

KNOWING GOOD AND EVIL

Mark 3:20-35

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Babcock Presbyterian Church

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Even though his ministry was just getting started Jesus was already stirring up controversy. The religious establishment, represented by the Pharisees, whose authority dominated the countryside, were seeing red flags first, when Jesus healed a man on the Sabbath and then when he forgave the sins of a paralytic. According to the Pharisees any work, even a good work, on the Sabbath was absolutely forbidden by the Law of Moses, and what's more only God himself could forgive sins.

To make matters worse, Jesus' own mother and brothers were also seeing red flags after hearing rumors Jesus was losing his mind. Mary had to be worried sick and heart broken, his brothers, probably more embarrassed and angry than worried. So together they trekked after Jesus with the intention of forcibly bringing him back home before he got himself, and the family in big trouble.

But now a third antagonist entered the fray, this time personified by the scribes from the Jerusalem Temple. If Galilee was a blue state in the progressive Pharisees' column, then Jerusalem, dominated by the ultra conservative temple priests, was the reddest state in Israel.

These temple minions, hearing about this newest threat from Israel's fly over country, went out to investigate. Scandalized by Jesus' radical reinterpretation of Jewish faith and practice, the scribes dared to say openly what the Pharisees were thinking privately. "He has Bē-el'ze-bul and by the ruler of demons he casts out demons!"

By putting this scurrilous charge out there the religious establishment drew a line in the sand, officially making Jesus, not only as a dangerous heretic but even more striking, branding him as a spawn of Satan.

It's important we know that the name Bē-el'ze-bul literally means "the head of the house." Since nobody could deny Jesus cast our demons, they then attacked Jesus for being in league with Satan, the head of the underworld, the godfather of all things evil.

But because of his growing celebrity, desperate measures were needed to discredit him so, they made this baseless charge only to have it backfire on them.

How? Using simple logic Jesus deconstructed their damaging narrative about himself by asking the obvious question, "Why would Satan use me to undermine Satan? It doesn't make sense! A divided house cannot stand. Why would Satan use me to terrorize his own demons by casting them out and sending them back to where they came

from? How can evil prosper with that grand strategy? Far from being his friend and helper, I'm the only one powerful enough to charge right straight into Bē-el'ze-bul's house and tie him up!"

Remember, Bē-el'ze-bul literally means the "strong head of the house." Far from being Satan's pliable agent, Jesus was Satan's most ardent adversary. And "the house of Satan," Jesus implied, was any institution, political or religious, that resisted the Holy Spirit.

But Jesus wasn't entirely through. He then issued the terrifying warning that maybe they (the scribes and Pharisees) should first thoroughly examine themselves to make sure they weren't the ones doing the devil's work.

And finally, the punch line: "Truly 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."

Translation: "You religious leaders should know better. I'm preaching the inevitable coming of God's Kingdom, as well as restoring people to health, kicking out demons and reconciling people to God and each other, and you say I work for Satan? You better be very careful my friends, because if you can't tell the difference between God and Satan, if you think things that are good are really evil and the evil people do are actually good deeds, you may have crossed the point of no return, so far away from God you can never find your way back, becoming so vain and self-righteous you'll never experience forgiveness because you won't think you need it.

History books are filled with names of those who fit this description, the usual suspects of course being Hitler and Stalin, two blood thirsty tyrants who convinced themselves their crimes against humanity were historic necessities. Indeed, Hitler believed when he ordered the "Final Solution," his favorite euphemism for the massacre of six million Jews, he was doing the Lord's work! Twisted? Yes, but he was so far gone he thought good was evil and evil was good. As for Stalin, who murdered even more innocent victims than Hitler, listen to his rationalization for the millions he massacred, "One single death is a tragedy, a million deaths is just a statistic."

Truth be told, the unforgivable sin isn't a sin randomly and suddenly committed. It takes a great deal of time and energy before crossing that point of no return. With each succeeding despicable act, the heart hardens and the soul empties leaving a vacuum begging be filled. All the more reason to be filled with the Holy Spirit who fills any void with faith, hope and love, leaving no room for evil to prosper.

I'm not overly concerned about anyone here blaspheming against the Holy Spirit, but that doesn't excuse us from becoming increasingly aware of the presence of evil all around us. Never underestimate it. That was the lesson relearned in the 20th century, proving Edmond Burke's maxim, "All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that

good men do nothing,” because doing nothing leaves a void in which evil can take root and take over.

A discerning reading of today’s gospel lesson shows Jesus wasn’t intimidated by his adversaries, whether the religious establishment out to protect the status quo, or even his own mother and brothers, out to protect the family’s reputation. Jesus had a job to do and a mission to accomplish. To be sure it wasn’t his intention to be his generation’s “L’Enfant terrible,” someone who enjoys embarrassing authority figures with shocking remarks and outrageous behavior just to prove he was more righteous than they.

Instead, Jesus was a serious player in the story of human events. He wasn’t out for attention or applause, nor was it ever his intention to embarrass even his meanest adversaries. Instead, Jesus was all about filling the void with the goodness and love that can only come from above, by healing the sick, raising the dead and kicking out demons, and above all inviting everyone to become his mother, brothers and sisters by doing the will of God.

Of course the scribes and Pharisees, and to some extent Jesus’ mother and brothers, were quite sure they were doing God’s will by getting Jesus out of the limelight as quickly as possible so life could go on as before. Can you fault them? No one likes disruptions that make things messy, most of us would rather keep things the way they are with “Safety First” being our motto for both our individual and corporate lives.

But Jesus came to upend such notions, to bring division and force us to either side with the powers and principalities of this present age or Christ and his Kingdom. One way or another every man and woman chooses between living in the void, where there’s plenty of room for evil to take root and flower, or being filled with the Holy Spirit, who leaves no room for the Evil One to ply his trade.

Some of you may be put off by my speaking about Satan, because you think Satan is simply a myth, a primitive metaphor to keep us in line. Maybe so, but I do hope you never doubt the power of evil, deceiving, destroying and devouring everything it can, if only to keep itself alive and viable. I also hope you realize, as powerful as evil can be, when all is said and done, the only power evil has over you is the power you give it.

On the other hand, God alone overcomes evil with good. Satan is the great destroyer, but God is the giver of life. Satan devours his victims, but God feeds his children. Satan tempts us to show us how weak we are, but God tests us to show us how strong we can be. Satan convinces us to think of ourselves as better than others, but Jesus teaches us to lower ourselves to make others better.

I wonder what the scribes thought when Jesus warned them they were on the verge of blaspheming against the Holy Spirit. Were they taken aback or did they dig in their heels? Seriously think of them next time you find yourself in the crosshairs of an ethical dilemma. Ask yourself, does a momentary ethical lapse justify you getting instant gratification? Maybe it’s a good starter, but it’s a terrible sticker, because before you

know it, the short run turns into the long haul where you may find yourself getting uncomfortably closer to that point of no return.

How do you avoid the void? Pull back and stay close to Jesus. Pray for his empowerment to do his Father's will so you can be counted among his mother, brothers and sisters. Do this and the void, evil's breeding ground, may at first seem enticing, but when you're in the Spirit you'll see it as the empty, cold, dark hole it really is.

May God's Spirit keep and protect us
as we keep and protect
Christ in our hearts, words and deeds.
Amen.