

Blasphemy vs. Right Speech Reading: Mark 3:20-35 Proper 5/B 6-6-21
by the Rev. Karen Faye Siegfried; St. Barnabas Episcopal Church, Arroyo Grande CA

Jesus said: “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.” (Mk. 3:28-29) What I would like to talk about today is blasphemy, the unforgivable sin, and rightful speech. So let’s start right off with the Blasphemy.

Blasphemy! It is a rather startling word which is not used frequently in casual conversation. In fact, there is nothing casual about committing blasphemy. Blasphemy is speaking or acting disrespectfully toward God or something sacred. In Greek literature, blasphemy means abusive speech or mockery. Biblically, it includes using the Lord’s name in vain, cursing God, ridiculing God, showing contempt for God, or denying the reality of God. It also includes desecrating sacred objects like the Bible, the Koran, and church properties.

Sixty-nine countries worldwide have blasphemy laws. The 2019 edition of the Freedom of Thought Report, from Humanists International, has found that blasphemy (which can include apostasy and atheism) is punishable by death in six countries. In some countries, blasphemy laws are used to impose the religious beliefs of the majority on a minority, as in the more conservative Muslim countries. On the other hand, there is a law in Denmark which makes it illegal to mock other religions and faiths. This blasphemy law protects the religious beliefs of minorities in their country. It is supported by 66% of the Danish voters who see the law as promoting the acceptance of a multicultural and multi-faith society.

Frankly, I’ve never preached on the subject of blasphemy nor had I thought about it much until 1989. That is when the Ayatollah Khomeini issued a fatwa for the assassination of Salman Rushdie for his publication of The Satanic Verses. This publication outraged the Muslim population who accused the author of blasphemy and hate speech. In more recent times, the Charlie Hebdo weekly magazine in France has been the target of terrorist attacks. In 2015, the publisher and other prominent cartoonists were killed for publishing critical satirical cartoons featuring the prophet Mohamed. Lest we think that blasphemy is limited to certain religions, I would like to remind you that it was only in 2008 when England got rid of their blasphemy laws. In 17C England, it was a crime to dissent from whatever was the religious dogma at the time. Protestants and Catholics have been at each other’s throats for hundreds of years (all in the name of God) while Jews have been persecuted by just about everyone for centuries.

Throughout the gospels, Jesus is accused of blasphemy by the religious authorities. This is a capital offense which was eventually imposed upon Jesus at the crucifixion. In defense of his opponents, who were zealous guardians of the Jewish faith, Jesus appears to them as pushing the edges of his relationship with God - as when he compares himself with God (Jn. 10:33) and when he claims that as the son of God, he will sit at God’s right hand. (Mt. 26:64-65):

In today’s gospel story, Jesus is accused of blaspheming God as he heals the sick and casts out demons from those who are possessed with a variety of illnesses. His own family thinks he is out of his mind while the religious authorities accuse him of using the power of Satan to affect these healings. These accusations really tick him off big time! How dare they call the power of God’s healing grace as the devil’s handiwork! How dare they characterize the work of the Holy Spirit as evil! How dare they judge compassionate acts of loving kindness as being demonic! It was in this context that Jesus said: “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.” (Mk. 3:28-29)

If you think about it long enough, this makes sense. After all, it is the Holy Spirit who leads us into all truth and strengthens us to do the will of God by following the pathway of love. But if we cannot discern good from evil, if we cannot identify the Holy Spirit as the source of love and forgiveness, if we equate the Spirit of God with the spirit of the Devil, then we will end up stuck in the darkness. And while God forgives, if we refuse to turn to this Source of forgiveness, then we will remain eternally guilty.

The discernment between good and evil is not always straight forward. And there's a fine line between freedom of speech and blasphemy. Being a strong advocate of the First Amendment to the Constitution, I do not support our government "abridging the freedom of speech or the press."

However as a Christian, I do believe in custody of the tongue to avoid abusive and soul destroying language. Our speech can encourage or discourage. Words can be medicines or poisons. When our words bless, they lift others up. When they curse, they can destroy people, reputations, and futures. Words can break or save lives, make enemies or friends, start war or create peace.

Today, political agendas and rallies are geared to the electorate's more primitive fears and unworthy cravings. Error, miscommunication, deception, slander, and fake news have all become so common that we expect them even from our most powerful leaders. This harmful speech is putting our democracy at risk and creating great anxiety among our allies. Toxic speech degrades personal relationships and diminishes the possibility of peace in our world. As we move further into the information age or as some people call it, "the disinformation age," careful speech and custody of the tongue are all the more pressing. So how do we as Christians proceed with this difficult task of right speaking?

I think the precept of "right speech" from the eight-fold path of Buddhism can offer us some direction. Right Speech, also called Wise Speech or Virtuous Speech, gives rise to peace and happiness in oneself and others. The Buddha was precise in his description of Right Speech. He defined it as "abstinence from false speech, abstinence from malicious speech, abstinence from harsh speech, and abstinence from idle chatter." Re-framed in the positive, these guidelines urge us to say only what is true, to speak in ways that promote harmony among people, to use a tone of voice that is pleasing, kind, and gentle, and to speak mindfully in order that our speech is useful and purposeful. I think this is what the Danish people were trying to achieve with their blasphemy law as their country continues to welcome many new immigrants of different religions.

For Christians, right speech and careful conversation are part and parcel of a life lived in the Spirit of God. This means we commit to telling the truth in ways that encourage, not destroy. We learn to speak carefully and refrain from gossip. As the Book of James reminds us: "With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so." (James 3)

Finally, I want to end with a story that I have told before. It is about a mother who spoke to her teenage daughter before she began middle school. She told her daughter to empty out a tube of toothpaste. After her daughter squeezed out all the toothpaste, she instructed her to put the toothpaste back into the tube. The daughter exclaimed: "I can't." The mother then responded: "You will remember this plate of toothpaste for the rest of your life. Your words have the power of life or death. As you go into middle school, you are about to see just how much weight your words carry. You are going to have the opportunity to use your words to hurt, demean, slander and wound others. You are also going to have the opportunity to use your words to heal, encourage, inspire, and love others. You will occasionally make the wrong choices. But just like this toothpaste, once the words leave your mouth, you can't take them back. When others are misusing their words, guard your words. Make the choice every morning that life-giving words will come out of your mouth. Decide tonight that you are going to be a life-giver in middle school. Be known for your gentleness and compassion. Use your life to give life to a world that so desperately needs it. You will never, ever regret choosing kindness." (Facebook)

So before you speak, ask yourself the following questions: Is it true? Is it kind? Is it necessary? Does it improve upon the silence? And if the answers are *yes* to all of these questions, then go ahead and share your words of wisdom from above.

"Lord open our lips. And our mouth shall proclaim your praise." (BCP- Morning Prayer)