

## “An Eternal Sin”

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First Presbyterian Church  
Sunday, June 10, 2012

**Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 138**

**New Testament Lesson: Mark 3:20-24, 28-35**

I got a call on Tuesday from an anonymous woman who was crying and very upset; she was beside herself. I found out that she lives a few miles from the Starlight Theater off Trust Avenue, an area of Kansas City with troubles most of us can't image. "I've lost God," she told me. My first instinct was to ask where she lost him; we'll go find him together. You laugh, but that's exactly what we did. After listening carefully as she told me about how God had left her, and that a demon had taken over, I asked her when she first noticed that God had left her and a demon had taken over. "It was 2009," she said, "when I got fired from my job." This woman – I'll call her Amy – Amy said that in 2009 she went mad. She got fired because she started doing bad things at work and she couldn't stop herself. She wanted to know from me if she was hopeless; does God just abandon certain people. I assured her she was not hopeless and that God never abandons anyone. But I reminded her that under God's divine plan, we get to choose – not whether we have a mental illness or depression or cancer or anything else like that. We don't get to choose what we get, but we do get to choose how we respond to it. And because God first chose us – because God first loved us – we are able choose God, to love God and to love one another and even love ourselves, as we seek to live as children of God, as a family of faith. And nothing we've ever done nor anything we could ever do can change that – **God loves us unconditionally** and **God will never abandon us**. That's clear, right? You all believe that, don't you? I mean, if not, if there's anyone here who doubts that God loves each and every one of us unconditionally, please, set that doubt aside, if only for this morning. Let's all accept God's unconditional love this morning. Agreed?

Good. So, if God loves us unconditionally, how can Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and (for) whatever blasphemies they utter; but, whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin." How can Jesus say that if in fact God loves us unconditionally; how can he say that God forgives everything except .... Everything except blaspheming the Holy Spirit? Isn't that a condition? Whatever it means to blaspheme the Holy Spirit (which I take to mean turning away from or fighting against the work of the Holy Spirit), isn't that a condition of God's love and forgiveness – not blaspheming the Holy Spirit? No, it's not. In fact, quite the opposite; our acceptance of the Holy Spirit is actually the pathway to God's love. Let me say that again. **The Holy Spirit is the pathway to God's unconditional love**. God's greatest gift to humanity is Love – our ability to love God through the power of the Holy Spirit – and, thus, to love one another, unconditionally and by choice. Think about it; if you're forced to love someone, then that love is not unconditional, is it? But God's love for us *is* unconditional and God wants us to experience that same unconditional love in our lives, in our love of God and even in our love of one another. So God gives us the ability to choose or reject the Holy Spirit; to choose or reject unconditional love.

In our New Testament lesson, those who say that Jesus "has an unclean spirit" – those who say, "he has Beelzebub" – have chosen to speak against the Holy Spirit and because of that, Jesus says they do not have forgiveness, ever. They are guilty of an eternal sin.

But why an eternal sin? Why is this one thing so unforgivable? Doesn't that show us that God places a condition on God's love for us? No; it's not a condition of God's love. Rather, living in the Holy Spirit is what activates God's love. If we turn away from the Holy Spirit, if we refuse to accept God's greatest gift to humanity, if we give up on trying to live our lives in tune with God and in keeping with God's will us, then under God's divine plan for us to experience love that is (a) unconditionally and (b) by our own freewill and choice; if we turn away from that, we're lost. We're lost in lives that play out apart from reconciliation and forgiveness and the blessings that come from being a child of God. And being a child of God is something that not even God will force upon those who refuse to accept it. Because to force us to love God would be to force us into servitude, to make us slaves to God's will rather than beneficiaries of it. And that's just not in the nature of who God is. God is love, and true love is unconditional. And there's no way for us to know true love – God's love – unless we are given the freedom to not love God, to not love one another, to, as Jesus put it, blaspheme against the Holy Spirit. To help us understand how this tension between divine love and free choice plays out in our lives, Mark tells us how it played out with Jesus. There came a time in Jesus' life, says Mark, where Jesus was asked to choose between God's divine, unconditional love and the love of his family and the people he grew up with.

According to Mark, Jesus' life was becoming overwhelming – he couldn't even find time to eat because large crowds were continually pressing in on him. And looking at this as madness, "people were saying, 'He has gone out of his mind.' Well, "when his family heard (this), they went out to restrain him" says Mark. They arrive where Jesus is and the crowd says to him, "Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside asking for you.' And he (replies), 'Who are my mother and my brothers?' And looking at those sitting around him, he (says), 'Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.'" In other words, there is a love and a bond even greater than even our connection to family, or to those whom we consider family. (For some people, their biological families are too strained or broken to even come into play here). But however you understand family bonds, Jesus is saying that there is a pathway to love greater than any connection you could have to anyone or anything on earth because that pathway leads us to God, by way of the Holy Spirit. In fact, it is the love of God that allows us to form true bonds with one another, bonds that can stand up under any strain or stress or upset; any condition whatsoever. And because divine love is unconditional love, ***we get to choose that pathway or not.*** We can choose to let the Holy Spirit guide our lives, to let our lives be ruled by a God who loves us unconditionally or we can let our lives be ruled and guided by other forces, forces that can tear us apart inside and destroy our families and our closest relationships, forces that can knock us off the pathway God has set before us. We get to choose. A man applied for a position with the New York City Police Department. He was interviewed by a panel of officers who tested his ability to react in a variety of situations. "What would you do," one expert asked, "if you had to arrest your mother?" The man thought for a moment and then replied: "Call for backup." Now that's a man who knows we can't go it along in life, and that it's not always our families and friends who will lead us to and keep us on the right pathway in life. We need to seek out those who are best for us in life, those who will provide us with backup in the spirit of God's love.

According to Jesus, God's family is not limited by earthly constraints; God's family *does not* consist only of those related by blood, or even all of us related as fellow human beings.

I mean, all people are human beings, but not all people choose to live life as a child of God, or to follow a pathway that leads to God's unconditional love. And sometimes doing this does mean leaving behind our families or friends, our employers or job choices, or even some of our long-held beliefs, hopes and dreams if they no longer lead us to God and God's will for our lives.

Gen. Colin Powell, in his book titled "Just Like Banana Kelly: Restoring Faith in Our Communities," tells about growing up in the South Bronx in the 1940s. "I'm the young son of Jamaican immigrants," writes Powell. "And what's one of the biggest influences in my childhood? The Young Men's Hebrew Association. Go figure." "It's not as surprising as it might seem" says Powell. "I grew up in a diverse New York neighborhood called Banana Kelly. My friends were Puerto Rican, Italian and Greek. My entire life pretty much spanned a few blocks, with school on one end of Kelly Street, and my church, St. Margaret's Episcopal, on the other." "Church was important in my family says Powell, "We had our own pew, and I was even an altar boy. But after school, I headed to the Jewish center because both my parents worked and it was a safe place for me. It was a cornerstone of the community. It was filled with people who really cared about kids – everybody's kids. That sense of community made all the difference in my childhood. Now that's a man who knows we need to follow the Holy Spirit in our lives, that this is how we receive the blessing of divine, unconditional love, and the guidance of the family of God. Growing up on Kelly Street in the Bronx, Collin Powell came to know that God's family is not limited by earthly constraints; God's family of unconditional love *does not* consist of only those related by blood, but, rather, it can be found among any who truly strive to have God as central in any and all life choices. And I hope, with all sincerity and humility, that the woman you know as Amy, the woman who I spoke to on Tuesday, I hope that she knows that as well. I hope that she, in her overwhelming sense of hopelessness, and you in whatever you are struggling with at this moment – whether it be your burden or that of a loved one – I hope and pray that you, too, know the blessing of – and the clear pathway to – divine, unconditional love through the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit. And if you don't, come to me. Go to someone or someplace that will help you to claim and hold onto your identity as a child of God, a member of the family of faith, entitled to all the blessings of a Spirit-led life.

Amen.

## PASTORAL PRAYER

Father God, you are good and loving. We are so grateful that you call us your children. In the midst of the busyness of our lives, the struggles we may face, the paths we must choose from, and the spirit we so desperately need to guide us, may we pray as the psalmist did.

We walk through the deepest and darkest valleys of our lives, O Lord: sickness, job loss, broken relationships, children who've lost their way and, yes, even death.

And yet, we know these valleys are a part of life that humanity has had to travel since Adam and Eve. AND we know that the valley is not the destination.

We know, also, the One who has faithfully led his followers through this valley countless times before. For, you, O Lord, are our Shepherd; we shall not want.

You, O Lord, lead us beside the still waters. You lead us in the paths of righteousness. We will fear no evil; we will fear nothing in this valley of darkness, for you, O Lord, guide and strengthen us by your Spirit.

Thanks you Lord, for giving us this assurance and so many others through your Holy Word. Let us never forget your faithfulness and love, even as we have never forgotten your prayer, which you taught, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.