

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
June 9, 2024 – The Third Sunday after Pentecost and St. Columba's Day
Mark 3:20-35; 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

This morning I want to comment first on the Gospel lesson we just heard and then consider today's reading from St. Paul's Second Letter to the Christians in Corinth.

In the narrative of Mark's Gospel, between last week's reading – when Jesus healed the man with the withered hand in the synagogue on the Sabbath – and today's lesson, Jesus had traveled with his disciples, curing crowds of sick people, and “then he went home.” So, his family was nearby.

This reading is about the truth – what the truth about Jesus is and where people stand in relation to that truth. Jesus has been casting out demons or unclean spirits. In his day this meant healing of physical and mental disorders as well as exorcism of demonic possession. His family members seem to believe the popular opinion that he is out of his mind himself. The scribes who have come from the religious center of Jerusalem accuse Jesus of casting out demons by the ruler of demons. Beelzebul is a name for Satan, derived from the name of the Canaanite god Baal. “Baal-zebul” means “lord of the flies.” Satan is the name of a supernatural being opposed to God. Jesus challenges the scribes – “How can Satan cast out Satan?” No, that isn't what has been happening. Jesus has tied up the “strong man,” Satan, and he has been able to plunder the strong man's house, the demonic world, because he has defeated Satan.

Then Jesus makes a very strong statement, a really frightening statement: “whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin.” What does it mean to blaspheme against the Holy Spirit? The Holy Spirit is the spirit of truth. This is about truth and lies. Remember the phrase from John's Gospel (8:44): Jesus says, “When [the devil] lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies.” But speaking of himself in John's Gospel (14:6), Jesus says “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.” The Holy Spirit is the spirit of truth and the spirit of Christ.

Who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit? People who call what is holy and good demonic and evil endanger their souls. The people who plotted against Jesus to destroy him did that. People who deliberately refuse to see and witness to the truth choose to blaspheme against the Holy Spirit. People who call God the opposer of God and the opposer of God, God.

Thinking about how we stand in relation to the truth, especially the truth taught by Jesus and revealed in his life and ministry, is extremely important. We are called to witness to that truth and to be true to the Holy Spirit. The details of how we do that will be different for each of us in our varied circumstances and challenges. It can be very

costly to ally ourselves with the truth, but today's Gospel reading puts that cost in perspective.

We need to watch ourselves and our perceptions of truth. In Jesus' time and in our own there are at least two major barriers to people seeing the truth, prejudice and self-importance, self-centeredness. These factors have led to the murder of millions of God's beloved children and to Jesus, God's Son. We all have prejudices, and we all have a tendency to be self-involved. By the light of the Spirit of truth we may see how to change and grow in the direction of the truth revealed in Christ. Today's Gospel teaches us that this may have eternal consequences.

Today we honor St. Columba. A saint is someone who bears witness to the truth of Jesus Christ. That may be in ways which influence countless people – as St. Columba did – or in ways that are hidden from most people. In every case, in order to witness to the truth of Jesus Christ we need to know Jesus Christ – in scripture and in liturgy and in prayer and through the words and works of the saints. We also need to be known by Jesus Christ. We need to open ourselves honestly to Christ in prayer so that Christ can meet us where we are with his truth and direct and redirect our hearts and our lives so that we can ever better bear witness to him and his truth. This is the process of a lifetime.

That brings us to our reading from St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians, a passage which is full of faith and assurance of ultimate truth about God and our lives. He writes, "We do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day." While our physical selves, our bodies, inevitably "waste away" day by day, St. Paul reminds us that another process is happening at the same time. Our "inner nature," our minds and souls, are being renewed by God. Writing to people who have accepted Christ as their Lord, St. Paul points out that by the work of the Holy Spirit the followers of Christ mature and grow inwardly over time, into the mind and likeness of Christ. If we cooperate with the Holy Spirit, this growth is possible, and this is what is truly important.

"For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal. For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens."

St. Paul challenges us to look beyond what can be seen, beyond what is, in fact, so often our focus in life – that which is temporary, physical, finite. He contrasts this mortal life with eternal life, calling eternal life a "weight," that is, substantial, compared to our mortal lives, which are relatively insubstantial. We need to look at where we are going ultimately, by the mercy of God. We are going where we will see what we cannot now see. We are going to behold the glory of God which is beyond all that we can even imagine now. We are going to our true home, where our hearts will be at rest. We are going to Christ. As C.S. Lewis wrote, in an address called "The Weight of Glory," "the door on which we have been knocking all our lives will open at last." Imagine!

This vision of our journey's end may guide us now. The life of Jesus and the teaching of Jesus inform us that what we do while we inhabit our "earthly tents" matters. So, how shall we spend God's gift of today? There is a well-known blessing that is based on a dozen verses in the Bible. To follow the mission it outlines would fill today and all our days. Let's hear its wisdom.

Go forth into the world in peace. Go out into the world grounded in the peace of Christ, the peace of faith, the peace of trust in God. This peace comes with practice, with making a habit of turning to God, with thanksgiving and praise and adoration, with prayer for our neighbors and for ourselves.

Be of good courage. Secure in God's love and goodness, we will face whatever we have to endure, whatever we fear, by the grace of God.

Hold fast to that which is good. While we live in this world of good and evil, we must hold on for dear life to what is good, to what is from God. A light and casual hold won't be good enough at the worst of times. So, we need to practice holding on tight to goodness, to God.

Render to no one evil for evil. Here is the first step of loving our enemies. We give up retaliation – in action, and in our hearts and minds. The Holy Spirit will help us.

Strengthen the faint-hearted. Support the weak. There is a reason why we hear Jesus saying so often, "Be not afraid." Every one of us is sometimes faint-hearted, sometimes weak. When we have strength, when we can be a channel of the strength which comes from God, we must offer strength to those who are afraid or weak. This is not the way of the world, but it is the way of God.

Comfort the afflicted. Our worldwide neighborhoods and churches are full of people afflicted by disease, disaster, war, famine, and so many misfortunes caused by moral and natural evil. God calls us to do what we can to help the afflicted. As we grow in love, we will find more ways and more resources to relieve the suffering of our sisters and brothers.

Honor all people. St. Benedict taught his monks to offer hospitality to each and every person as if that person were Christ himself. That gives us a hint of what honoring others might mean.

Love and serve the Lord, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit. We rejoice in the power of the Holy Spirit because we know that it is by the Spirit that we love God and serve God.

Jesus said, "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother." We have been invited into Christ's family. By the grace of God, may we accept this holy invitation now and be with Christ forever. Amen.