My Brothers and Sisters in Christ, let us pray. Lord God of our Hearts, Minds, Spirits, and Souls, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

Our Gospel reading raises the issue of “the sin against the Holy Spirit.” This phrase is very troublesome and has vexed both preachers and the rest of us probably since it was recorded. The recording of this phrase implies an unforgivable sin.

“Whomever speaks against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven, guilty of an eternal sin”. It sounds like something straight out of Dante’s inferno, doesn’t it? Do we believe in our hearts that God will not ever forgive? (take all answers)

Let’s think about this a little bit. Who among us never makes a mistake? Who among us has done something that has hurt someone? Who among us has caused others to do things against their neighbor, either knowingly or unknowingly? These are the things of everyday life and the reason that we come here to church, to hear God’s message of hope and grace and forgive ourselves to try again. We’ve talked about this. You are forgiven by grace.

But that’s not what this text says; it implies that God will not forgive in this one instance. What does that mean, to blaspheme the Holy Spirit?

It’s good that we’re talking about the Holy Spirit, because that’s what Pentecost is all about. We have spent some time these last few weeks with the most pervasive but forgotten part of our Trinity, haven’t we? Where do we hear about the Spirit in the Bible?

The Spirit is something that is at the dawn of creation. The Spirit hovered over the waters. It’s the wind, the ruach, that accompanies the Israelites through the wilderness after the Exodus from Egypt. It’s that which is breathed out of the post-resurrection Jesus onto the disciples. It’s that which allows all the peoples of the world to understand one another on Pentecost. It’s the comforter, the paraclete, that which is left behind by Jesus to remind us of all that was said during his ministry here. It is the very presence of God. So back to our question: what does this mean?

I don’t think it means that I cannot, in the depths of despair and that I can’t find God and I’m not afraid to say so, that I’m committing eternal sin. I don’t think it means that in the depths of grief, sadness, and bereft of hope and that I doubt the existence of anything good for hours, days, weeks, maybe even months at a time that God is hearing me but damning me to hell.

We can take this metaphorically rather than literally. No matter what we say or do, we cannot defeat nor deny God’s power in and over our lives to find hope and meaning and future and providence and love. Regardless of what WE do, God continues to search us out and drive our lives toward purpose, wholeness, and meaning, and that may be despite us doing everything against those very words and objectives. God just doesn’t work that way, being dictated to by us in terms of what God does in the world and in our lives. God will decide these things, not our will be done, right ? Amen? (wait for response)

Okay.

And I think we do try and drive God away from us by behaving in certain ways. We pursue the fearful rather than the hopeful paths sometimes, because we know how the past, however bad it was, turns out. Remember the old saying, “Better the devil you know…” you finish that. The next part is not the God that you don’t, right? We testify to the darkness because we can control it better.

This is really hard at the beginning and end of our lives. The darkest paths we pursue are fearful: the fear of failure, the fear of being alone, the fear of losing control. These are the big three. Turning toward God opens possibilities, but unknown ones that may cost us in time, money, friends, family. Our text says that—“here are my mother and brothers”. It’s risky to trust others with our souls. We can—and will—get hurt. But we also can and will experience the promises of God—mercy, justice, compassion, kindness, too. But that requires a change of heart.

The heart where the Holy Spirit lives. The soul of our being. Don’t turn away from the soul of who you are—you are too precious and beloved. How do I know that? I’ve lived in church communities which have supported me through times when I thought I could not manage. When I turned inward and could not find a way out. Love your neighbor as yourself, Jesus says, so how can I love my neighbor if I can’t accept my own flaws too? It’s good to live in community where you’re accepted for who you are, as you are, because the gifts you have are valued and treasured. Relational covenant, we’ve talked about this—the basis of our faith and the core of God’s dealings with God’s people—are what keep us from falling away and falling apart. I hope you can open up and see how vital this is to understanding God, sin, and forgiveness.

I’ll leave you with these final thoughts.

Look, I don’t think any of us are Job, stripped of everything around us and cut off and still faithful. That’s a lot to ask without a period of lament and questioning.

But God is experienced two ways: inside ourselves and outside with others who know God. It’s too hard to figure out all the faith questions all at once or on our own. It requires ties of a family—described here as mothers, brothers, sisters who we can turn to, but in our modern world this goes waaaaay beyond blood relations. We rely on having earth mothers and wise fathers and patient friends who will hold our hand and sit with us. We need patience when we question ourselves to the point of despair. Lest we turn inward, and fall away.

The question for us is what kind of church do we offer to one another, relational or transactional? And will we put in the effort needed to accept people how they are to truly see their gifts, rather than what they can do for us?

We need to be reminded that there is God talking to us, beside us, for us, and with us. And that is Jesus’ message: “don’t give up on yourself, because I will never forsake you, either.” Thanks be to God, Amen.