

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

Today we begin the second half of the church year, it's the non-festival time of the year. It's marked with green on the altar, and the Sundays are identified as days after Pentecost. The number of these Sundays depends on the date of Easter. An early Easter means more Sundays after Pentecost; a late Easter means fewer.

With the coming of the *Lutheran Service Book*, the Sunday's texts — propers, we call them — are assigned a bit differently than before. We used to lop off certain texts around the Festival of St. Michael and All Angels. Now we do it, if you will, at the beginning of the season.

Thus, before we get to our text today in chapter 3 of Mark, we've missed hearing about Jesus doing some pretty amazing things. In these first chapters of Mark, we see Jesus teach with authority, not like the scribes (Mark 1:22). We see Jesus demonstrate power over unclean spirits, silencing them and casting them out (Mark 1:25-26). We see Jesus cleanse lepers and heal the sick (Mark 1:41-42). We see Him make the lame walk (Mark 2:11-12). Wow! Who is this guy? The people hadn't figured it all out yet, but they knew what they were witnessing, and they were flocking to see Him (Mark 3:7).

On the other hand, Jesus did some things that didn't sit well with the Jewish leaders. Jesus ate with sinners and tax collectors (Mark 2:16) — He even chose a tax collector as one of His disciples (Mark 2:14). His disciples didn't fast, either; instead they picked grain on the Sabbath, and that's forbidden on the Sabbath (Mark 2:18, 23-24) because the Pharisees said that's work. Moreover, Jesus Himself healed on the Sabbath, also breaking their Sabbath rules (Mark 3:5).

He's a sinner! A blasphemer! He acts as if He is God; see how He forgives sins (Mark 2:7, 5)! Not only that, but He lets those unclean spirits call Him "*the Holy One of God*" (Mark 1:24) and "*the Son of God*" (Mark 3:11), and He doesn't correct them.

"Surely, Jesus is a threat to our authority," the scribes and Pharisees thought, and they didn't like it. And so they sought to destroy Him (Mark 3:6). They would have liked to kill Him outright, but that would have been too obvious. The people wouldn't stand for that. No, they'd have to destroy Him in a different way.

How? Jesus' own relatives showed them the way: destroy his reputation, destroy His credibility, destroy His popularity. Jesus' own relatives tried to seize Him, for "*they were saying, 'He is out of his mind.'*" How outrageous! How blasphemous, yet, perhaps understandable. These were His relatives nearest to Him as He grew up, of whom Jesus would later say, "*A prophet is not without honor, except in his hometown and among his relatives and in his own household*" (Mark 6:4).

The scribes, though, “upped the ante” in their attempts to discredit Jesus. They accused Jesus of being in league with Satan himself. “*‘He is possessed by Beelzebul,’ and ‘by the prince of demons he casts out the demons.’*” This is even more outrageous, a greater blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, who was working in the Christ, as He did all of those amazing signs and wonders.

Some of you have been sitting in on Dr. Voelz’ Adult Bible Class as he makes his way through the Gospel of Mark. After some time of teaching, going through introductory material in Mark and talking about principles of interpretation, he just began Mark chapter 4. You might ask, “How can he only be to chapter 4?”

Well, he encourages a lot of discussion in his class — theology is both interesting and fun! You really should come and join the fun. And one of the things he does is that he will often discuss the sermon. Last week, you recall, we talked about the Holy Trinity, confessing the Athanasian Creed, and he spent significant time in class answering a question concerning the Trinity and a portion of that Creed.

Now think with me for a moment, and suppose in those reviews of pastor’s sermons, Dr. Voelz tried to undermine what I had just proclaimed from the pulpit. You can imagine the harm that would be done to the ministry here at Zion. It could tear the church apart and destroy the work of God in Christ Jesus.

I’m not suggesting that Pastor could never be wrong — far from it. And I’ve mentioned before the importance of the sheep judging their shepherd as C.F.W. Walther, the LCMS’ first president, once put it. Teaching or preaching falsely is serious, and should be confronted. Yet the sheep who recognizes something said falsely shouldn’t seek to undermine the authority of his pastor, but should go to the pastor individually and correct him gently, that he may acknowledge his error and correct it with the congregation. I always hope that it wouldn’t be necessary, but I’m a sinner, and if it would become necessary, I know that’s how Dr. Voelz would do it; and so should we all.

Of course, Jesus never did err, and the scribes knew better than to throw out such a moronic accusation about Him who was doing these marvelous things. They were not dumb. They knew Jesus was not casting out demons by Satan’s power. And Jesus corrected their false accusation: Satan is not against Satan. He is not warring against his own best interests. He is a mighty foe — strong and powerful — and Jesus, mightier still, was doing battle against him and his minions. For Jesus’ battle with Satan was not done after His forty-day skirmish in the wilderness. Jesus would take this battle all the way to the cross, where the strong one would be utterly defeated by the death of the Stronger One, the woman’s Seed delivering a head-crushing blow to the ancient serpent’s head by His heel-bruising death on the cross.

Of course, it took more betrayal and lies, the incitement of a mob and blasphemous mockery to get Jesus to the cross. But it was necessary, for Jesus' death was His act of binding the strong man, that He might descend to hell, the strong man's domain, and plunder it, proclaiming "*liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound*" (Isa. 61:1).

Yes, Christ the crucified "*through [His] death [destroyed] the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil*" (Heb. 2:14), and He rose again from death that He might deliver us from our fear of death to the joy of life, and from the bondage of this fear to the freedom to live "*in holiness and righteousness ... all our days*" (Luke 1:75) and as those who will inherit eternal life, for we know "*that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us ... into his presence.*"

Indeed, this "*eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison*" still awaits us as we look to Jesus and are strengthened in our faith by His sacrament. It's why "*we don't lose heart,*" though blasphemous things are still spoken against Jesus. And when like the scribes did then, these people, who know better themselves, utter these blasphemies, they are blaspheming not just Jesus, but also the Holy Spirit. They are rejecting His testimonies concerning Jesus and even Jesus Himself. This sin cannot be forgiven.

But, that's not who we are. We know the truth; we hold to the truth that the Spirit has guided us to—we say, "*Jesus is Lord*" (1 Cor. 12:3); therefore, we are not guilty of this eternal sin. Rather we are comforted by the Spirit's message of our Lord Jesus Christ, of forgiveness and life, and of an eternal home with the Lord that awaits us in the heavens.

So also we join in our Lord Jesus' prayer for us: "*keep [us] from the evil one. ... Sanctify [us] in the truth; your word is truth*" (John 17:15, 17).

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.