

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

We heard last Sunday, after Jesus had asserted lordship over the Sabbath and proceeded to heal a man “*with a withered hand*” on the Sabbath, that the “*Pharisees*” began to plot with “*the Herodians*” about “*how to destroy him*” (Mark 3:6). What audacity Jesus exhibited! He didn’t just tear down the fence the Pharisees had erected around the Commandment. He upended the Commandment itself. What blasphemy! No mere man has the right to change the Commandment or cancel it. Who did Jesus think He was, God or something?

Jesus wasn’t done. He tried to withdraw, but the people followed. They had heard what Jesus had been doing, healing the sick, restoring limbs, cleansing lepers, casting out unclean spirits and demons. And He kept on doing these things.

The unclean spirits would bear witness to Jesus’ identity: “*I know who you are —the Holy One of God*” (Mark 1:24); “*You are the Son of God*” (Mark 3:11). Jesus ordered them to keep it quiet, but perhaps the Pharisees and scribes heard what those unclean spirits said. Or perhaps others reported it back to them; it’s not clear.

Jesus’ relatives were certainly scandalized by all this. These relatives were likely not His close family, but perhaps the aunts and uncles and cousins with whom Jesus traveled to Jerusalem for the festivals. “He’s changed. He’s not that same boy who ‘*was submissive to [His parents,]*’ and who was increasing ‘*in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man*’” (Luke 2:51-52). “*He is out of his mind.*”

But Jesus’ response to the scribes’ accusation was not that of a man who is crazy. It was not the response of someone who could not put together a cogent and convincing argument. Jesus was not out of His mind, but things had changed. He had taken up His “*Father’s business*” (Luke 2:49). This long-promised Offspring of woman had begun His ministry of saving the world, of forgiving sinners and calling them to Himself, of destroying the evil works of the ancient serpent, bruising His heel to crush the serpent’s head, of building a new house, centered on Christ, Jesus Himself as the cornerstone, an eternal home in the heavens.

And indeed, this good news does sound crazy to all who have not been taught by the Spirit. Christ crucified? Folly! Weakness! It’s scandalous!

Resurrection? Christ Jesus raised from the dead? And God “*will raise us also with Jesus*”? We who are “*wasting away*” and will die? These earthly bodies are but a temporary home — a tent — that will be destroyed? But we will be raised up with new bodies, glorified bodies, a “*building from God,*” and He will “*bring us ... into his presence*”? It’s just more foolishness!

These promises — religion in general, Karl Marx held — were “an opium” delivered to us ordinary people to deaden our senses to suffering, to give us the illusion of happiness, to keep us compliant. For Marx, religion was, therefore, useful, even if untrue. After all, it’s unscientific — have you ever seen someone rise from the dead? And the Gospels that bear witness to it are unreliable and unhistorical. In fact, most of the Bible is unreliable say the cultural elites ... all of the miraculous stuff is, anyway.

And to some of these elites, the Bible is even harmful — filled with hate speech. Thus, we’ve been praying for Minister Päivi Räsänen and Bishop Juhana Pohjola in Finland. They are being prosecuted for proclaiming Biblical truths. These two must be silenced according to the prosecutor; the state must make an example of them, lest anyone be so bold again.

It is reminiscent of Jesus in our text. It wasn’t enough for Jesus’ relatives to say that He’s crazy, seize Him, and secret Him away. No, the scribes had to destroy Him, and so they accused Jesus of being in league with “*the prince of demons,*” “*possessed by Beelzebul*” — along with Satan, one of the devil’s many names. By Satan, Jesus casts out demons.

This is where Jesus responds masterfully, and His words have resonated. “*How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but is coming to an end.*”

Satan’s power and influence are coming to an end, but not by his own doing. It is by Jesus’ doing, begun by entering into the strong man’s house, binding this foe first by casting out unclean spirits and demons; next by going to the cross and dying, thus destroying him “*who has the power of death, that is, the devil*” (Heb. 2:14); then by descending into the devil’s stronghold to proclaim His victory, and by rising victorious from the dead on the third day; and finally by sending the Holy Spirit as our Advocate and Defender.

To be sure, the devil remains our adversary. He still “*prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour,*” as Peter says (5:8). But his raging and writhing are but the last gasps of an adversary defeated by Him who is the Stronger One. That’s what Jesus’ cross did, as we say in the proper preface for Passiontide: Jesus “*accomplished the salvation of mankind by the tree of the cross that, where death arose, there life also might rise again, and that the serpent who overcame by the tree of the garden, might likewise by the tree of the cross be overcome.*”

Believe this, and you will be saved. Believe this and trust in the grace of Your baptism, and you are saved. Believe in this Spirit-filled water, and you will be

reckoned Jesus' brother or sister, a part of His family, a family marked not by blood, but by water. For *“in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise”* (Gal. 3:26-29).

Brothers and sisters, the devil will continue to roar at you, but St. Peter encourages you: *“Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you”* (1 Pet. 5:9-10).

But finally, what of the sin that has no forgiveness forever? Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit? Should we be worried about it? Might you have committed it?

That you're here leads me to say, “no, you shouldn't be worried,” and “no, you probably haven't committed it” — unless you are a false Christian ... a hypocrite.

LCMS dogmatician Francis Pieper defined this sin thus: “The sin against the Holy Ghost is committed when, after the Holy Ghost has convinced a person in his heart of the divine truth, that person nevertheless not only rejects the truth he is convinced of, but also blasphemes it.” “The sin against the Holy Ghost ... is the willful and determined suppression of the inner conviction wrought by the Holy Ghost” (Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, I:573).

Jesus called the scribes out for this sin. The Holy Spirit was working in their hearts convincing them of Jesus, the Son of God, and yet they rejected Him and sought His demise. It's as Stephen said of them: *“You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you”* (Acts 7:51).

But you are not here to resist the Holy Spirit,. You are here to be convinced by Him concerning sin and righteousness and judgment. Jesus wasn't crazy to come into our flesh to save us, and we're not crazy to put our trust in Him. It's not crazy for us to acknowledge our sins. It's not crazy for us to want righteousness, and to believe that our righteousness is credited to us by faith in Christ Jesus. It's not crazy for us to confess that *“the ruler of this world [has been] judged”* (John 16:11); *“It is finished”* (John 19:31); “Christ is risen! Alleluia!”; the victory is ours.

Believe it. Believe it and be saved.

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