

A Sermon for the Second Sunday after Pentecost 2015 (Proper 5B)
The Rev. Dr. Bill Doggett
St. James' Church. Mt. Airy MD

It is sorely tempting to ignore the famously difficult gospel lesson for today and focus entirely on the first reading from the book of Samuel, with its rather straightforward argument between God and the Israelites. I'm not going to give in to that temptation, but before we move on to Mark's gospel, I do want to call your attention to the first reading just for a moment.

We will be continuing to read from the saga of the kings of Israel for many weeks this summer, but to make any sense of what we will hear on these summer Sundays, today's reading is the essential text.

So please remember it. Remember how God is arguing with the Israelites, who have recently settled in the Promised Land after their long captivity in Egypt and forty years' wandering in the wilderness. They have been led by prophets, but now, seeing no obvious candidate to replace the aging Samuel when he dies, they want a king, and God tells them, "No you don't."

God has Samuel outline the reasons why they will be worse off with a king – that long list of woes that includes losing their children, their property and their freedom to enrich the king and his courtiers, but just like the Tin Man in *The Wizard of Oz* after being told the disadvantages of having a heart, they say, "But we still want one."

And why do the Israelites want a king? To lead them into battle so that they can be like other nations. Never mind that going to battle and being like other nations are exactly the things God doesn't want for God's people. And the consequences of ignoring that bit of advice from God will take up the rest of the historical narrative

in the Hebrew Scriptures, and, indeed, the rest of the lives of the many generations of Jews right up to the coming of Jesus, who, in a way, might be the “anti-king,” who will lead the people away from battle, and teach them how to be different from other nations.

Which brings us to today’s gospel lesson, in which Jesus is playing the role of “anti-king” to the hilt.

He’s been healing people and casting out demons and proclaiming the good news of the advance reign of God right and left, and the leaders of his religious community, who have a mutually beneficial but uneasy relationship with the leaders of the occupying Roman forces in Jerusalem, are understandably anxious about how Jesus may upset the balance of that relationship and cause the Romans to do away with the privileges of autonomy and authority the Jews have enjoyed in occupied Jerusalem.

First, the religious leaders try to discredit Jesus’ message, but they find that his teaching and policies not only stand up to Fact Check scrutiny, they are immensely popular. So next they try to do what has always been the norm in politics: since they can’t attack the message, they attack the man, attempting to smear his character, his faith, and his funding sources.

This attack worries Jesus’ family, who, seeing him doing things that seem crazy – challenging the Roman Empire, calling the most devout and respected members of his church hypocrites and worse – wonder whether Jesus might actually be crazy. And Jesus responds to these challenges by family and the authorities in an even crazier way: he calls into question the whole fabric of the social order that defines his community – who’s in, who’s out; who has authority and who is weak; even

how you behave in church. And since sanity is measured by your ability to follow social norms and respond to social cues, maybe Jesus actually is crazy.

But if so, he's crazy like a fox. Everything he does and says, while infuriating to the civil and religious authorities and baffling to his family, is consistent with his role of "anti-king." He teaches his followers by word and example how not to be like other nations who go to war with one another, and who unjustly take from the citizens to enrich the powerful.

Jesus envisions and enacts a community in which there is enough for everyone, where violence is not used to solve problems, where barriers to inclusion in the nurturing folds of community and family no longer exist, and where God's love is at the center of every human life.

At this point you may, if you were paying attention to today's gospel lesson, be saying to yourself, "wait a minute... isn't Jesus' teaching about the unforgiveability of blaspheming the Holy Spirit just as exclusionary and harsh as any of the teachings and practices he has been arguing against?" "And what the heck does it mean to blaspheme the Holy Spirit anyway?" "And why should that one sin be eternal or unforgiveable when other, truly heinous sins are not?"

Which are all very good questions. We don't talk a lot about blasphemy these days, but it's a simple word in origin. It means to speak ill of or vilify someone. We only use it in reference to God anymore, but in Jesus' day it was an ordinary word for what my teenaged sons would call 'dissing' someone.

And Jesus says that dissing the Holy Spirit is unforgiveable. Mark, the author of the gospel, helpfully adds that it was the religious leaders' calling Jesus' spirit unclean that merited this warning.

But it turns out that neither “unforgiveable” or “eternal” is a very good translation of the word Mark reports Jesus using. “Can never be set free” would be closer to the mark. And rereading the passage in that way clears up some of the mystery. Speaking ill of the Holy Spirit prevents you from being set free because it is the Holy Spirit that is the agent of liberation. You cannot be set free by the Spirit if you have no relationship with the Spirit. You cannot be set free if you do not embrace the liberating power of the Spirit.

And what does the Holy Spirit free us from, if our hearts are open to it?

Fear, first of all. Fear of death. Fear of being alone. Fear of those who are different from us. Fear of change. All those fears that keep us from connecting with one another, with our passions, with our most deeply held desires, and our most cherished gifts. Perfect love, scripture tells us, casts out all fear, and it is only through the Spirit of God that we know perfect love.

Which is all lovely sermon talk, but pretty abstract. Jesus, though, is always trying to show his friends and followers how to turn the abstractions of faith and love into the concrete reality of action, and indeed into the potentially concrete reality of a world truly transformed by love.

And so, in the middle of this political, cultural and social battle Jesus is having with his family, followers, and the leaders of his church, Jesus still makes love a reality. Jesus continues to heal. Jesus continues to feed. And Jesus continues to welcome strangers as friends, and friends as family.

In gesturing to the crowd around him and saying, “Here are my mother and my brothers,” Jesus has said that every one of us is a part of his family. And that changes things.

When I was serving at Christ Church on Capitol Hill, I related in a sermon that my nineteen-times-great-grandfather, Benjamin Doggett, was the Rector of Christ Church, Lancaster, Virginia starting in 1660. A member of the parish told me that she too was a descendent of Benjamin Doggett, and the knowledge that we shared a common ancestor changed our relationship. We would greet each other with “Hi Cuz!” and we became friends.

Jesus declares that each and every one of us is related in that way. Everyone here is part of your family, and a part of mine. And indeed, everyone in the world is related to you – a blood relative in Jesus. If we really believe that to be true, how will it change the way we live?