Diocese of New Jersey On-Line Sermon

2 Pentecost – Proper 5 – Year B – June 6, 2021

1 Samuel 8:4-11, 16-20; 2 Corinthians 4:13 – 5:1; Ps.138; Mark 3:20 – 35

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*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.* (Mark 3:24 – 25).

On June 16, 1858, 163 years ago, Abraham Lincoln gave a speech to 1,000 Republican delegates meeting in Springfield, Illinois when he was seeking their nomination to run for the United States Senate against Democrat Stephen Douglas. In the speech, Lincoln was adamant about his opposition to slavery and pledged himself to oppose its spread to new American territories. The title of the speech was [“A House Divided against itself cannot stand.”](https://www.nps.gov/liho/learn/historyculture/housedivided.htm)  The title came from Mark’s Gospel, from this week’s appointed Gospel reading.

“If we could first know where we are, and whither we are tending,” Lincoln said in that speech, “we could then better judge what to do, and how to do it. We are now far into the fifth year, since a policy was initiated, with the avowed object, and confident promise, of putting an end to slavery agitation. Under the operation of that policy, that agitation has not only, not ceased, but has constantly augmented. In my opinion, it will not cease, until a crisis shall have been reached, and passed. ‘A house divided against itself cannot stand.’"[[1]](#endnote-2)

Lincoln was right. The nation could not endure permanently half slave and half free. A crisis was *not* averted.The Union was dissolved. The House did fall and the Nation engaged in a brutal, bloody Civil War which split citizens and families and resulted in nearly 700,000 casualties. Today, when American citizens engage in hate-speech, vitriol and hateful actions against other Americans, we all would do well to remember our history. There is nothing to prevent it from happening again. It is one thing to engage in passionate debate about issues; it is a radically different thing to malign and denegrate fellow citizens with hate speech and to engage in violence against them. For Christians, it is sinful.

*“How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divded against itself that kingdom cannot stand.”*(Mark 3:25).

We should be clear; Jesus is not talking politics. He is talking about himself and God’s ministry. We’re in chapter 3 of Mark. Jesus is home, presumably in his own house. I’m sure he is exhausted. Before coming home, he had been on circuit, preaching and healing.

During that last circuit trip, Jesus had great numbers of people come to him, from Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, beyond the Jordan, Tyre and Sidon.[[2]](#endnote-3) Mark tells us “he cured many, and whenever the evil spirits saw him, they fell down before him and shouted, ‘You are the Son of God!’”[[3]](#endnote-4) That’s not unimportant in Mark’s Gospel, nor with respect to our reading today. The evil spirits are able to correctly identify Jesus and his connection with God. They fall down before him. What a stark contrast with the scribes of todays’ reading who associate Jesus with Beelzebul.

Finally, Jesus goes up a mountain and calls his inner circle, the Twelve, to him and appoints them Apostles.[[4]](#endnote-5) It is after all of this -- healing and teaching and casting out demons and appointing apostles -- that Jesus goes home; goes home for some rest (cf. Mark 3:19).

But, as seems to happen when Jesus is home, a crowd gathers, a large crowd. It fills and surrounds his house. The last time something like this happened was in chapter 2 of Mark’s Gospel when some people brought a paralyzed man to him so that Jesus could heal him.[[5]](#endnote-6) You remember that story, I’m sure. The crowd was so large, the paralyzed man’s friends went up to the roof and lowered him down to Jesus from the roof.

It seems that Jesus’ house is just as crowded this time too. And the preaching and teaching, and perhaps healings going on in that house must be causing quite a stir, because Jesus’ family hears of it. They go to get him, to restrain him, the text says, because people were saying, “he has gone out of his mind, ” that he is “beside himself” (Mark 3:21).[[6]](#endnote-7)

Others are concerned. Some scribes, “religious watch dogs,” had come up from Jerusalem. Apparently they are in among the crowd in Jesus’ house…They express their concern, “He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons!” (Mark 3:22).

Beelzebul is probably the name of a god of the Philistines, ancient enemy of the Jews, or of the Cannanites. The meaning of the original name is unclear, but according to one source, it may have meant something like “high and lofty one.” This was altered in Judaism to mean “Lord of the flies” or “Lord of the dung heap.” [[7]](#endnote-8)It became a synonym for Satan. The scribes are accusing Jesus of being in league with Satan.

Jesus is not intimidated. He calls them to him and speaks to them in parables*..."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. But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered”* (Mark 3:23 – 27).

The point is clear: From the moment of his baptism, when the Holy Spirit descended upon him (Mark 1:10), Jesus has been working in direct opposition to Satan and Satan’s kingdom. Jesus’ preaching, his healings and exorcism are unequivocally on behalf of God and God’s Kingdom. If Jesus’ healings and exorcisms have been successul in casting out evil spirits, and they have been, how could those scribes dare to attribute them Satan, the adversary of God and God’s Kingdom?

Jesus has been cleaning house! This is precisely the meaning of the last of the parables. Jesus has entered the strong man, Satan’s house, tied him up and plundered his house, by casting out evil spirits and demons! How then can these Scribes say that he has Beelzebul and by the ruler of demons cast out demons?” It is absolutely contradictory. It is more than contradictory. It is an obstinate refusal to acknowledge the power and work of the Holy Spirit. Jesus addresses this obstinance next.

*“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"* (Mark 3:28 – 29). Why did Jesus say this and what does it mean?

Mark tells us Jesus says it because they had said, "He has an unclean spirit." As biblical scholar Lamar Williamson observes, “the spirit at work in Jesus Christ, by which he casts out demons, is the Holy Spirit of God. To confuse that Holy Spirit with an unclean or demonic spirit, reversing good and evil and attributing the savings acts of God to the destructive power of Satan, is to place oneself outside the realm of God’s forgiveness…”[[8]](#endnote-9)

We never find out how these scribes from Jerusalem react to this blunt statement from Jesus. Instead, we turn back to the concern of Jesus’ family. Mark tells us, “His mother and his brothers came, and standing outside they sent to him and called him” (Mark 3:31). The crowd in and around house is so large, they can’t near it. They apparently can’t even be heard. But the message gets passed forward. “Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you” (Mark 3:32).

I wonder what Jesus’ mothers, brothers and sisters were thinking. “Oh, he’s at it again. Come on let’s get him and take him back with us until he calms down…” Or, “Why does he have to do this so publically, doesn’t he know how it makes us look? It’s embarrassing!” or “He’s really been much too busy, doing way too much, he’s going to burn out. Let’s take him with us, so he can get some rest.” Again, we don’t know, but Jesus doesn’t pay his family much heed or attention.

Instead, Jesus replies with a rhetorical question, the answer of which has great import, not only to those in that crowded house, but also to those who have heard it down through the ages as well as to those of us gathered in this house today. “Who are my mothers and brothers?” “And looking around at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mothers and brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother!” (Mark 3:33 – 35).

What is it to do the will of God? That’s made clear in Jesus’ summary of the law, found later in Mark, when Jesus is speaking to another scribe.[[9]](#endnote-10) This scribe is of a different sort than those who accused Jesus today. Appearing in chapter 12 of Mark, this particular scribe has a yearning to hear from Jesus and a hunger to know what Jesus thinks. “Which of the commandments is first of all?” this scribe asks Jesus (Mark 12:28). And Jesus answers him, “'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these" (Mark 12:29 – 31).

To love God, to love one’s neighbor, to love oneself with humility and reverent awe. To proclaim this love and this healing message to the world, and not only to proclaim it, but to live it. This is the calling of Christians. It is the calling, the vocation of all of the mothers, brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ. It is our calling. Too often, we fall short of this calling. Too often we are “beside ourselves” with other things. Too often, we are divided over lesser values and lesser kingdoms.

The divisions and anger in our country today are deep and serious and they are doing us great harm. In a recent survey, one in five Americans say many members of the other side “lack the traits to be considered fully human.” 15% of Republicans and 20% of Democrats say the country would be better off if large numbers of opposing partisans “just died.”[[10]](#endnote-11)

There seems to be little willingness and little creativity in solving this and healing the divisions for the sake of the common good. We need to have a different and deeper imagination. An imagination about what the Kingdom of God can be like and should be like. We also need to have a greater respect for human dignity.[[11]](#endnote-12)

Mothers, Fathers, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, cousins in Christ, we are called to be “beside ourselves” with Jesus, beside ourselves for his Kingdom message, beside ourselves doing God’s will, a will that is always about living into our baptismal promises, living into God’s love, love for one another, marked by respect for one another’s fundamental humanity and dignity, the love of Christ Jesus, love that is without equivocation or compromise. Love that unites, rather than divides us. This isn’t to pretend that we don’t have real differences. It is to insist that we address our differences as human beings, children of God and followers of Jesus Christ who commanded us to love.

Let us pray…

*O God, from whom all good proceeds: Grant that by your*

*inspiration we may think those things that are right, and by*

*your merciful guiding may do them; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever*. Amen.

Collect for Proper 5, BCP p. 229

1. Lincoln, Abraham “A House Divided Against Itself Cannot Stand” – Speech to the Illinois State Republican Convention – June 16, 1858 found at [House Divided Speech - Lincoln Home National Historic Site (U.S. National Park Service) (nps.gov)](https://www.nps.gov/liho/learn/historyculture/housedivided.htm) [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. See Mark 3:7-8 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. Mark 3:10-11 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. Mark 3:13 - 19 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. See Mark 2:1 - 11 [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. Williamson, Jr., Lamar *Interpreation – A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching: Mark* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1983) 83 [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
7. See “Baal-zebub” in *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary* ed. Paul Achtemeir (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996) [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
8. Williamson, Jr., Lamar *Interpreation – A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching: Mark* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1983) 84-85 [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
9. See Mark 12:28 - 34 [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
10. Godwin, Pearce See “America Talks: Toxic polarization threatens our nation’s future. Here’s how we can save it.” USA Today On-Line – Opinion Section - May 18, 2021 found at [How America Talks can help save our nation from toxic polarization (usatoday.com)](https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2021/05/18/how-america-talks-can-help-save-us-from-toxic-polarization-column/5035082001/) [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
11. See the Baptismal Covenant of The Episcopal Church, Book of Common Prayer (1979), p. 304-305 [↑](#endnote-ref-12)