

Christ Episcopal Church
Dayton, Ohio
Third Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 5B
June 10, 2018

Lord of the Flies

Let me do a quick check here to see how many of you have heard of *the unforgivable sin*? Can I have a show of hands?

This text has been used to scare and frighten people over the centuries. In some cases it has caused great harm—providing justification for cruelty, ostracism, and even the death penalty.

It comes to us from the passage that is our Gospel reading for today. St. Mark wrote in the early 70's of the first century, some forty years or so after Jesus. The Romans, following a Jewish revolution, had destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple. Many of the leaders of the Jews were either killed or exiled. Judaism was necessarily changing rapidly from a Temple and Priest centered religion to one that was more compatible with a dispersed people—a religion focused on synagogues and festivals observed at home and rabbis (who were teachers, not priests). (For any of you who might like to explore this newer form of Judaism, let me commend to you the Jewish Cultural Festival that our neighbors are celebrating at Temple Israel this afternoon. They asked me to invite you for food, fun, games, and even short classes.)

During the first century transition in Judaism, there were rising tensions between leaders of the synagogues and those Jews who were beginning to call themselves Christians. There were many reasons for that, but one of them was that the Jesus followers were welcoming Gentiles—people who were never Jews to begin with.

Mark describes a time when some scribes arrived from Jerusalem when Jesus and his disciples were in Galilee. Jesus had been healing and casting out demons—which was probably a first century way of describing the healing of mental illnesses. Some people thought Jesus was out of his mind, including some in his own family. Into this turmoil come the scribes who said:

*He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.*¹

Baal was one of the old Philistine gods, meaning “Lord.” Beelzebul, or Beelzebub as he was sometimes called, literally means, “Lord of the flies.” William Golding took this as the title of his 1954 novel in which the head of a pig is raised up on a pole to signify a totem—a totem swarmed by flies.

¹ Mark 3:22b

Now that's not a very nice thing to say about anyone, let alone the son of God, that he's capable of only being Lord of the flies, or Lord of the demons, or Satan who is opposed to God.

St. Mark, writing in the midst of the tensions and responding to these scribes, says:

*"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"—for they had said, "He has an unclean spirit."*²

I doubt that Jesus ever said that. I think that it was Mark, writing many years later, who put those words in Jesus' mouth in order to condemn the Jewish critics—critics who were saying bad things about the Christians nearly a half century after the time of Jesus.

Why do I say that? Because the Jesus we usually encounter was all about forgiveness of sins of all sorts—including—including forgiving the very people who mocked and crucified him:

*"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."*³ --words uttered from the cross.

What Mark did is understandable. People do it all the time. Someone with whom we disagree, we condemn them. Children learn on the playground to call people bad names. When we grow up, we have adult bad names. "You folks are guilty of an unforgiveable sin; you're the sons of perdition; you're lost and condemned forever! So there!"

Rather than state our case clearly and argue for it and simply disagree, we attempt to discredit the other by painting them with a label: communist, Nazi, terrorist, unpatriotic, traitor, devil, purveyor of fake news, or as we heard yesterday of the Canadian Prime Minister, "very dishonest and weak."

Now let's look at this another way. What is it that we might take away from Mark? What kind of behavior is Mark trying to discourage? Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Saying that God is Satan. That which is of God is evil. "Jesus is Lord of the flies." Or putting great moral evil or natural catastrophe on the divine will. Saying things like a hurricane is God's payback for some supposed moral failing, or an act of terror was God's punishment for this or that or the other thing.

We Christians are challenged by this text to hold off on the name-calling, judgmentalism, and mis-labelling. We're invited, instead, to a generosity of spirit

² Mark 3:28-30

³ Luke 23:34

toward those with whom we disagree, who have a different point of view, who are unlike us.

Hatred is not a Christian virtue. *Love* is what we're called to display to the world. We're even asked to love our enemies.

St. Paul told us that love is patient and love is kind.

*Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrong doing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*⁴

Love gives up life itself if that is required to keep from losing anyone. God is love. But there are limits. Not limits on treating others lovingly, but limits on certain behaviors like bullying, abuse, slavery—taking advantage of folk just because we can.

So sometimes love is fierce—fierce love is that kind of love that sits down at a segregated lunch counter. It's not violent, but it's intense and severe. It's the energy and motivation to confront injustice. Fierce is beyond anger. Anger is often about past injustice. Fierce is the single-minded pursuit of a just future. Think of Martin Luther King, Jr. or the Old Testament prophets or Jesus as he sets his face toward Jerusalem.

Fierce may well be the face of love in our time.

Amen.

⁴ I Corinthians 13:4-7

