

What to Do When the House is Divided

Mark 3:20-35
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Let's face it, preaching each Sunday from one of the assigned lectionary scripture passages can be a harsh taskmaster! Case in point, today's Gospel reading from Mark 3. Within these 15 verses we are confronted with issues like:

- Family interventions
- Demonic exorcisms
- Satan
- The consequences of being divided
- The 'unpardonable sin'
- A new definition of what it means to be a 'family'

When this scripture passage comes up in the lectionary every three years, I cringe. Thankfully, three years ago I was on sabbatical in Ireland and Scotland and didn't have to deal with this passage. But here we go.

Chances are you are familiar with the phrase, **"If a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand"** (Mk 3:25). Most folks think the author of this famous phrase was Abraham Lincoln, because he used it so effectively in 1856 during his Illinois senatorial debate with Stephen Douglas. Lincoln rightly recognized the impossibility of the United States enduring the status of being half slave and half free. The resulting Civil War almost bore witness to the falling of a nation that was so severely divided against itself.

Our Presbyterian denomination at the time of the Civil War, however, did indeed fulfill this prediction of how a house divided against itself will not stand. Many Presbyterian theologians and pastors in the South defended and justified both slavery and secession from the Union by using scripture. After all, in the Old Testament, Abraham was a slaveholder and the Laws of Moses did not abolish slavery but instead regulated it. In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul admonished Christian slaves to obey their masters and be content with their lot in life – to simply be the best slave that you can be. It was the division over this issue of slavery that was the straw that broke the camel's back in our denomination. Presbyterians split into Northern and Southern branches. We remained separate denominations for over 120 years, only reuniting in 1983. So, when we reflect upon how Christian churches in this country are divided over any number of issues today, we need only look at our own history to notice that divisions have led to a divided house that falls time and time again.

The prevailing winds today, unfortunately, indicate that the United Methodist Church denomination may indeed still split over the issue of sexual identity and the ordination of open LGBTQ persons of faith, called by God to serve. And, of course, many Presbyterian congregations in the PCUSA did indeed leave our denomination when we settled the matter in the affirmative seven years ago. Kirk of the Hills church

here in Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery left even before a final decision was made. The good news is that over the past several years the Presbyterian Church (USA) is not nearly the house divided it was before those departures, especially since several additional congregations left after allowing the marriage of LGBTQ persons three years ago. We've learned that when one part of the family simply cannot continue to be and live in relationship with the rest, then separation – even if not the will of God – is one solution.

Like issues before it, including slavery, the ordination of women, whether divorced clergy should be defrocked, the allowing of interracial marriage, and a woman's right to reproductive choice (which, by the way, is the official position of our denomination), some people continue to cherry-pick selected Bible verses to vehemently defend historical and traditional positions and practices which folks like us consider to be steeped in prejudice, injustice, ignorance, and fear. It's unconscionable and downright sinful for anyone to use scripture to uphold the supposed superiority and privilege of any group of people over any other. And it still happens, a lot.

But one of the questions we are called to wrestle with is this: Are there *legitimate* issues that divide a house to such a point that division becomes the only option? If, for instance, that house is a family facing the horror of domestic violence and abuse then that, in my opinion, is indeed a legitimate cause for separation, for that house to fall. Yet, Jesus' point remains valid. **Any entity truly divided against itself can reach the point where it cannot stand, whether it be a household, the church, or even a country. This scripture passage hopes the house, however that is defined, never reaches that point of division. That is why, through God's Spirit, we continue to work toward unity.**

In the context of Jesus' statement about how divided houses cannot stand comes another issue that I want to briefly address, one that's almost never dealt with in our denomination. As the Church Lady would say, "Can you say "Satan?" Our biblical story reports that the scribes were trying to destroy Jesus' authority with the crowds by claiming that his power to cast out demons was coming from Satan himself, not God. I'll have to wait for some other occasion to fully address this issue referred to as **blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, called the 'unpardonable sin.'** But as I've heard it explained, **if you've ever worried that you may have committed the unpardonable sin, then you haven't.** Jesus claimed the scribes' charge was preposterous because that would mean the prince of demons was casting out other demons – and that would lead to a divided house that could not stand.

How do we approach this issue of satanic power, of evil, in our postmodern, progressive age? For that I want to turn to some thoughts by the Rev. Gibson "Nibs" Stroupe, a human rights author and pastor of the diverse Oakhurst Presbyterian Church in Decatur, Georgia, outside of Atlanta. He writes:

Satan does not necessarily mean a personality with horns and a red tail, but it does name a demonic power that is actively engaged against the compassionate and reconciling love of God.

This is the reality that Jesus names here, and whether we believe in a person named "Satan" is not as important as hearing about our captivity to the powers of evil signified by "Satan," powers that continue to seek our allegiance.

Satan and Beelzebul...name the forces and configurations of power that capture us and cause us to hurt ourselves, hurt others, and hurt God.

Stroupe then rightly lists some of these **destructive powers, such as: racism, patriarchy, materialism, and militarism**. These powers of darkness still have a strong hold here in this country, do they not? In reference to Satan, Jesus tells a parable in which the “strong man” must first be bound up before he can be dealt with. The same is true with all the destructive powers we face today. **An important part of my ministry here in Tulsa is indeed focused on addressing the racism that still exists, including the unconscious bias that a majority of those of us who are white still harbor toward persons of color. We all have our own work to do in this regard.**

Mixed up with all this is Jesus' family who thinks he's gone out of his mind, or at least off the deep end. So, in an act we would now call a family intervention, they seek to remove Jesus from the crowds he is teaching. Jesus' response seems harsh and even offensive, but it is really just a teaching about expanding our circle of inclusiveness and where we place our highest loyalties. **Jesus re-defines ‘family’ by expanding it beyond simply blood relatives to include all those who “do the will of God” (Mk 3:35) as his brother and sister and mother. In other words, our loyalty to God, and following the ways and teachings of Jesus, takes precedence over all other loyalties, including those we’ve long held sacred.** Jesus refuses to allow cultural or even familial expectations to thwart his mission. We are asked to do the same.

Stroupe adds a personal illustration for which many of us can find points of connection. He says that even though he grew up with white supremacy as culturally, and to an extent religiously acceptable – even within his own family – he came to understand that racism was not God's will. He began to be in internal conflict with the beliefs of his family and community, who he loved deeply. **How many of us here today haven't gone through some of the same struggle in dealing with, and sometimes rejecting, some of the things that we were taught and were ingrained in us as children by family, by the church, and by the culture in which we grew up?**

Many of us, then, might now be able to appreciate why **Jesus called the configuration of destructive and oppressive forces “Satan,”** and can understand why Jesus, though not anti-family, indicated that his loving family might sometimes be part of the problem. **That's why so many, especially those who have experienced rejection to some extent by their biological family, rely so deeply on their chosen family.**

Therefore, with what most likely is an overriding sentiment of every person here this morning, we are blessed to be able to call College Hill our family! And we should be deeply grateful that while by being able to acknowledge our differences, we are not a house divided. Therefore, by the grace of God, we shall not fall!

Oh, and by the way, **the answer of what to do when the house is divided is to simply continue to love God, love your neighbor, and love yourself. And while we're at it, let's not pour any more fuel on the fires of polarization and division we face on a daily basis.**

Amen.