

Third Sunday after Pentecost – June 10 (Proper 5)

The Sundays after Pentecost and Trinity take us into the basic building blocks of the Christian faith. This week we will hear what God said to the man and woman in the Garden of Eden after the first sin. It is a foundational text for the Christian faith. Perhaps it is worth our while to listen again to what the Lutheran Confessions say here. There is, of course, much more to be said in this regard as it has often been a point of some contention within the Church. (Check out also the Apology, Article II; Smalcald Articles, Part III, Article I; and Formula of Concord, Article I)

Augsburg Confession: Article II Original Sin

Also they teach that since the fall of Adam all men begotten in the natural way are born with sin, that is, without the fear of God, without trust in God, and with concupiscence; and that this disease, or vice of origin, is truly sin, even now condemning and bringing eternal death upon those not born again through Baptism and the Holy Ghost.

They condemn the Pelagians and others who deny that original depravity is sin, and who, to obscure the glory of Christ's merit and benefits, argue that man can be justified before God by his own strength and reason. ¹

In a longstanding debate about the nature of humanity before God, Lutherans come down on a particular side of the discussion, albeit a not very popular side in North America. In fact, it is roundly abused in many ecclesial corners of the North American scene. Lutherans are thoroughly Augustinian in this; even within the words of the AC we notice that we are not “Pelagian,” the very heretics whom Augustine battled toward the end of his career.

Augustine in the fifth century and Luther and his sixteenth century colleagues had very good reasons for this position, reasons which still make sense and are important today. This is not just an ancient argument, but a very real pastoral concern. The doctrine of Original Sin, properly understood, brings great comfort to the believer, has the great virtue of honesty, and allows Christ to be the Savior in all respects, and keeps me from taking any of that to myself.

First a few definitions are in order: Original sin is not the first sin which Adam and Eve committed in the Garden of Eden and which we will read about today. Theirs was the first sin but that is not Original Sin. Original Sin is actually a condition into which we are born. You might think of it as a birth defect, just as many children are born with broken bodies and minds. We are all born with broken, dying, spirits, bodies, and whole selves. Original Sin is the origin of our many moral failings which we also call sins. We commit sins because we are broken as human beings. But Original Sin does much more than just deform us morally, it also results in

¹This quote was taken from <http://www.bookofconcord.org/>. This is a good site for exploring the Book of Concord and more. I would recommend, however, that if you planning to do more, pick up a copy of Kolb and Wengert's recent translation of the text. Excellent notes and introductory essays are included in that text.

our physical deaths and our maladies of the body. This sickness extends to our interactions with our neighbors: our economic structures are largely based on greed and not generosity. The result is poverty for some and abundance for others. Original Sin has even affected the whole of creation. Isaiah 65 and other passages suggest that earthquakes, predation, storms, and the like are a result of the fall of humanity into Original Sin

Even Pelagius admitted that much, however. Most people today are willing to admit that we have real problems and the world is not working properly. The real question at hand is just how broken we really are. Pelagius, from whom the heresy gets its name, insisted that there remained within the human being some spark of goodness, a little bit of that goodness which was found in humanity at the creation. The fall had shattered the image of God, but not completely erased it. Like a dish which had been dropped, there were some useful pieces which remained.

Augustine said this was foolish and the Lutheran reformers, combating medieval Catholicism's semi-pelagian tendencies agreed. The destruction of the human being by sin was complete. God's salvation could not be likened to gluing the broken plate back together. Jesus did not come to sow a new patch on an old garment. He came to make completely anew. The baptismal event is a resurrection event, not a repair, nor a restoration.

This is still a dividing point between Lutherans and Catholics. Lutherans insist on *simul justus et peccator* (at the same time a sinner and a saint), holding that that the old man is totally corrupt and the new man is totally pure and justified. The Catholics want to bring those two things together in the human being in a way which suggests that God is actually repairing the broken human life and building on the old creation in a way. Taken to its extreme, the Lutheran position becomes a license to sin – we have talked about that before. Taken to the other extreme, the Catholic position, which is shared by many in the evangelical camp, especially those coming from the holiness bodies, results in the human being taking considerable credit for salvation.

Most Evangelicals who belong to the semi-pelagian camp identify that remaining goodness of the creation to reside in the human will. I may not always be a good person, but I want to be. That is what distinguishes the saved from the damned. The saved have made a decision, reacted to God with the result that saving faith is established. As Max Lucado once famously said – he wrote this book to talk about the 1% that we do in order to be saved.

Luther and the Confessions will have none of this talk. We are spiritually dead, lifeless corpses who cannot by reason or strength come to Jesus Christ or believe in him (Small Catechism). Original sin is a condition which has rendered us spiritually the enemies of God, not merely indifferent or ignorant of God, but openly hostile (Romans 5). The difference between me and the damned is not that I got something right. It is the mystery of God's grace and I have to leave it there. But this also means that I don't have to be asking about or wondering about what I got right. In truth, if I get anything right, it is always because God has re-created me in Sacrament and Word. This allows me to give credit to God for all that is good. It also lifts a tremendous burden from me. I don't have to ask if I have ever done enough, or if what I thought was a right

will was really a properly right will. I can simply marvel that God loves a stinker like me and delight to see him at work in me. It does have a danger, however, which we note above. Too often Lutherans have misused their grace-filled theology to be license to do little or nothing, becoming what amounts to spiritual sluggards or worse.

When we brought this up in the discussions, we wondered why we would defend Original Sin as a concept. What makes it so important today?

1. We thought it was rather essential to our Christianity, could we be Christian without Original Sin? Would we be something else?
2. Without Original Sin we do not need Christ to transform everything. He becomes a much smaller savior. I may have some issues, but not that many. I don't need a complete renewal, just a little cosmetic surgery.
3. The denial of Original Sin simply feeds our human need to control everything. Original Sin denies to me the ability to control my life. I am trapped in it.

Why do some really struggle with Original Sin?

1. They don't want to be bad – they need to see a goodness in everyone (even Darth Vader had some good in him!)
2. The whole self-esteem movement is an assertion that we are all basically good.
3. American ethos has largely been based on an Armenian/Semi-Pelagian. To espouse Original Sin almost un-American.
4. They are shying away from a determinism which they feel denies Free Will in the articulation of Original Sin.

Collect of the Day

Almighty and eternal God, Your Son Jesus triumphed over the prince of demons and freed us from bondage to sin. Help us to stand firm against every assault of Satan, and enable us always to do Your will; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

God is "almighty and eternal." He has all the power, he never dies or grows weak. I think sometimes we think that God simply has more power than anyone else or that he just has always been there, but these terms actually suggest something else which is critical for us to keep in mind. God is completely other, transcending all our categories. His strength is not simply greater than everyone else's strength, his strength cannot be measured or compared. It is completely other than our strength. Likewise it is not the case that God is really old and will be around for a very long time, he does not participate in time as we do. He is timeless. Time has no hold on him and he is without any limitation, without beginning or end. Contrary to the cartoons, God is not just an old guy. We too often want to hang a human body on him. But that doesn't

really work when we are talking about God. Dionysius, a fifth century theologian, really hammered that point many years ago.

Which then makes the second phrase all the more remarkable, God entered the limited world. While God did not have that human body of his own nature, he took up humanity and that human body to himself in the incarnation. This was not simply a step down for him, but a categorical shift. For the eternal one to be born, to die, to be in this village at this time, is not merely a diminution of his power and self, but it is a fundamentally different mode of being.

It is in the participation of his humanity in that divine nature which is so important to us today. The human being who is Jesus, his body, his blood, his presence, his spirit, is able to be here physically and truly because in the incarnation humanity has been taken up into the divine. Of course this was the fundamental error of Zwingli in this regard, and to a lesser extent Calvin and the traditions which flow from their font. They, probably without knowing it, bought into a subtle distinction in their understanding of God which had arisen in the late medieval period known as Nominalism. Nominalism did not say God was wholly other, but simply greatest of all. Thus, while Jesus had all that power, his power was not wholly other than our power, simply on the top of the power scale.

But this prayer beseeches God for help on the basis of the incarnation, and the incarnate Word's triumph over the enemy. That help comes to each of us, individually, because the perforated hands of Jesus are also the omnipotent hands of God. The one who shed life blood for us, can come with that blood in a sacrament because God transcends time and space and matter itself. He can answer this prayer with far more than just good intentions of a distant deity who is watching from a far or, much worse, the omnipotent power which would surely crush us. Jesus can be here to help us gently and potently, every moment encouraging and strengthening us in the battle against the foe which preserves us as human beings and which enables us to be the creatures of God which he always wanted and loves us to be.

Readings

Genesis 3:8-15 The reading is taken from the center of the Fall narrative. I have included this important and familiar story in its entirety.

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made.

He said to the woman, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?"

² And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, ³ but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'" ⁴ But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. ⁵ For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." ⁶ So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and

ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. ⁷ *Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths.*

⁸ *And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden.* ⁹ *But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, “Where are you?”* ¹⁰ *And he said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself.”* ¹¹ *He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?”* ¹² *The man said, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate.”* ¹³ *Then the LORD God said to the woman, “What is this that you have done?”* The woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.”

¹⁴ *The LORD God said to the serpent,*

*“Because you have done this,
cursed are you above all livestock
and above all beasts of the field;
on your belly you shall go,
and dust you shall eat
all the days of your life.*

¹⁵ *I will put enmity between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and her offspring;
he shall bruise your head,
and you shall bruise his heel.”*

¹⁶ *To the woman he said,*

*“I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing;
in pain you shall bring forth children.
Your desire shall be for your husband,
and he shall rule over you.”*

¹⁷ *And to Adam he said,*

*“Because you have listened to the voice of your wife
and have eaten of the tree
of which I commanded you,
‘You shall not eat of it,’
cursed is the ground because of you;*

*in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life;
¹⁸ thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;
and you shall eat the plants of the field.*

¹⁹ *By the sweat of your face*

*you shall eat bread,
till you return to the ground,
for out of it you were taken;
for you are dust,
and to dust you shall return.”*

This pericope draws our attention to God’s solution for our sinful condition, a condition into which we fell as a human race through the rebellion of Adam and Eve. Our human tendency is to see this through Adam and Eve’s eyes, which is good at some points. But better is to notice God in this.

- 1. God walks in the Garden in the cool of the day. The Hebrew here can speak of a habitual action. God is in a relationship with his creatures. He goes for a walk with them. This picture is not just quaint or some anthropomorphism of God. It speaks of his love for the man before the fall.*
- 2. God calls to them. We know that God knows all. Why does he call? He calls because while he surely knows what Adam and Eve have done and could force this issue, he wants relationship with Adam and Eve. He seeks them gently. He calls them, he does not descend upon them in righteous fury.*
- 3. He questions Adam about what has happened. Again, God already knows the answers, but what matters to him is that Adam responds. It is not the content of Adam’s response but the fact of it that is important to God. He wants Adam to answer him; he seeks the relationship which will flow out of his forgiving love.*
- 4. When the man passes the buck, God cares about the woman’s response. He queries her too. She too is a spiritual being, she too is valuable to God.*
- 5. But when she passes the blame to the serpent, the questioning stops. The doom is simply pronounced. God does not seek that relationship, or at least this text does not speak to that quest.*
- 6. But even the doom pronounced on the serpent is hope for the woman and the man. The child of the woman will someday crush Satan’s power, his head. At a cost, but the victory will be his.*

I think too often we focus on the man’s failures to respond or the woman’s willingness to join the “blame anyone but me game.” We psycho-analyze the people, but this text is not given to us as a revelation of mankind, it is a revelation of God and his mercy for sinners. Yes, of course, it says something about us, not very flattering stuff either. But one does not need an ancient text to tell us that we have been messed up for a very long time. Most of us are pretty well aware of that.

This text seems to speak of God’s pursuit of the sinner. He has every right and reason to be frustrated with us, but that does not stop him. We can so easily focus on our failures and

shortcomings as human beings and wonder if God will still love us. This text suggests that he does. Some feel unforgiveable, unlovable, but he won't give up on them. He pursues, seeking the confession which Adam needs so desperately. Have I done enough, of course not, but Christ surely has. He has crushed Satan's head, the enemy before whom I was powerless. Whereas a denial of Original Sin will suggest that we are good enough for God to save us, the doctrine of Original Sin lets us focus on God instead of us. This is about God pursuing his creation, even the creation which has rebelled against him. The questions in this text are not the omniscient God seeking information. He already knows the answers to the questions he asks. The questions are really God seeking relationship. He does not come in wrath and judgement, but even though Adam and Eve have really screwed this up, he still loves them.

We don't preach sermons on Original Sin, but we let Original Sin stand so we can preach the Good News of Jesus, the Gospel.

Some years ago when we pondered this text, we wondered what was up with the enmity. We thought that this made the most sense not as an etiological story explaining why snakes give us the willies when we see one, but a hatred, mistrust, and fear which would exist between humans and Satan himself. This is never a team, we are never benefiting one another. It is always a competition, a zero-sum game, always a situation in which one of us must win, and the other lose. This will of course mean that when Jesus incarnate encounters Satan in the temptation scenes depicted in the NT, the battle is automatically engaged. Satan hates the human. Good news: Jesus wins!

What causes this enmity? Is it the Holy Spirit? But what about the folks who have no faith? It seems to be something that was hard wired into our humanity. We don't like Satan. Perhaps it is just the natural response of God's creatures. Satan hated us first. We respond in kind. Or is it really more basic to our creation? Is it God providing us with a healthy instinct? Is this the Law written on our hearts? We have an interior knowledge that something is wrong. Is this our conscience? The presence of the Holy Spirit certain makes this aversion to Satan much stronger.

Of course when I bring this up, I am rather into natural law and that means another whole conversation is necessary. Increasingly our world does not recognize the "male and female" distinctions which are simply assumed in this text. Sexuality and gender are a spectrum of expression which one can move. The recent Vanity Fair cover with "Caitlyn" Jenner was in our minds. While we can preach this as Law, we have to find some way to proclaim some Gospel here. I don't think we can forget that God loves all his creatures, even those who have made a real mess of things, including ourselves. We have made gender everything. Even those who espouse biblical sexual ethics have fallen into this trap. We have allowed Sexuality to be the defining element of our humanity. Is that how God sees us? Should we see people that way?

We also thought we needed to proclaim a healthy gender, not only rail against the dysfunction and sin. Yes, the dysfunction is real. Jenner's attempt to take control of his sexual being seems to be a form rebellion against God. But Adam and Eve had also rebelled. God sought them out.

That has liberated us to live a new and beautiful way which is ancient and true. To be a healthy heterosexual person is a really good and healthy thing.

Psalm 130

Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD!

² O Lord, hear my voice!

Let your ears be attentive
to the voice of my pleas for mercy!

³ If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,
O Lord, who could stand?

⁴ But with you there is forgiveness,
that you may be feared.

⁵ I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,
and in his word I hope;

⁶ my soul waits for the Lord
more than watchmen for the morning,
more than watchmen for the morning.

⁷ O Israel, hope in the LORD!
For with the LORD there is steadfast love,
and with him is plentiful redemption.

⁸ And he will redeem Israel
from all his iniquities.

This is a most interesting choice for the Psalm. It is usually sung during the season of Advent, when we wait for the Lord (vss 5-6). But the “out of the depths” of the first verse really is the focal point today. Who are we? Are we mired in a pit from which we cannot escape? Is our only hope to wait for a rescue which must come from God? That seems to be what the psalmist says, but do we really believe that about ourselves. We have conquered so many problems with technology and innovation. Is there really a problem which we cannot solve?

What if there is one? What if there isn't one? The psalmist forces us to ask some hard questions. Can I really solve my sin problem? There are some brain scientists who believe that with the application of the right chemical stimuli they can take away negative thoughts and actions. If they create an “anger pill” which keeps us from getting angry will we be responsible for our anger anymore?

II Corinthians 4:13-5:1 Again, I have included some context for us.

⁷ But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. ⁸ We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to

despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; ¹⁰ always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. ¹¹ For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. ¹² So death is at work in us, but life in you.

¹³ Since we have the same spirit of faith according to what has been written, “I believed, and so I spoke,” we also believe, and so we also speak, ¹⁴ knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence. ¹⁵ For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

¹⁶ So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. ¹⁷ For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, ¹⁸ as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

¹ For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. ² *For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling, ³ if indeed by putting it on we may not be found naked. ⁴ For while we are still in this tent, we groan, being burdened—not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. ⁵ He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee.*

⁶ *So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, ⁷ for we walk by faith, not by sight. ⁸ Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. ⁹ So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. ¹⁰ For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.*

The Epistles in the green seasons, (Epiphany and Pentecost) are not chosen for congruence with the Gospel readings, but are chosen to allow us to read sections of the Epistles which address topics not normally found in the Gospels.

Paul's second Letter to the Corinthians, especially the first part (chapters 1-7) is a completely different tone than his first letter. Truly, this may be one of the most beautiful sections of scripture written.

Paul's difficulties have been resolved, but only after great trials, hard words, hurt feelings, and multiple letters and trips. In a last ditch effort Paul sent a harsh letter to them with his friend and colleague Titus. It worked. The people repented of their sin, expelled the immoral brother, and sought reconciliation with Paul. Titus was so excited about this he chased Paul up the coast of Asia Minor and into Macedonia to deliver the news and Paul wrote this letter back to the people in Corinth.

We don't have the harsh letter, or at least not under that title. Some people have noticed a decided shift in the tone of II Corinthians at chapter 10. It seems to them to be much more strident and angry. Many have questioned whether this is not actually the body of the harsh letter somehow attached to the end of the reconciliation letter. We don't know. It is only a theory. Others have thought that Paul perhaps got further information on the situation in Corinth which required him to turn to harsher words at the end of II Corinthians. Did Titus paint too rosy of a picture? Again, it is all speculation.

The letter we have here is filled with a holy joy at the wonder of reconciliation and forgiveness. Paul is exploring that theme in this section. The very treasure of God is given to us in jars of clay. This is gold inside us, better than gold, it is God himself. I am not worthy, but the words I speak actually work the forgiveness of sins. You can see why have such an emotional and difficult experience Paul might have done this. Often the people who have the greatest need for forgiveness can decide they don't deserve and thus disbelieve it. Consider Joseph's brothers in Genesis 50.

This then turns into a reflection on suffering. Paul's suffering is nothing compared to the joy he has when he sees Christ in action in his own ministry. He suffers much, but he does not lose heart. He doesn't lose heart because Christ is at work in his body.

But then Paul strings this together with the holy hope we all have in the resurrection and the day when Christ will gather us all together. He has brought together some really important themes here:

- 1. Forgiveness as a treasure in broken people – this is very sacramental theology.*
- 2. Suffering is nothing compared to what we see Christ doing. He is actually forgiving people before my very eyes.*
- 3. And those two things combine to build a lasting hope, a hope which counts on Jesus' great work of love on the last day. We have the joyful expectation that this Christ who works in us is never done until we are living and fit for heaven.*

Does that sound like a sermon outline or what?

Mark 3:20-35

²⁰ Then he went home, and the crowd gathered again, so that they could not even eat. ²¹ And when his family heard it, they went out to seize him, for they were saying, "He is out of his mind."

²² And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem were saying, "He is possessed by Beelzebul," and "by the prince of demons he casts out the demons." ²³ And he called them to him and said to them in parables, "How can Satan cast out Satan? ²⁴ If a kingdom is divided against itself, that

kingdom cannot stand. ²⁵ And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. ²⁶ And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but is coming to an end. ²⁷ But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man. Then indeed he may plunder his house.

²⁸ “Truly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the children of man, and whatever blasphemies they utter, ²⁹ but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin” — ³⁰ for they were saying, “He has an unclean spirit.”

³¹ And his mother and his brothers came, and standing outside they sent to him and called him.

³² And a crowd was sitting around him, and they said to him, “Your mother and your brothers are outside, seeking you.” ³³ And he answered them, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” ³⁴ And looking about at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! ³⁵ For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother.”

Are you ready to proclaim Jesus the Good Thief? Does he not in verse 27 actually compare what he is doing to a thief who has tied up the strong man, Satan, and is plundering (stealing) people from Satan's clutches with every exorcism? Satan does not willingly give up his people. Remember there is an enmity between them. Satan hates people, his own people hate him too. Satan does not ever give them up out of the goodness of his heart, he has no heart, he has no goodness. He only knows greedy, devouring hatred.

Students of the Gospel of Mark may well recognize within these verses an example of a device which Mark likes to use: the rhetorical sandwich, also known as intercalation. Sometimes when Mark is telling a story, he will interrupt the story to tell another story, and then, when that second story is done, he finishes the first story. Today we see the family of Jesus as they try to get him committed to a mental institution, but then some Pharisees accuse him of being demonically possessed, and then Mark finishes the story of Jesus family coming to get him. It is like the story of Jesus' family here is the bread, and the story of the scribes is the middle part of the sandwich: although, since they are observant Jews, most likely that middle part is not ham and cheese.

Why does Mark break up the story? If you look closely at the two elements they actually share a few points in common. Noticing these points in common likely gives us a good clue into what Mark is trying to tell us about Jesus in this passage. A little comparison chart may be in order here to make this clearer.

Jesus and his family

1. Accuse him of a problem – mental illness
2. Should be Jesus allies – they are his family
3. Authority – families were very important
4. Get Jesus wrong – he is not insane

Jesus and the Pharisees

- Accuse him of problem – a demon!
- Should be Jesus allies – fellow Jews
- Authority – religious leaders
- Get Jesus wrong – he is not demonic

5. *Jesus distances himself – notice “real family”* *Jesus accuses of blaspheming H.S.*

But there is another element which acts like a frame around the sandwich (the crust?). At the beginning of this pericope it notes that Jesus is surrounded by a crowd of people. There are so many Jesus doesn't even have room or time to eat. The crowd shows up again at the end when Jesus points to them and declares that those who, like them, do the will of God, those are the family of Jesus.

So what is this about? It seems to me that this larger framework is really important. Mark is trying to say something about who is important to Jesus. Remember he is writing to a community of people who are afraid and have the sense that God is either ignoring them or is angry with them. They are being persecuted for their Christianity and wondering why they are being so treated. They are wondering if God has forgotten about them, or if he is angry with them.

Listen carefully to what Jesus tells them here. The bond between Jesus and the followers of the “Way” as the first Christians were known transcends his family ties. We perhaps don't hear that so strongly, for our family structures have been persistently under attack for the past several decades and are often not considered to be so important to us. For first century people your primary identity was found in your family. Jesus just told them that they are his family. He has not forgotten about them. They are far too important to him for him to forget about them.

Before that, however, in the discourse with the scribes, he said that while there is a sin which breaks relationship, it is the grievous sin against the Spirit, blaspheming him, essentially accusing Jesus of being the same thing as the Devil. Every other sin is forgivable, it does not break relationship with Jesus and the Father. We tend to hear this passage and start to wonder about the unforgivable sin, but the real emphasis here is not on the unforgivable sin but on the largess of God's forgiveness. There is no other sin which comes between the person and God. Jesus has died for them all. Their persecution is not because God is mad at them or punishing them. This removes their situation from that sort of a situation entirely.

Mark is telling the people, his audience, us, that the relationship between the person and God is primary to God, and what is more, no misbehavior on our part can ever stop that love of God for us. The only thing that comes between us and that great love is our rejection of that love and the Spirit who bears it to us. To call that Spirit the enemy, to reject him, to turn away from that love and blessing of God, that does break relationship. But that is not because our naughty deeds are greater than Jesus love, it is because we have rejected him and his solution for our broken lives. It is the nature of his love that it can be rejected. He does not force himself upon us and thereby enslave us. That would be to negate the very love which he holds for us.

There is another thing which needs to be said in this context of the LCMS. Jesus calls the crowd around him mothers and sisters. That is shocking. It contained men. While it was completely acceptable for someone at the time to refer to a mixed crowd as brothers, to call a mixed crowd of men mothers and sisters and brothers would have been startling to those who heard. Mark

makes no mention of it, but we can surmise that this is because his audience included a number of women. I bring this up because this sort of a factotum needs to be factored into the conversations we are having about the roles of women in our church. We too quickly run to Corinthians and Timothy and imagine that this ends the discussion. But in fact the Gospel writer's depiction of Jesus' treatment of women needs to be included here. It complicates the questions and makes some uncomfortable, but that is a good thing. Please understand that I am not advocating for the ordination of women here. I think that would be a mistake for the LCMS to do, but I think the way we have conducted this conversation has served needlessly to alienate women and others.

Our people will likely be sitting up and taking notice of the "unforgivable sin" and wonder if they have done that.

The sin against the Holy Spirit is to reject his work. To reject Christ is to reject forgiveness. To reject the Spirit is unbelief.

Pastorally speaking, if someone is concerned that she or he has done this, we can say that their concern itself is good news. They are not blind to their sins. They care about their sins. That is the work of the Spirit. They could not do that without the Spirit and hence they are not in this Sin against the Spirit.

Proclaiming this: Jesus has drawn a line here and only here. There is no other sin which cuts us off from God's love. We like to draw other lines, currently many would draw a line at sexual ethics but in other generations we have drawn it in other places. Jesus only draws this line. We cannot proclaim anything else.

Law and Gospel

1. Sin is so much more than being naughty. It is a condition I have caught, a condition which would permanently separate me from God. Sin results in my senses failing, my body aging, my heart stopping. So Jesus has come into this world, to breath our poisoned air and die our broken deaths. He has taken up our infirmities and borne our pain to brutal death so we don't have to.
2. Sin, original sin, is not just a personally important problem, it is a communal problem, a systemic problem. Sin makes the world totter and veer toward destruction. Sin causes the storms and quakes which upset the lives of millions. Sin has upset the very balance of nature. God seeks out Adam in the garden, Jesus calls all who follow God's will his brothers and sister, Paul rejoices to see the very power of God in his words of forgiveness.

3. We have gotten used to sin, we don't notice it anymore. I think the lions eating the gazelles are normal, natural. They are not. But God will not leave us in our ignorance. He walks the garden path, calling us back to where we belong, with him. Paul sends letter and friends repeatedly to the sinners of Corinth and finally they repent, Jesus loves the crowds, even the mother and brothers and scribes who would put him away for blasphemy or madness.
4. All this has resulted in some profound broken things in my life, relationships are just one of them, but they cause particular pain. God restores the relationship, Paul's congregation is once more his cherished community.
5. The most difficult and painful relationship break is that relationship which leaves me hungering and thirsting for God. Sin cuts me off from him and I need him. My life is miserably lonely without him. See the number above – God walks the garden, Paul sends the letter, Jesus calls them brothers and sisters.

Sermon Ideas

1. Who are my mother and brothers? (Gospel – that the Spirit of God would set at ease the hearts and minds of the listener – Jesus has established a durable, lasting relationship with them in his work, his sacrifice, his resurrection. We are the brothers, sisters, mothers of Jesus!)

The OT lesson needs to figure prominently in both of these sermons. This sermon is really for the congregation which doubts itself. It wonders if God really loves it. It fears that it has somehow lost contact with the Holy Spirit and it is running out of gas. It wonders where God is. It wonders what it has done wrong. It wonders if it will survive.

I cannot tell if any institution will survive, but if it fails, it does not fail because God has stopped loving its people. Jesus has much to say about that today. It is not that our church will automatically thrive if we do the things of God's will. It doesn't work that way. Sometimes we suffer too. As Paul said, sometimes we are wasting away externally. But we never need to worry about God's love for us. God, in Jesus has forgiven every sin.

That love of God for sinners is written large in the cross which stands over every Christian church. That is what that strange symbol is doing up there. It is proclaiming that this is a place where God loves people, these people, all people.

In this text Jesus uses the imagery of the closest relationships we have, our family. God's love is likened to those relationships. An illustration of a mother who loves an unlovable child might make for a good illustration here, perhaps some woman who has cared for a child who was born with profound cognitive impairment. This also would allow a little discussion of Original Sin.

This would be a place also to address those who might have a concern about sinning against the Holy Spirit.

2. I believed and so I spoke (Epistle – that the Spirit of God would strengthen the faith of the hearer and embolden him or her to be a speaker of the Gospel)

This is the sermon for the congregation whose zeal has grown cold. Paul's epistle to the Corinthians is filled with the wonder which empowers Christians to live the lives of joyful witnessing. Paul gets to be the bearer of powerful words of forgiveness and he marvels at that. It is a treasure in jars of clay, and it has totally changed his life. You really get the sense from this text that Paul loves to forgive people, he loves to convey the Gospel to folks. It gasses him up.

He suffers, it is true. But his suffering does not get him down. In fact he is able to laugh at it, and that in turn becomes another witness. He has hope which transcends that suffering. He sees the work of the last day in his words this day. He sees the power of the resurrection at work, despite his dying body, despite his suffering, he has his eyes fixed firmly on a heavenly beauty.

But that is not just a future hope. Paul sees all this in the restoration of the relationship he has with the people in Corinth right now. He is not only looking forward, in fact his forward gaze has far more to say about his current life. He believes what will happen, (Jesus will bring us together into his presence!) but that means he speaks today. And in that speaking he notices the same thing he believes in happening, no so much seen, but unseen, believed, lived by faith, not by sight. It is a foretaste of the feast to come. He knows there is a day when Jesus will gather all together, but he has been given to see that in the gathering of his friends together in forgiveness.

This sermon will demand an illustration. You really need to have a moment when you have seen Jesus work restoration in the life of someone. You will need to say that this is something which you love to see, which also empowers you for ministry.

Your goal will be to help them see the same things going on in their lives, so their words may be spoken with holy joy and zeal.

3. No need to play the blame game! or God called to them. (Genesis – That the hearer would believe that God has and is pursuing him/her and rescuing him/her from the clutches of Satan)

This sermon is for the congregation which is divided, which points the finger at one another. These people are blaming one another, hiding behind a self-justification. But do Adam and Eve really accomplish anything with their finger pointing? They are simply lost and alone when this story opens. Their self-justification doesn't change that at all.

Does it make them any less naked? Does it make them any less sinners? Hardly, this sermon, however, will need to focus the attention of the congregation on God.

God pursues the sinners, he is not really interested in the excuses, and he is much more interested in them. God does not need to call them, he does not need to ask where they are. He does not need to hear what they have done. He knows all this. But he wants the confession of Adam, he wants to reestablish the relationship with sin has broken.

Of course this sermon will need to bring verse 15 into the mix here. God has a plan for what do with Adam's sin before he comes into the Garden. He knows the cost. It is his own dear Son, Jesus. Of course God could have simply wiped out the creation and started anew. There is nothing he could not have done, but he did this. The only way to explain that is love. He loved this man cowering in fear behind the rhododendron. He loved his wife who was hiding in the azaleas. He loved them and sought them.

You might want to bring in the Gospel lesson, as Jesus tells the scribes who accuse him of being in league with the enemy that in fact he has come to tie up the enemy and plunder his goods, the people he has enslaved. Jesus has come to steal away the treasures of Satan. That would be you and me and everyone else we meet.

By his ongoing and beautiful grace, we get to be part of that mission. The real unity which we can find is not in establishing blame, but in the mission which Christ has and which he has shared with us. We get to be the ambassadors of his grace, the conveyors of his love. But here we are anticipating chapter 5 of II Corinthians.

4. God's Crazy Love (Gospel – that the hearer would stand on the ground that God has established in his love.)

We love to draw lines which put others outside the love of God. But Jesus draws a really crazy line in the sand for us today. The only people outside are those who just reject his love. The sinners, even the huge sinners, the folks that have made a complete train wreck of their lives, they are not on the wrong side of that line. We might like to put them there, but God does not.

That empowers us to live a little differently. The person some in the world would reject, we can love. God loves them. I can stand with him in that love, even when it makes me feel uncomfortable. God doesn't draw this line at the four walls of this building. God does not draw the line in behaviors that I find repellent. God does not draw the line at people who are like us.

God's line is simple – faith in Christ. Dying without that faith is bad. There is no forgiveness even for little sins without Christ.

The usual form of the Lord's Prayer we use says "forgive us trespasses" crossing the line.