

Sermon for June 25, 2017 – “A House Divided”

12th Sunday in OT, Year A – Text: Mark 3:19b-35

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‘A house divided against itself cannot stand.’ “I believe this Government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved...I do not expect the house to fall...But I do expect it will cease to be divided.” Abraham Lincoln said that on June 16th, 1858. He knew what he was talking about. Not only in foreseeing the end of slavery in the United States, but in recognizing that even a mighty house can be brought down. Of course, he had a good source for this pearl of wisdom, the words of Jesus from this morning’s sermon text. Abe Lincoln was an excellent student of Scripture, and he knew how to turn a phrase. His “House Divided” speech helped propel him to the presidency. But as an astute Bible student, Lincoln also knew that Jesus wasn’t talking politics when He made that statement. Lincoln used Jesus’ phrase for illustration purposes only. Jesus had a very different “divided house” in mind. The truth is our text suggests several houses. Each of them would be in trouble if divided, but what Jesus is **really** talking about may surprise you. So then, which house is Jesus talking about? Which house cannot stand?

The first house in our text is Jesus’ own family. It begins: **“Then he went home; and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. “Then his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, “He has gone out of his mind.”** Strange, isn’t it, to picture Jesus’ family thinking He was insane? The people who knew Him best. His mother Mary who’d been told by the angel to expect unusual things from her Son, Jesus’ brothers, whom He’d grown up with. You’d hope that they of all people would’ve understood His mission and been on board with it. But instead, they divide against Him. They might’ve just wanted to protect Him from public humiliation; you know, save the family name and all. A house divided like that cannot stand. Jesus makes that clear at the conclusion of our text. **“Then His mother and His brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to Him and called Him. A crowd was sitting around Him...“And they said to Him, ‘Your mother and Your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for You.’ And he replied, ‘Who are My mother and My brothers?’ And looking at those who sat around Him, He said, ‘Here are My mother and My brothers! “Whoever does the will of God is My brother and sister and mother.’** If Jesus’ own family was going to divide against Him, He’d replace them with a new one. No one can be part of His family by virtue of a fortuitous birth or prestigious pedigree. Whoever does the will of God belongs to Jesus’ house. This is **all** the work of God. We cannot become part of Jesus’ family by our own thinking, or by our own choosing. No one can make up his or her mind to “believe in Jesus” apart from the power of the Holy Spirit. We didn’t become a Christian by making a decision for Christ. Jesus flat out states in John’s gospel, **“You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last”**. Paul writes in the familiar verses of Ephesians, **“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith..“And this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God...“Not by works, so that no one can boast. “For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.** We, each of us, are all members of Jesus’ family by the faith the Holy Spirit worked in our hearts. Our house is built on “Christ Jesus Himself as the chief cornerstone.” That’s a foundation that’s built to last forever! That’s a house that cannot be divided by the devil! Yet, this is still not the “divided house” that Jesus is talking about.

Another possible “divided house” is suggested by Jesus’ enemies. One that’s actually impossible to divide. We read...**“And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, ‘He has Beelzebul – and by the ruler of the demons He casts out demons.’** Now, this is the worst possible blasphemy to suggest that the Son of God is possessed by Satan and that His work is satanic! But think about it...If Jesus **was** in cahoots with Satan (Spoiler alert: He’s not!), then He’d be separated from the Father and the Spirit. And, of course, we know that the Trinity is indivisible. Notice how Jesus responds...**“Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter...“But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin”**. Jesus speaks of an “unforgivable sin” because the teachers of the law accused Him of ties to Satan, while many others, even some of His enemies, concluded just the opposite, that He must be from God since He drove out evil spirits. Jesus accuses them of committing the “unforgivable sin” – why? Because they spoke against the work of the Spirit who was trying to convince them that He really was the Messiah. Going back to John’s gospel, Jesus told His enemies...**“Even though you do not believe me, believe the miracles...“So that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father”**. If a person rejects God’s Spirit once it’s been made it clear to that person that Jesus is the Savior, then that person has committed the “unforgivable sin”. The writer of Hebrews puts it this way...**“If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth – no sacrifice for sins is left...“Only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God”**. So, if the Son was divided against the Father and the Spirit, if – in fact – His work was satanic, then there’d be no hope of forgiveness and salvation. In fact, if God was divided against Himself the entire universe would dissolve!

But this isn’t the “divided house” Jesus is talking about either. No, the “divided house” is – drumroll please! – Satan’s. In his parable, Jesus asks: **“How can Satan cast out Satan? “If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. “And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. “And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come”**. Sounds good, right? Yeah, but there’s one problem. Jesus is telling us that Satan’s house is **not** divided. Essentially, Jesus is telling the scribes that their accusation is absurd. Satan would **never** drive out his own demons. He wouldn’t divide against himself. Satan’s house isn’t divided, it’s strong. It’s not going to collapse under its own weight or self-destruct. As much as God loves you, that’s how much Satan hates you and is hell-bent on your soul’s destruction. He and his demons are like an underground terrorist network, more sinister, more subtle and more successful than al-Qaida or ISIS will ever be. They work overtime to try to “tie you up” so that they can “rob your house” of faith in Christ. One of Satan’s favorite tactics is to make us lazy about our faith. Do you think he wants us to have a strong resilient faith? Of course not, quite the contrary! He loves it when we lose focus, when we worry, or become fearful or anxious, when we become complacent, when we resist spiritual growth.

In writing to a junior devil, the demonic title character of C.S. Lewis’ “The Screwtape Letters” says this about the nature of temptation: “Whatever their bodies do affects their souls. “It is funny how mortals always picture us as putting things into their minds...“In reality our best work is done by keeping things out...” Satan hopes to keep what’s really important out of our minds. He hopes to rearrange our priorities. Why? Because once Satan separates you and your house from God he can divide and conquer your faith and your family.

Another ploy of the devil is to lie, trying to convince people that they’re “crazy” for believing in something, or for having the conviction to live out their beliefs. He’d have us believe that we don’t know enough about the Bible to study it, that prayer doesn’t really work, or that God has stopped listening. That going to church is a waste of time.

But we should remember, as Lewis reminds his readers in his preface to “The Screwtape Letters”, “that the devil is a liar.” **Lies – more than anything – are central to Satan’s strategy.** They break down the soul. Slowly...Deliberately. You see, lies are like seeds planted. Planted not merely intended to grow into doubt and unbelief, but to develop into behaviors that tie us up in the cords of guilt, remorse and shame. Thus bound, Satan can then “rob our houses” of faith in Christ not only in his ability to forgive our sin, but in the Spirit’s power to free us from destructive patterns of behavior.

The term “Satan” is a Hebrew word meaning “to oppose, or obstruct.” It’s often translated as “the Accuser,” or “the Adversary” in the Bible. The devil uses division to break up families...setting husbands and wives against each other, setting children against their parents. The same is true in churches; where the devil has lots of fun setting members against each other, causing church splits like the one in Corinth. The enemy doesn’t want people to be in agreement. The enemy wants us to bicker over minor things. The enemy doesn’t want people to believe that forgiveness is possible, that things like love and grace exist. The enemy doesn’t want us to share our faith in Christ, he wants us to be quiet and will say and do anything to keep us that way. The devil will do anything to divide us or tie us up, even using those closest to us to test us. But we must, as Paul tells us, stand firm.

And here’s the thing, we must be united in the message. We must be of one heart and mind in sharing the love of Christ with the world. The enemy wants to divide our house. He wants to get us fighting and squabbling over things that waste our time and energy, that erode our faith and trust in God’s love and forgiveness. Anything to distract us, to get us off target. We cannot allow this to happen.

In days of a “house divided” within mainline Protestant Christianity Jesus is offering a word of caution. If the strong man, that is, our faith, is “tied up” in things like senseless debate, red tape, endless discussion, non-productive planning, power plays, institutional preservation, and political maneuvering; if **any** of these things happen and cause us to lose our focus then not only the devil but virtually **any** “thief” can sneak in and plunder the house. In other words, all kinds of silly and simplistic alternatives to serious faith can attract people while organized religion isn’t paying attention. The Church is about the spreading of the gospel, to know Christ, and to make Christ known. And, if we are diligent, if we indeed stand firm, we can and will have victory in Christ. We’ll have victory in our families, in our homes, in our churches, in our world.

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.