

Mark 3:20-35 + A House Divided Christ United¹

Cross of Christ Ev. Lutheran Church – Liverpool, NY + 3rd Sunday after Pentecost + 10 June 2018

Division. Discord. Opposition. Hostility. Hatred. Polarized people taking sides, forming camps, forming tribes with the gap between them growing wider and wider. Common ground disappears as people lob angry, hurtful, hateful words at each other like artillery shells. Words and images whizz by through the media like bullets on a battlefield. A nation, a people torn apart as tribes form between different people living in different parts of the country, even between families and friends and neighbors. How long before a hate-filled war of words becomes something more violent?

Sounds awfully familiar, doesn't it? You might even think of our present situation here in 21st century America. Yet that was the situation in America when a tall, gangly candidate for the U.S. Senate stood up to speak in the Illinois State Capitol in 1858. Decades of debate and division and failed attempts at compromise over the subject of slavery were tearing the nation apart. People in different parts of the country were forming into camps and parties or "tribes," as they'd be called today, becoming more and more polarized, more and more opposed, and the breach grew ever wider. For the time being, it was a hate-filled war of words and legislation.

The tall, gangly candidate had recently accepted the Republican nomination for the Senate. So on that June day in 1858, Abraham Lincoln stood up to launch what would prove to be an unsuccessful campaign. As he looked out at a nation tearing itself apart over the subject of slavery, he called to mind something Jesus had said in a very different context. **"A house divided against itself, cannot stand."** Lincoln recognized that America as it was could not continue. He went on, **"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. It will become all one thing or all the other."**² What Lincoln spoke of was the reality that the divided house of this nation would be united by force someday, which it was through a terrible civil war three years later.

...But was that what Jesus meant when he spoke those now famous words 2,000 years ago? The gospel writer Mark gives us the original context of that famous phrase. We do find Jesus speaking about two very hostile sides. Jesus does speak of a great division, a great gap that has lasted centuries.

Yet he speaks not so much about two fighting camps or tribes or parties of people, but the great division between God and the devil, between those who follow Christ and those who, knowingly or not, follow Satan. Jesus speaks of the discord sown by the devil centuries ago between God and his holy humanity—a rift that has only grown deeper and wider and more polarized between God and people over the centuries, a divide that shows itself time and again as countless rifts splinter fallen humanity.

Now it was early in Jesus' ministry. He had traveled throughout the region of Galilee, driving out unclean, demonic spirits and healing people of every disease. He preached with a divine authority that no rabbi ever had. Some thought Jesus to be the promised Messiah. Others wanted to make him king. Huge crowds instantly sprung up wherever Jesus traveled, while some of the religious leaders began gathering to oppose him. With all that swirling around, Jesus returned to Capernaum, where another huge crowd gathered.

Most of the time we think of those great crowds that gathered around Jesus as a sign of his authority, a confirmation that he was Savior of the world. Yet those crowds could make life difficult for Jesus. Mark tells us that the crowd pressed so heavily on Jesus, demanding of his time, energy, and attention, that **"he and his disciples were not even able to eat."**

Of course, this got Jesus' family concerned. They were worried about Jesus. They were so worried that he wasn't taking care of himself that they thought, **"He is out of his mind."** They weren't thinking that Jesus was the long-promised Messiah. They weren't concerned about him completing his mission. No, they came to Capernaum ready to take Jesus home, even by force, to save him from himself. In a sense, Jesus' physical house was divided with him on one side and his family on the other—a family that failed to recognize why Jesus was there and what he had come to accomplish.

...But it wasn't just his family. Satan was trying to divide Jesus' physical house, but he was also trying to divide Jesus' spiritual house too—the house of God's people, his church. Mark tells us, **"And the teachers of the law**

¹ Some of the thoughts in this sermon were received with thanks from Pr. Phil Arnold.

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lincoln%27s_House_Divided_Speech

who came down from Jerusalem said, 'He is possessed by Beelzebul! By the prince of demons he is driving our demons.'"

These were the religious experts of the day. They knew their Old Testament forward, backward, and inside out. If anyone should've recognized Jesus for who he was and what he had come to do, it should've been the teachers of the law. They couldn't deny his miracles. They couldn't deny his very real power. They couldn't deny he was driving out demons, but they were so opposed to Jesus that they tried to discredit him. They claimed that his power came not from God, but from "**Beelzebul**"—a name for Satan that means "Lord of Dung." They claimed that Jesus was possessed by an unclean, demonic spirit that gave him power to drive out other demons.

So how did Jesus react? We would expect anger, but Jesus doesn't do what we expect. No, Jesus was concerned for their souls, even for the souls of his enemies. Jesus wanted his enemies to see how foolish their accusations really were. "**How can Satan drive out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand. And if Satan opposes himself and is divided, he cannot stand; his end has come.**" Civil war does not strengthen a nation. It can destroy it. Strife in a family between parents and children, husband and wife, brother and sister does not strengthen a family, but can destroy it. How foolish to think Satan would fight himself!

Jesus wanted his opponents to realize that there are two sides completely opposed to each other—the side of Satan and the side of Jesus. If they were not with Jesus, they were against him. Satan was doing everything he could to divide and destroy Jesus' house—his family and his church.

Now you could look at Jesus' family that thought he was out of his mind and think, "How foolish!" You could look at those scribes and think, "How blind!" You might even be tempted to think that you'd never make the same mistakes.

...Or could we? Is it possible that Satan could divide the house of this congregation? Could Satan drive a wedge between you and another believer here? Could Satan take a comment or a decision or a proposal and use that to start a clique or camp or tribe or opposing sides here and there? Could Satan twist your view of your fellow members as "out of their mind" enemies?

Or could Satan divide the house of your family? Parent against child, brother against sister, husband against wife—each with a competing idea of the way things should be, while viewing the other not as a beloved child of God, but as an "out of their mind" enemy?

Or could Satan divide your heart? God tells you in his Word that he wants you to do this or that, but you wonder, "Jesus, do you really expect me to do that? It's not easy or pleasant. It's even painful! You can't really expect me to do that. If you did, you'd be out of your mind."

How similar we are to Jesus' foolish family and those blind teachers of the law! Left on our own, the house of God would divide and crumble into dust. Yet into our division and discord and hostility steps Jesus, and Jesus unites this house divided. He tells the teachers of the Law, "**No one can enter a strong man's house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man. Then he can rob his house.**"

Now that brief parable might make you scratch your head. What is Jesus saying? The strong man in the parable is the devil, and the One who ties him up and robs him is Jesus. The possessions of that strong man? That's us.

By nature, we enter this world hostile to God and his Word. We want to make ourselves god. So we side with Satan just like Adam and Eve did so long ago when they bought into Satan's lies, but what does Jesus do?

Jesus had to overcome the strong man. Jesus had to prove himself stronger and he did so by becoming weak. Jesus proved that he was stronger than Satan by being born of a virgin named Mary. Jesus bound the strong man by living a perfect life under God's law—refusing to give in to Satan's lies and temptation and keeping God's holy commands perfectly in every way. Jesus overcame the strong man by allowing himself to suffer betrayal and violence and injustice and ridicule. Jesus allowed himself to be lifted up on a cross, enduring God's holy wrath that we deserve for all those times when we've divided God's house. Finally, to prove that he is the stronger man, Jesus rose from the dead. He walked away from his tomb proving that Satan has been robbed and his house empty. You and I are no longer slaves to Satan, but members of God's family, united by Christ to live new lives devoted to him.

When Jesus' family arrived to bring him home, Jesus responded to those who summoned him, "**Who are my mother and my brothers? Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, 'Here are my**

mother and my brothers! Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother.” Notice what Jesus is saying here. ***“Whoever...”***

Whoever hears God's Word and does his will, you are Christ's mother as if he only had one and that one is you. Whoever devotes himself to hearing God's Word and makes it the basis for his life, you are Jesus' brother as if he only had one and that one is you. Whoever devotes herself to the study of God's Word and shares it with others, you are Christ's sister as if he only had one and that one is you. Jesus loves you and has made you his mother or brother or sister as part of his united house, his united family.

As in Lincoln's time, we live in a time of division and discord, hostility and hatred. People all around us are taking sides, forming tribes, and attacking each other with words and images. Knowing how history repeats itself, I pray that this hate-filled war of words does not become something more.

Yet amid all this division and discord, we have a Savior who has united us and continues to unite us with others. Here in his spiritual house, Christ unites people of all different shapes, sizes, colors, cultures, and backgrounds. By his perfect life and innocent death, Jesus has overcome that strong man Satan, bound him, and robbed that house empty bringing you and me into his house. We are Jesus' family—his mothers, his brothers, and his sisters. We are not a house divided, but a house united through faith in Jesus who crushed the serpent's head and with whom we reign now and forever. My dear family in Christ, we were a house divided, but in Christ, we are united. Amen.