

SERMON: Satan vs. the Holy Spirit

TEXT: Mark 3:20-35

The Devil's Advocate is the title of a movie that came out in 1997 starring Al Pacino. My husband at the time was in the habit of purchasing movies before he even saw them. So we both sat down and watched it one night after the kids were in bed.

It wasn't a horror movie in the classic sense, no violence or blood and gore (that I can recall), but it was terrifying. So terrifying, in fact, that I didn't want it in the house. I made him get rid of it; I think he gave it to his mother!

I normally don't pay much attention to the devil; he's not worth my time. I generally don't even believe in Satan as a being. I do believe evil exists, but not in one particular person. The movie did personify Satan, though, and the terrifying thing about him was that he was attractive and charming and charismatic. And he could transform himself into different beings – male or female – for the purpose of seducing people into selling their souls. He would place options and opportunities before people that were intensely tempting, and he convinced them that these were good choices, the right thing to do for everyone involved. He seemed so nice, so trustworthy, so concerned about doing what was in your best interest. And before

you knew it, you were entangled in a terrible situation that was impossible to escape.

The movie convinced me that IF the devil does exist, this portrayal showed exactly what he is like. Terrifying, because he's so attractive and compelling.

In the passage we read from the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is surprisingly not a very compelling character. The whole passage, in fact, is one we'd rather not have to deal with. I think this is the first time I've ever preached on it.

Up to this point in Mark, Jesus has done a number of healings and exorcisms, and the crowds have grown larger as he moves from place to place. But in this scene he's not winning any popularity contests.

One contemporary theologian explained, "This story is offensive. Jesus rebuffs his family. Jesus thumbs his nose at those in religious leadership. Jesus compares himself to one who breaks into someone's home, ties up the owner, and steals.... He offends those closest to him, those with the greatest power to hurt him and even...some in the crowd and the newly appointed apostles, too. Jesus offends because he upends everything we've heretofore thought sacred: family, religion,

civility, established order, home, church, country. Jesus calls us to give up all the loyalties that in comparison to God should be penultimate, but in practice become working idols that drive our decisions, thoughts, and actions.” (Jill Duffield, *Looking into the Lectionary*, The Presbyterian Outlook, June 10, 2018)

Suddenly Jesus is speaking against everything society holds dear. Suddenly, instead of healing, it seems as though he’s trying to destroy. Consequently, people think he’s gone off the deep end, he’s lost his mind, and his family tries to restrain him. As Mark tells it: “And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, ‘He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.’” (v.22) They thought he was possessed!

Hearing this, Jesus questions, “How can Satan cast out Satan?” He defends his point, arguing that a kingdom or a house divided against itself cannot stand. He tells that confusing parable about how you have to tie up a strong man before you can plunder his house. Then he declares that people can be forgiven of blasphemy, “but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin.”

This particular verse has always puzzled me. In fact, it scares me that I might be guilty of it, because I'm not really sure what it means.

In my study of this passage, I read several commentaries, all of which were in close agreement about how to define the unforgivable sin. But the most succinct was this: "The inability to tell the difference between the power of the Holy Spirit and the demonic is an *unforgivable sin*." Further explanation from this scholar says, "It is an odd feature of Jesus' ministry that he is open to everybody: Gentiles, Jews, the poor, the demented, the sick, working class, women, tax collectors, sexual outcasts. The only people who provoke Jesus' intolerance are his family and the normal, law-abiding scribes. The ones closest to him, his family and those who are... dedicated to a life of piety, are those that are also farthest from him. They are least able to make the leap from dedication to religion to openhearted love of God's beloved, disfigured humanity." (Wendy Farley, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 3, ed. David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor)

Yep. I've done it. I'm guilty of the unforgivable sin. I'm afraid we all are. We consider ourselves the "in" crowd: church-going, law-abiding, family values folk. We want to believe that Jesus values the same things we do, that Jesus supports every cause that we support. But we have it backwards. We're supposed

to be looking to Jesus to learn what we should value. We should be standing up for him, rather than expecting him to stand up for us.

We have not been open to everybody as Jesus was. We create categories for people and we put up walls to keep all those *bad* people away from all us *good* people. We want to be the ones who decide who's in and who's out.

June is Pride Month for people who identify as LGBTQ. I think many people wonder why these folks feel the need to flaunt their sexuality. But for generations, they have hidden their true identities, they've pretended to be straight in order to be accepted. Throughout the decades much of society – particularly religious society – has demonized them, saying that their lifestyle is an abomination in the eyes of God. And it goes much deeper than a baker refusing to make a wedding cake for a gay couple.

People have been bullied to death, driven to suicide, beaten to death, fired from their jobs, ostracized by the church, kicked out of their homes, and forgotten by their families because of who they are. But slowly – very slowly – we are beginning to realize that the power working within them is not Satan at all, but the power of the Holy Spirit, as in the parable, binding the strong man to liberate the

captive. It is about time that the LGBTQ community feel the freedom to be open and honest and proud of who they are and who God created them to be.

So, if we really are guilty of the unforgivable sin, what now? Are we really never to be forgiven? Are we doomed to spend eternity in hell?

Let's look again at Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians, where Paul wrote: "...We know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence. Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God. So we do not lose heart."

I believe that as we strive to extend grace to others, grace will be extended to us. The mother and brothers and sisters of Jesus were standing outside in the passage from Mark. When they called for him to come out, Jesus said to those sitting inside with him, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And looking at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother." Initially, this feels like Jesus is rejecting his family. But it is an invitation, rather than a rejection

– an invitation to all of us to come inside, to take our place in the family of faith,
the family of grace.

It is Satan that tells us that others don't belong. It is the Holy Spirit that
gathers us and breathes life into us and binds us together as people of God.

Brothers and sisters, may we open our minds and our hearts and our arms to
welcome all, and to become a house united in the strength of the Spirit... to the
glory of God!

AMEN.