

FIRST LESSON: Leviticus 24:15-16
SECOND LESSON: John 10:22-30
May 8, 2022

“Blasphemy!”

Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

The last person to be jailed in the United States for blasphemy was Abner Kneeland in 1838 in Massachusetts. Kneeland had gone from being a Baptist to a Universalist to a very vocal atheist. He was convicted and served sixty days in prison. The judge described him as “a cantankerous and inflexible heretic.” But we don’t really think about blasphemy in this country, despite the fact that as late as 2010 there were still a few laws on the books that no one enforced. **But if we lived in Pakistan, we would think about blasphemy.** In Pakistan today people are put to death for blasphemy. And in Indonesia, a woman was charged with blasphemy and imprisoned for 18 months for complaining that the mosque Call to Prayer was too loud. She lived right next door, a bit like living next to the fire department.

In Jesus’ time the punishment for blasphemy was death, and even though they couldn’t technically enforce it because the Romans were in charge, stoning to death by a mob still happened, just as it still happens today in conservative Muslim nations around the world. We have a very American idea that what we think should be allowed. We believe that what we think and even what we say is a protected right. Even unpopular opinions can be expressed. But much of the world is not like that, and at a human level intimidation can even be found in a nation such as ours.

Jesus’ words were dangerous words. And he knew it.

It was the Festival of Dedication at Jerusalem. In other words, it was Hanukkah. Because it was winter, Jesus was in the Temple Courts walking in Solomon’s Colonnade, which by tradition was the place where Jewish kings gave justice. One of the great problems with the gospel of John, however, is that the text just says “the Jews” approached Jesus, because various Jewish groups no longer existed after the fall of the Temple. John’s gospel was probably written in the 90s, and the second Temple was destroyed around the year 70. There were no more Sadducees, Herodians and scribes, and the surviving Pharisees were organizing rabbinical schools. As a result, everyone is lumped together in John and called “the Jews,” as if Jesus himself were not Jewish. This has tragically contributed to anti-Semitism. But while John’s gospel says, “The Jews who were there gathered around him, saying, ‘How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly,’” these particular “Jews” would have belonged to different political and religious parties within Israel, and this was definitely a trick question, not a sincere

enquiry. These men would have been connected to the Temple and its politics in some way.

Jesus said, "I did tell you, but you do not believe." Jesus had said things like, "I am the door." "I am the way, the truth and the life." He had told them who he was. But that was not specific enough for these men. He had also demonstrated in action both who he was and whose power he exercised. A common accusation made against Jesus was that his power to heal was demonic. So miraculous healings and miraculous provision also did not suffice.

It is possible to see the same event and interpret it completely differently. Sincere Christians can be found on opposite sides of the abortion debate that is raging through our nation right now. The same thing is understood very differently. For Jesus, who often healed on the Sabbath, some rejoiced to see God's healing power at work. Others objected to the breaking of the Sabbath laws in this disgraceful manner. Both groups were trying to be faithful to God according to their own understanding. These were men who saw the works that Jesus did but did not rejoice. Instead, they saw a dangerous lawbreaker. But there were probably other much crasser motivations at work in this particular case—motivations of base self-interest and a desire for power, because Jesus said to them, "you do not believe because you are not my sheep. My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me."

The reason these men did not recognize Jesus for who he really was, is really quite outrageous. Jesus says it is because they do not belong. They are not part of the flock. All Jews were understood to belong simply on the basis of being Jewish. It was a matter of blood and heritage. But Jesus was making a spiritual distinction. Being born into a given family or culture was not enough.

Within Israel, God was the ultimate shepherd, and spiritual leaders the under-shepherds. But Jesus blended God the Father with himself when it came to the care of the sheep. Jesus said he gives them eternal life. What human being can do that? He says his sheep have been given to him by the Father. No one can snatch them out of Jesus' hand, and no one can snatch them out of the Father's hand. Jesus mixed himself and God together in a way that was guaranteed to raise the ire of those he was speaking to. But then he really clinched it. They wanted to know if he was the Messiah. He pushed that answer right off the cliff. Jesus said, "I and the Father are one." They immediately picked up stones to stone him for blasphemy.

Now theoretically speaking, "I and the Father are one" could mean a lot of things. I and the Father are one in purpose, one in spirit, one in ideals. But given what Jesus said before this, that sort of "oneness" seems unlikely, and the men he was up against were in no doubt what Jesus meant. They were ready to carry out an execution on the spot. Jesus must have had nerves of steel. He said to them, "I have shown you many good works from the Father. For which of these do you stone me?"

"We are not stoning you for any good work," they replied, "but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God."

We don't understand from our perspective why blasphemy should be such a feared and powerful thing because we are individualistic. But they

believed that any society that tolerated such disrespect of God would immediately become liable to judgment. If the people did not remove the blasphemer from their midst, God would judge them all guilty and the consequences would be horrendous. Fundamentalists today have made similar claims using other issues. A society that tolerates homosexuality, or abortion, or pre-marital sex, or trans people, is liable to hellfire and judgment. What one does endangers all. Gay marriage somehow undermines heterosexual marriage. I've never quite been able to figure out how—but that's the argument. God will punish the whole nation if these divergent opinions are tolerated. Jesus' claim that "I and the Father are one," therefore, put all of Israel in danger. Of course, then as now such accusations were also a very convenient way to exercise social control, and they could have just seen this as an excellent way to get rid of Jesus.

But where does all of this leave us? We may not believe that blasphemy affects anyone but the one who commits it, but we're still left with Jesus' words. The divinity of Christ is the most critical issue of our faith. Was Jesus divine? How can a man also be God? This concept wouldn't be so hard to take in if we were polytheists, but we're not. We believe in one God, who also is two, or maybe three?

I know I have said this before, but the trinity is not something we are capable of understanding. Trust me, scholars have tried. And the divinity of Christ is also not something we can understand. Christians through the centuries have had countless arguments and painstakingly written carefully phrased confessions of faith. History is littered with the debates. But even if we come up with some kind of explanation, we can't really comprehend it. And probably the earliest disciples didn't understand either, but what we do know is this: The absolute earliest confession of faith, before even the apostle Paul, is "Jesus is Lord," which is a way of saying Jesus is God. People like to claim that the idea that Jesus is divine is relatively late and that the second generation of Christians made it up, but that simply is not true. It was the first generation, the men and women who knew Jesus personally who proclaimed that he was divine.

Do I ever doubt the divinity of Jesus? Yes, because I can't fit it in my brain. But then I go and pray to him and we sort it out. I find that when it comes to the practice of my faith not everything can be handled by intellectual argument, and sometimes I have to just shut up and do. Faith is a verb. If I wait to understand everything before I can have faith, I will never get there. But when I practice my faith, my faith grows stronger, my heart experiences grace, and this mysterious God who I do not understand but profess, is able to work in me and through me. Amen.

Leviticus 24:15-16

¹⁵ Say to the Israelites: 'Anyone who curses their God will be held responsible; ¹⁶ anyone who blasphemes the name of the Lord is to be put to death. The entire assembly must stone them. Whether foreigner or native-born, when they blaspheme the Name they are to be put to death.

John 10:22-30

22 Then came the Festival of Dedication at Jerusalem. It was winter,^{**23**} and Jesus was in the temple courts walking in Solomon's Colonnade.^{**24**} The Jews who were there gathered around him, saying, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly."

25 Jesus answered, "I did tell you, but you do not believe. The works I do in my Father's name testify about me, **26** but you do not believe because you are not my sheep. **27** My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. **28** I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand. **29** My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. **30** I and the Father are one."

31 Again his Jewish opponents picked up stones to stone him, **32** but Jesus said to them, "I have shown you many good works from the Father. For which of these do you stone me?"

33 "We are not stoning you for any good work," they replied, "but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God."