merciful of ways. These two things must be held together. The warning and the good news are set side by side in this text. We get caught up with the unpardonable sin question and miss the good news when Jesus says, "Truly, I say to you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter."

The warnings Jesus offers are stern and yet the forgiveness is never mechanical. It is never, sorry

you committed sin number 429, do not pass go, do not collect \$200. Forgiveness is always relational. The relational piece is key. That is where the first questions about Judas comes back into play. Could we imagine a different ending for Judas, the one who betrayed Jesus for thirty pieces of silver? I can. Repentant Judas, realizes in horror his grave mistake, returns the silver coins to the chief priests and elders. They scoff at him, rejecting the money, offering him no pardon at all. Judas then runs to find Jesus, who has already been hung on a cross clinging to life. Judas pleas with Jesus and there Jesus, hanging between criminals looking down at Judas and includes him in the prayer, "Father, forgive them, for they know not..."

I do believe with Jesus there is always hope. And so the question, "Is there a point of spiritual no-return?" Well the biblical witness tells us that there is no point when all hope is lost with God. There is no point when we cannot be reconciled again to our Creator. There is no point when we have dug a hole so deep that suicide is our only option. God always desires relationship with us, always, even when we have done terrible, horrible, no good, very bad things. That is what makes God so much different from you and me because we don't always desire relationship all people, all the time.

Now just for the sake of clarity, and to dispel any misguided preaching you may have heard on the subject, suicide is not an unpardonable sin. Now the author of the question did not put the two together, I'm not implying that, but the church historically has heaped judgment upon those

who have ended their own lives. Suicide is a tragic end for those who feel they have no options,

for those who have lost all hope. But that does not mean God has lost hope in them. Even in death there is redemption for the lost and the haunted and the bullied and the sick and the sinners. Spiritually there is not a point of no-return, because there is no place God cannot go to claim God's own.

There is a short poem attributed to Rumi that says, "Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field. I'll meet you there." While humanity thinks so often in black and white, God thinks in a completely different color palette. I'll meet you there, in the field, Jesus would say to Judas, and we will talk about it. There in the field of the sheep and the goats, I will offer to be your shepherd once more and tell you about my abiding love for you. Our hearts will break but forgiveness can be yours.

Author Elizabeth O'Connor wrote, "Despite a hundred sermons on forgiveness, we do not forgive easily, nor find ourselves easily forgiven. Forgiveness, we discover, is always harder than the sermons make it out to be." If depression and suicide are on the rise the church must preach love and forgiveness and new beginnings, not judgment. That's not our job.

Forgiveness is hard to give and hard to receive. There is so much we don't know about sins and sinners. There is so much we don't know about God and about life. But we do know that God, in Jesus, came to be with us, and that alone says so much. Emmanuel, God with us, in life, and even unto death. God is with us, truly with us, and so hope cannot be destroyed and forgiveness is always God's choice.

The Psalmist says it best:

Where can I go from Your Spirit?

Or where can I flee from Your presence?

If I ascend into heaven, You are there;

If I make my bed in hell, behold, You are there.

If I take the wings of the morning,

And dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,

Even there Your hand shall lead me,

And Your right hand shall hold me.

If I say, "Surely the darkness shall fall on me,"

Even the night shall be light about me;

Indeed, the darkness shall not hide from You,

But the night shines as the day;

The darkness and the light are both alike to You.

God's light can always shine in our darkness. There is no place to flee from God's presence.

There is no-point of spiritual no return.

Thanks to be God. Amen.