

Blasphemy! 7 Epiphany B

In a world of spies and moles, where information and communications are intercepted and used for military, political, economic and moral advantage is there anything sacred? Blasphemy! It is a word used in religious circles. The American Heritage Dictionary states it is “a contemptuous or profane act, utterance, or writing concerning God or an irreverent or impious act, attitude, or utterance in regard to something considered inviolable or sacrosanct.”

What Jesus did was blasphemy, according to Jewish law. In the law no one but no one could forgive sins except God.

The idea of forgiveness in the Old Testament had as its focus the renewal of Holiness. Whatever separated man from God the source of Holiness was to be removed so that a “right” relationship could be restored. God requires holiness in his people. To be holy is to be set apart for God and His service. You and I might aspire to be holy. Yet, God is holy, holy, holy Lord, a threefold description of his purity and majesty that also sets man apart from God.

There was also an OT understanding that forgiveness was the removal of guilt and sin to

restore God's favor and overcome God's wrath. Man was created to live in God and in community with others. Sin of course destroys both relationships. Forgiveness restores fellowship with both.

Jesus comes along and takes forgiveness to a new level. He assumes authority to forgive sins. He does so by making a theological diagnosis for primarily a medical problem. He first tells a paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven." Jesus takes an Old Testament understanding that forgiveness removes barriers caused by sin and paves the way to recovery of wholeness of personality, health and integrity. He puts himself in the center of that teaching by making a presumptuous claim to forgive sin. He backs up this radical claim by a Messianic act of healing the man.

Throughout his career Jesus stressed that forgiveness was based on repentance and faith. He also said that forgiveness was conditional on forgiving others.

I will tell you a story now of a church. The pastor was in dialogue about a particular charity loved by several members. A decision had been made to change the relationship to this charity of several years where a good work had been performed to help others in the community.

Different understandings of what it meant to minister went back and forth for some time. It was an internal, family struggle dealing with its history and defining its purpose.

The pastor's desire to communicate new understanding in the discussion was passed on to non-members at a meeting of this charity and the entire community. It was a sad day for everyone. The charity was ending its operation and a breach in trust had occurred. In the world of IT or information technology, an electronic message from the pastor was perceived as fair game. The church's intellectual property and spiritual laundry became public domain. Damage was done to the integrity of church as family. Trust and innocence would be changed forever.

In a desire to move on, the pastor spoke about lessons learned the following Sunday. The domain of church emails was no longer sacrosanct. However, it was time to move on. In the earlier definition of the word, blasphemy, "an irreverent or impious act, attitude, or utterance in regard to something considered inviolable or sacrosanct," had occurred. In a church trust is paramount. In a church trust is to be inviolable.

In the Navy, it is said, “Loose lips sink ships.” Classified material in the wrong hands can cost lives.

As well in the church, information in unauthorized hands can cause irreparable damage to its mission. In the story, healing needed to continue for the church and its pastor. The pastor realized after studying Mark’s gospel that the true blasphemy was not the misuse or exposure of private reflections of a church but the true blasphemy would be his failure and the church’s failure to forgive all those involved in the breach of trust.

So the pastor forgave the ones who trespassed against them. The pastor forgave himself for not protecting information better. The church members all learned from this critical incident and began to forgive one another for those things done and left undone. And because we are the church in that story we must forgive and move on.

The authorities of Jesus day had an epiphany of how God would deal with sin and guilt. They saw forgiveness in action. They saw a man made whole. Jesus’ authority to forgive has been given to us and he just may charge us with blasphemy.

Last week we have had a lot of conversations about Trinity and its history with ECHO and other ministries of charity. We have done much and we have much to be proud of. Our work continues to bring the message of reconciliation to ourselves, our families and our community.

Jesus took forgiveness to a new level. It was God's way of revealing Jesus' authority to forgive and heal as only a loving God can. We are God's chosen to take forgiveness to a new level by his authority and only in the power of his love.

In the words of Isaiah, "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you perceive it?" AMEN.