

## **“Giving Up on Hope is the Worst Sin of All”**

A Sermon Shared with St. Andrew’s United Church  
on June 10, 2018 at 10:30 a.m. (Third Sunday after Pentecost)

Scripture Readings: Psalm 138 (VU #860)

Mark 3:20-29

(by The Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

We continue our journey through the experiences of Jesus in his life – his interactions with ordinary citizens, with religious leaders, and with curious bystanders.

All of these incidents can be summarized by two observations. Jesus was deemed to be a danger and got himself into trouble with the authorities when he did something successfully, but those in charge felt that he had no authority to do it, or he got into trouble when he questioned the authority of others. Challenging others, or being challenged, is a common theme in the biblical witness.

Many of us feel discouraged and down trodden when we are challenged. And so the passage for today that speaks about the sin against the Holy Spirit as the only unforgiveable sin, I would suggest that is the sin of making no room for hope and encouragement of others, or even failing to leave space for one’s true self in life.

Depression and self-judgment happen when we sense we have nothing to offer. That is too common an experience at any age, and Jesus knew that not providing a sense of the value of self was the greatest sin of all.

Samira Khan has suggested there are two types of failures: A permanent failure, where you have failed at something miserably but you have no desire to change your status; or a temporary failure, where you have failed miserably, but you take charge of your life to make sure that the idea of failure does not become the permanent script of your life.

She says that whenever she fails the biggest fear that she has is what will society say? That is completely wrong, she points out, because people will say things even when you win or succeed. Then people will simply say that she had it all easy in life, or she was lucky, or privileged. People will talk about you for a few days, then get bored and move on to another person.

It doesn’t matter when you experience failure – what matters is how much you learnt from it and how quickly you bounce back and work on success.

Every day is a new day – no matter how bad the situation, you can always overcome it. Or so she believes.

Simple insight; challenging solution.

In the book *The Prayer of Jabez*, written by Bruce Wilkinson, St. Peter leads a person around, and they see a large white building with no windows. The person asked what is in there. St. Peter replied, “You do not want to know.” The person insisted, so St. Peter relented and took him in. Inside were thousands of beautifully wrapped gifts, and so the

curiosity of the individual was raised. "What are all of these?" he asked. St. Peter replied: "These are all of the blessings that people failed to ask for while on earth."

Wilkinson writes elsewhere in that same book that when we seek a blessing, "We're crying out for the wonderful, unlimited goodness that only God has the power to know about or give us."

We often have no idea how to ask for a blessing. What is worse, the sin against the Holy Spirit is to think that no blessing is available to us at all.

In his book "Focus Your Vision," Dewitt Jones, a former National Geographic photographer, suggests that what we need in life is focus. Too often we are so general in our perspective that we fail to be clear of both our gifts and our expectations. Focus is very important.

At the same time, we cannot be so focussed that we fail to be open to the spontaneous moments that arise in life. While focus is valuable and important, being open to the unexpected is equally significant.

A sin against the Holy Spirit is a rejection that spontaneous and impromptu moments may arise to capture our attention, and make us ready to face the future in new, unique, and energized ways.

A sin against the Holy Spirit means that we are not ready to ask the questions, or be ready to hear the answers.

The western world was rocked in the past week on hearing about two prominent figures of the culture dying by their own hands. Kate Spade, a well-known designer particularly known for her handbags, and Anthony Bourdain, celebrity chef who had an award winning show on CNN entitled Parts Unknown.

I never watched Bourdain's show, though I saw the advertisements for it often, and Kate Spade I did not know at all until the night before she died, when she was an answer to a clue on Jeopardy. But their deaths remind us that we are wrong if we feel that some people have no worries or concerns in life. As one commentator put it, "Happiness is not the end result of a sum of accomplishments. Every one of us has his or her own struggles that may, in fact, equal yours."

And each of these individuals who ended their lives had faced challenges and uncertainty in their careers, but they reached a pinnacle of success, thanks to the very ability of which Dewitt Jones writes and films: Focus. Yet their focus was such that they failed to accept the periphery support and insights that would have kept them on track for the future.

We can do harm to others if we judge their ability to handle such crises and worries, but we also are not faithful if we do not point out that Jesus reminds us that being able to see beyond the fears and worries and heartaches of life is part of what God calls us to do. Giving up is an option, but it is not an option that is life-affirming.

Former Moderator Peter Short recently spoke to a group of church leaders and made the following two observations: "People need a blessing in their lives, and they do not know

how to go about asking for it;” and the corollary of it was equally dramatic and insightful: “The church has a blessing to offer, and does not know how to go about sharing it.”

Failure can be not being open to the blessings and hope around us, and failure can be our own inability to offer a blessing and encouragement to others.

We are in charge of what spiritual practice we pursue, and it is not to be about us alone. If our spiritual practices nourish us in order to be more generous and caring as followers of Jesus, then they are life-giving practices, filled with hope. In simple terms, we are not created just to look after ourselves.

The United Church began 93 years ago by people who believed that the community of faith had a blessing to share, and it was valuable and important to all.

Today you people are offering thanks for the ministry we have conducted the last four years. Some throw around a term that Catherine and I find somewhat over-stated – the “Dream Team.” Of course Catherine may not know that is a reference to the first modern Dream Team, the 1992 American Olympic Team in basketball, which featured future Hall of Fame players such as Michael Jordan, Patrick Ewing, Larry Bird, and Magic Johnson.

But if there is any “dream” to our “team” it is this: We came here with Catherine in the prime of her career, and I a somewhat tired old man, but together we both held onto the belief that the church still had a blessing to share, and it was incumbent upon all of us to share that blessing with others and with one another. We as individuals had faced our own disappointment and challenges within the church and beyond in life. That was a reality that we knew of each other, but not a focus of what we shared and taught and lived. Instead, we held firm to the commitment that hope abounds, the spirit is alive, and that God’s goodness is present for us all. We never wavered in our commitment to accept and be moved by the Spirit, and we still are that way today.

Giving up hope is the worst sin of all, and high-profile cases have shown it may be a sin against ourselves as much as against society or others.

Catherine and I have not given up hope – that is not the reason for the end of our working partnership at this time, and we desire that you, too, do not give up hope as you seek to follow in the ways of Christ as a people of God now and into the future.