

# A Dividing House?

## Fault Lines, Family, and Mission

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

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You gotta love the themes presented in this passage from the third chapter of the Gospel of Mark. I could do an entire sermon series on:

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

So, where to begin? June being Pride Month, a good choice is exploring the understandings of what it means to be a "family", extending that beyond biological family to include your and my chosen family. However, even this topic often leads to division, based on differences in understanding and acceptance, and how some define "family values".

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. Speaking of divided houses falling, our own Presbyterian denomination at the time of the Civil War did indeed fulfill this predicted conclusion because it became so divided against itself. It was division over this issue of slavery that was the fault line that led to an earthquake in our denomination.

**Historically, and to this day, fault lines continue to shift and create havoc within organized religion.** For instance, the obvious issue of LGBTQ+ rights and acceptance – in both church and society – continues to be a fault line leading to more and more earthquakes, like in the recent split in the United Methodist Church. We Presbyterians, after finally reuniting our Northern and Southern branches in 1983, came close to dividing again over that same issue of sexual identity and the ordination of LGBTQ+ persons of faith, who discerned they were called by God to serve in the church, whether as a pastor, elder, or deacon. And later, when our denomination allowed gay and lesbian and non-binary couples to marry, and Presbyterian pastors to officiate, many congregations felt an earthquake that did indeed lead them to leave and join one of the smaller, more conservative Presbyterian offshoot denominations.

The good news is that over the past several years, nearly a decade now, the Presbyterian Church (USA) is not nearly the divided house it was before those

departures. While some still believe we would be stronger if we could have stayed together, we've learned that **when one part of the family simply cannot continue to be in a right relationship with the rest, then separation – whether the will of God or not – is a common solution, and perhaps the most-healthy one for all concerned.**

One of the questions we are called to wrestle with, then, is this: Are there *legitimate* issues that divide a family home, or nation for that matter, to such a point that division becomes the only viable option? If, for instance, that house is a family facing the horror of domestic violence and abuse, then that, in the opinion of most pastors today, is indeed a legitimate cause for separation and for that house, as it currently stands, 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 nation.** For the first time in our lifetime, it truly feels like our own internal divisions are so deep that democracy now appears fragile and at risk. Hard to believe that a deepening fault line is reaching a point when some are even calling for a new civil war of some kind. Our nation, sadly, seems headed in at least two very different directions on so many issues. And there are those attempting to force the fault lines into an earthquake. Each side, of course thinks they are in the right, and the other in the wrong. And neither side is actually conversing with the other concerning what they really need and are searching for. Instead, it's all about winning a debate rather than having a dialogue. It's about divide, conquer, and rule. Trying to solve the problem at hand is hardly even attempted.

**Our scripture passage, however, hopes that any house, regardless of how that is defined, never reaches that earthquake point of division. That is why, through God's Spirit, we are called, to the best of our ability, to continue to work toward some sense of unity, even if fragile.** "What unites us," they say, "is greater than what divides us." While that may be true, a good percentage of people, perhaps ourselves, are more focused on what divides than on what unites. In fact, thanks in no part to cable news, it's become an obsession. **We seek confirmation bias for what we already believe.**

While it's obvious that political differences are the deepest wedge adding to our nation's division, religion isn't far behind. Combine the two in a certain way and you have a seriously untenable situation. That **doesn't mean that our faith shouldn't inform our politics, for it clearly does** – both for those on the right and on the left. But there is a movement gaining strength that's a fault line in and of itself. And it does indeed have the potential to cause an earthquake of division. It's called **Christian Nationalism**. I've mentioned it a few times in sermons and we've looked at it in our Adult Church School class, but never explored it in depth. And I will wait again to do that until a later date. I did want to share a statement now, however, just released by the Westar Institute, that's the Jesus Seminar folks with the likes of Dr. John Dominic Crossan, and before their passings, Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong, and Marcus Borg. They write:

**The gathered community voiced unanimous agreement that Christian Nationalism, in its claims that the United States is a "Christian nation," is not only profoundly mistaken, but willfully so. It poses profound dangers both to genuine Christian practices of hospitality and compassion and to the political integrity of the United States.**

**In contrast to this exclusionary vision, we embrace the best traditions of equality that have consistently urged the recognition of human rights across all borders of race, gender, religion, and nationality.**

Clearly, in this area of religion and politics we have a house divided. We'll be hearing more and more about all this as we approach our national elections on November 5.

Now, in our scripture passage, 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, including oppression, supremacy, injustice, all the isms (like materialism, militarism, racism, and the like). To make matters worse, 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 blood relatives to include all those who "do the will of God" (Mk 3:35).** Jesus refuses to allow cultural or even familial expectations to thwart his mission. We are asked to do the same. We can understand, then, why Jesus, though obviously not anti-family, indicated that **his loving family might sometimes be part of the problem of holding him back and narrowing his calling to ministry and mission. Is there anyone holding you back?** That's why so many, especially those who have experienced rejection by their biological family to some extent, rely so deeply on what is called their "**chosen family**". Again, that is one of the things being celebrated during this Pride Month of June. **I would suspect it's appropriate to say that for each of us that College Hill is part of our own chosen family.** And remember that Jesus defines family as those who participate in God's mission of healing, hope, and restoration. That's meant to include each of us, thus taking a lot of courage.

**One answer, then, of what to do when the house is divided, to put it most simply, is to remember that you and I will never look into the eyes of someone God does not love – that includes ourselves when we look in the mirror.** For when Jesus commanded us to love our neighbor, he knew our neighbors would act, look, believe, and love differently than you and I. That's kind of the whole point.

**Let us approach division, therefore, with a bit more of God's grace, seeking unity in the midst of our diversity, yet staying true to our own values and convictions.** Or, as Episcopal Bishop Michael Curry states, "To love...does not mean we have to agree. But maybe **agreeing to love is the greatest agreement.** And [it's] the only one that ultimately matters, because it makes a future possible.

Amen.

Resources: *Feasting on the Word*