

“We Have Met The Enemy And It Is Us”

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1 Samuel 8:4-7, 16-20 + Mark 3:20-30 = unforgivable sin

In October 2006 a gunman walked into the West Nichol Mines schoolhouse in the Old Amish Community of Lancaster Co. Pennsylvania. Charles Roberts took hostages, barricaded the schoolhouse and in a standoff with the state police shot them all, killing five and then committed suicide himself.



On the very day of the shooting, a grandfather of one of the murdered Amish girls was heard to say, "We must not think evil of this man." An Amish neighbor comforted the Roberts family hours after the shooting and extended forgiveness to them as did many other members of the Amish community.

One Amish man held Roberts' sobbing father in his arms for an hour. About 30 members of the Amish community attended Roberts' funeral, and Marie Roberts, the widow of the killer, was one of the few outsiders invited to the funeral of one of the victims.¹

At the time I was pastoring a church in Oklahoma. One deacon came to me quite disturbed by the news from Pennsylvania. I assumed at first he was upset about the massacre, but the source of his upset was rather his total incredulity over the forgiveness offered by the Community to the family and to the killer himself. "There is no way that they could do that," he said, "No one can forgive such a thing."



Nothing theological and Biblical I offered could persuade him that the Amish offer of forgiveness was genuine. He was convinced the media had made the whole story up. From further conversations, I came to discover he himself could not forgive such an act and he read it back on God. He had all kinds of scriptures to prove his point; to exonerate himself from having to accept that such forgiveness was possible. He was clear in his own mind that

God would never ever forgive this massacre; therefore he was free to do the same.

Everyone has something they cannot forgive. The question is: is there an unforgivable sin with God.

In Mexico there is a nickname for the old, original Volkswagen beetle. It is called a "Vocho" or "Vochito." "Vocho" is slang for "bellybutton." The explanation is that a Volkswagen in Mexico is like a bellybutton because "everybody has one."



An "unforgivable sin" is a lot like that as well. Everybody has one. Most everyone has something where they say "That's unforgivable. I couldn't possibly forgive that." Most everybody can identify an evil in someone else that they cannot bring themselves to forgive. Some even project that unforgiving spirit on God, and find ways to believe that God cannot forgive it as well.

Jesus had some choice things to say on the subject. When scribes and other leaders stated as fact that Jesus was able to heal because of demonic power, Jesus went beyond mere plausible deniability. He responded with prophetic authority that they were more than mistaken, their souls were in peril.



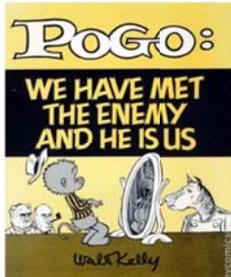
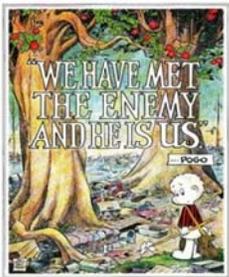
"whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin."²

What Jesus means is that the Spirit of God leads us to rightly discern truth. The scribes and other leaders were making the most grievous of fundamental errors: they had named as from Satan something that was actually from God. If anyone has so tuned out the Spirit that one cannot correctly discern what is from God and what is not, one's eternal soul is indeed in serious peril. Jesus names this "blasphemy against the Holy Spirit,"

While Jesus speaks here of one unforgivable sin, he is not actually saying God is unable or unwilling to forgive this sin. Rather the shoe is on our foot not God's. If we are so deceived within ourselves that we call good evil and

evil good, then we don't even know we have sinned. God cannot forgive what is unrepented.

Pogo agrees. Pogo the possum has another way of saying what Jesus is saying here. On one of the early Earth Days, Pogo was looking over the swamp littered with trash. Porky Pine said morosely "It is hard walkin' on this stuff." To which Pogo replies: "Yep, Son, **We have met the enemy and it is us.**"



Pogo is actually quoting himself from decades before when he coined the phrase, "**We have met the enemy and it is us.**" It first appeared during the McCarthy era alluding directly to the desire to lay off blame on someone else. Walt Kelly is pointed in his critique: Every one of us has a blind spot for our own sin and can heap wrongful judgment on others.

Samuel faced a similar problem. The people of Israel were demanding a human king. They were weary of the tribal confederation, no longer satisfied with being led by God alone through the Holy Spirit inspired prophets. God spoke through Samuel pointing out that a king would end up oppressing the people; that their king would have moral failures and provide poor leadership. But to no avail.



The Israelites got exactly what they were asking for, and then per usual complained to God about it. Like most all of us, the people of Israel preferred a human agent they could blame rather than dependency on God's Spirit to lead them.

In Samuel's time as well as today:

"We have met the enemy and it is us."

Jesus asks us squarely:

"Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?"³



We have an unfortunate tendency to blame things on someone else ~ the blind way we assign

evil to others but reserve the good for ourselves. We are no longer listening to the Spirit of God. We are not searching for God's truth. So it is when God's Spirit is ignored. We would be wise to be extremely careful who we call bad and who we label good so as not to fall into this trap.

The lectionary used to have the passage from John called the "Woman Taken In Adultery."⁴ You remember the story: an adulterous woman is brought to Jesus to be judged and executed. And you remember the punchline: Jesus says "**Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone.**" When everyone had slunk away, Jesus on behalf of God forgives the woman of adultery.



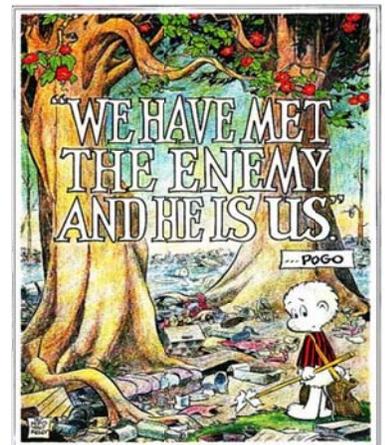
I have preached on this passage exactly three times before it was dropped from the lectionary, and each time it has engendered considerable controversy. In my very first church in Milford, Texas, my Clerk of Session came out of worship quite agitated. Indeed, he was so angry he could hardly speak, "Adultery can't be forgiven." "But Jesus said it" "No Jesus would never forgive that." Adultery is something he could not forgive, and he was convinced that God could not either.

Is adultery what Jesus says is unforgiveable? Is it mass murder? Every one of us has something we have to struggle to forgive. Most all of us hold on to the hurts and pains we believe others inflict on us, and mistakenly think that by withholding forgiveness we are somehow punishing them. In reality we are only punishing ourselves. The Amish in our first story know only too well the power of forgiveness and the toxicity of unforgiveness.



The real unforgiveable sin, what Jesus labels "blasphemy against the Holy Spirit" is when we willfully separate ourselves from the still, small voice; when we neglect the Holy Spirit; when we fail to heed the Spirit's call; when we allow our own inner voices and desires to trump God's call.

Unforgivable sin? "We have met the enemy and it is us."



¹ from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amish_school_shooting

² Mark 3:28-29

³ Matthew 7:3 and Luke 6:41

⁴ John 8:2-11