

"The Unforgivable"

*O Lord, uphold me that I may uplift you, and may the words of my mouth
and the meditation of our hearts be always acceptable in your sight,
O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.*

A man phoned me last week. I did not know him. He wanted to speak with me about the unforgivable sin. He sounded very upset. "The unforgivable sin." That sounds frightening, doesn't it? We believe in a God of grace and mercy who forgives our transgressions when we come to God in a spirit of repentance and truth.

Is this true? That there is truly a sin that is 'unforgivable'? The Bible mentions this three times in the New Testament. In Matthew 12:32, in Luke 12:10 and in today's gospel reading from Mark 3:29.

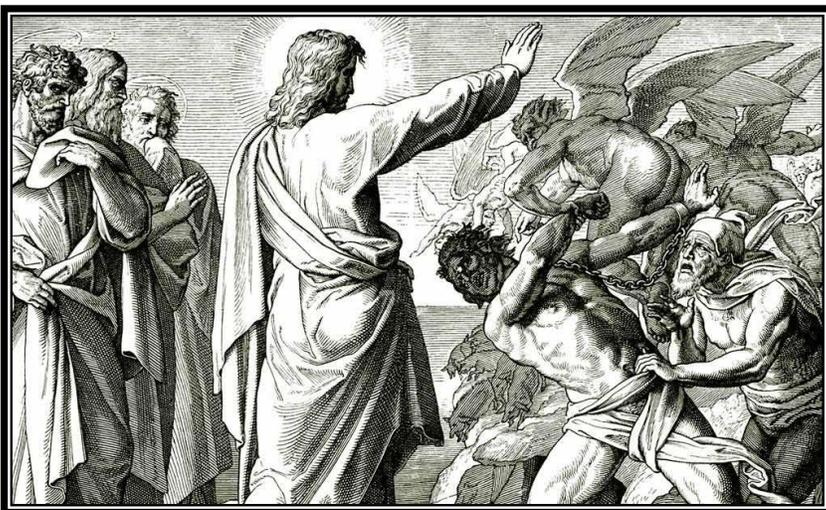
"Whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven." (Matthew 12:32)

"Whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven." (Luke 12:10)

"Whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness but is guilty of an eternal "sin." (Mark 3:29)



The man who spoke with me on the telephone knows his scripture. These verses sound very black and white, very cut and dried. We have to be very careful with our interpretation of scripture, especially when we pull out challenging verses and have them stand on their own.



We need to enter into the story in order to understand what Jesus is saying and why he said those words. **We need to know the context.** So what is going on?

Jesus has returned to his home base in Capernaum. He has been on a preaching tour around the Galilee. His fame has been growing as he heals many. He is already drawing the attention of the religious authorities, not just in Galilee but as far south as Jerusalem, and not in a positive way. The crowd knows he is

back and they overwhelm him with requests. Jesus and the disciples do not even have any time to eat a meal. Jesus' family is told that **"he has gone out of his mind."** (Mark 3:21) and his family try to take him away from the crowd. They are worried about him. Then it gets worse. The religious leaders from Jerusalem start spreading a vicious rumour that Jesus has been taken over by Beelzebub, who was considered to be the lord of the demons. Imagine saying that about Jesus, God in the flesh. Imagine how Jesus felt when he heard these wicked words.

Jesus calls the religious leaders to him and speaks to them in parables. He begins by asking them how he could be Satan if he is healing people against their demons? *“How can Satan cast out Satan?”* Jesus doesn’t use the name Beelzebul. He goes right to the source, to naming the enemy. So of course the accusation of the religious leaders is completely unfounded. If Jesus were Satan then why would he be healing people?

Jesus is going after Satan not by dividing him from inside but from the outside. Satan is the strong man in Jesus’ parable whom Jesus will bind up.

Jesus then gives this teaching;

“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.” (Mark 3:24)

On June 16, 1858, just 3 years before the American Civil War began, Abraham Lincoln, who would become president in 1861, gave a speech on disunity in the United States. Lincoln was against slavery. He begins his famous speech by quoting from Mark’s gospel:

“A house divided against itself, cannot stand.

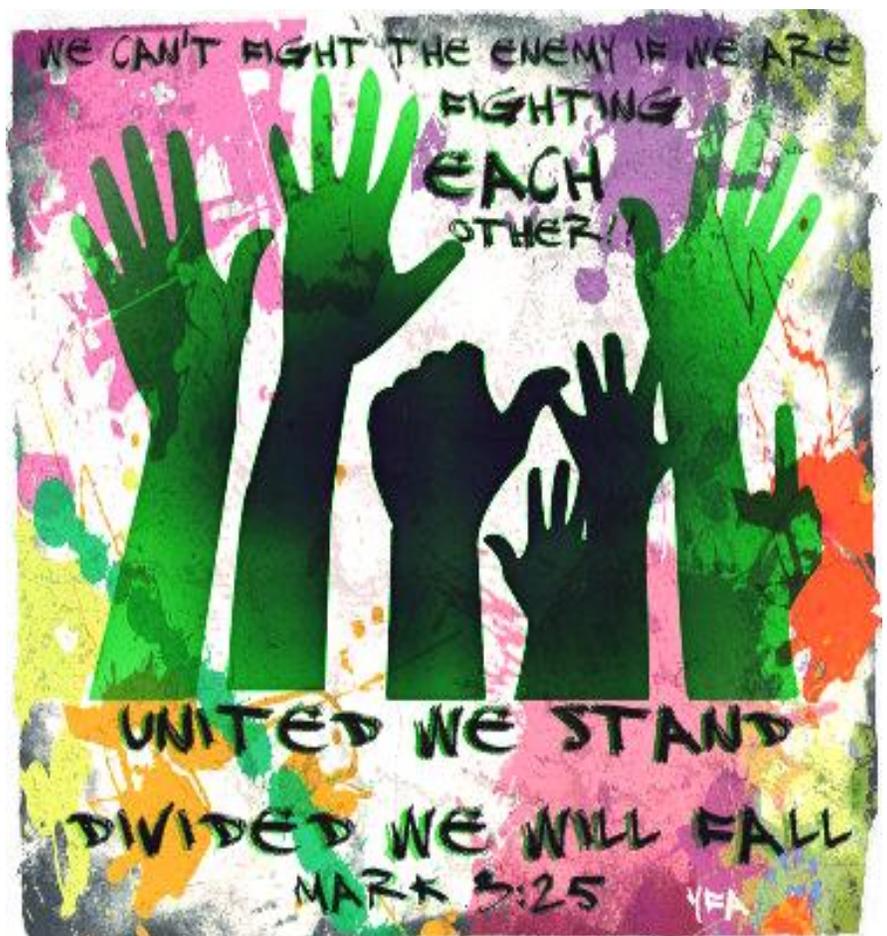
I believe this government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free.

I do not expect the Union to be dissolved — I do not expect the house to fall — but I do expect it will cease to be divided.

It will become all one thing or all the other.

Either the opponents of slavery will arrest the further spread of it, and place it where the public mind shall rest in the belief that it is in the course of ultimate extinction; or its advocates will push it forward, till it shall become lawful in all the States, old as well as new — North as well as South.”

As Christians and as Canadians, I believe that Jesus’ words hold true today. We must stand together, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, in this country of ours and walk together, all of us, in truth and in reconciliation.



Jesus goes on to condemn the religious leaders who believe that he is filled not with God, not with the Holy Spirit, but with Satan. He tells them that they will never be forgiven for believing that the Saviour of the World is in reality Satan. He tells them that they are *“guilty of an eternal sin.”*

Mark’s gospel is clear that Jesus is only condemning the scribes and repeats that Jesus gave this response only because the scribes said that *“he has an unclean spirit.”* This response is only for a

small select group of people who are thinking that Christ is the enemy.

Then Jesus continues to teach and he gives a beautiful inclusive teaching that everyone who does the will of God is Jesus' brother and sister and mother.

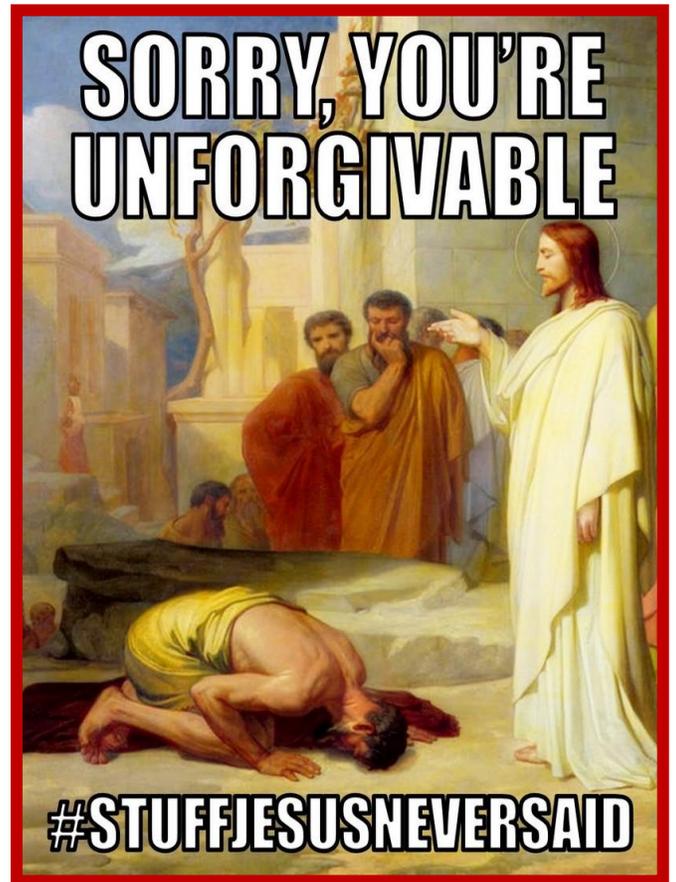
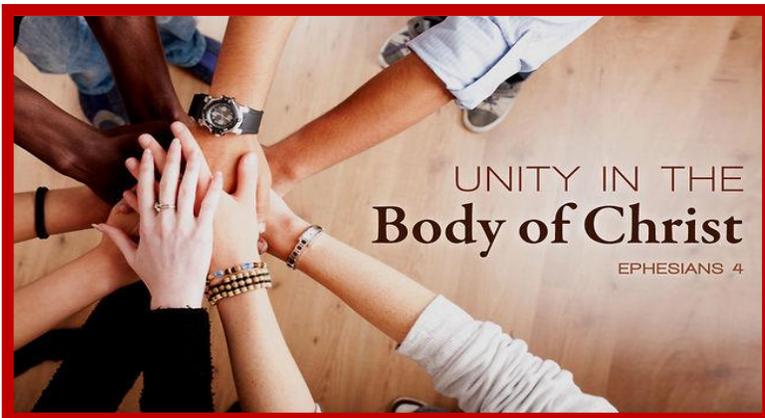
We are part of the family of God. In the words of the apostle Paul, we live by faith and we do not lose heart. We know that we receive our salvation from our faith in the redemption of the world by Jesus. We know that we are **"ambassadors for Christ."** (2 Corinthians 5:20)

To blaspheme against the Holy Spirit means that we are saying that Jesus is demon-possessed and not filled by the Spirit of God. That Jesus is evil. That does sound seriously irreverent, doesn't it? That sounds seriously unforgivable, doesn't it? That sounds like a very hard heart, doesn't it? I know some people who are not disciples of Jesus but I have never ever heard anyone say that Jesus was evil, that Jesus was Satan.

When we turn to our Saviour in faith and in trust and in humility and in repentance, all of our transgressions are forgiven. We become part of God's family. We become a child of God and citizens of heaven.

Our God is forgiving and good. If we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. The Lord our God is merciful and forgiving. **God forgives our sins and remembers them no more.**

This tough teaching about the 'unforgivable sin' reminds us to draw together in faith and in unity to God and to each other.



May we stay united together, in our households, in our family of faith, in our community, and in this nation of Canada,

all while acknowledging the light of Christ and the divinity of Christ and the power of Christ.

Amen.

Archdeacon Deborah+
