

## **“A House Divided”**

### **Sermon – June 9, 2024 Stone Presbyterian Church**

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“A house divided against itself, cannot stand.”

When you hear that phrase, you cannot help but think of Abraham Lincoln.

No President so skillfully or artfully used biblical quotations and imagery in his speeches.

Yet, though Lincoln grew up in a highly religious Baptist family, he never joined any Church, was a skeptic as a young man and sometimes ridiculed revivalists.

Some of his contemporaries said he was turned off by organized religion because of the self-serving and self-righteousness he observed.

But as you can tell from his speeches, he was serious student of the bible.

In his “Reply to Loyal Colored People of Baltimore” on September 7, 1864 upon presentation of a bible from them, Lincoln wrote:

“In regard to this Great book, I have but to say, it is the best gift God has given to man. All the good the Savior gave to the world was communicated through this book. But for it we could not know right from wrong. All things most desirable for man’s welfare, here and hereafter, are to be found portrayed in it.”

Lincoln read the scriptures to look for the moral truths and ended up using it as the basis for freeing the slaves to the shock of his cabinet.

You might recall the fuller part of the quote that I started with:

“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. It will become all one thing or all the other.”

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He said it on June 16, 1858 (166 years ago next Sunday) after being nominated by the Republicans to run for the Illinois Senate. He ended up losing to Stephen Douglas.

Lincoln took creative license in quoting “a house divided against itself cannot stand”. Lincoln was referring to our country that was on the brink of civil war over states’ rights to slavery. Jesus says it in retort to the scribes about himself, which you heard in today’s gospel lesson from Mark, though it occurs also in Luke and in Matthew, which is the version Lincoln actually quoted.

As background for today’s story, Jesus has been curing people and casting out demons (which, admittedly, we today do not understand exactly what that meant) in addition to proclaiming the word of God.

As a result, Jesus has become very popular and, like you heard earlier, so much so that when he is in a house it’s so packed with people you can’t even eat.

The scribes don’t (or can’t) deny these miracles but they are upset. Perhaps in part because Jesus was a nobody from Galilee and was becoming a “pop star”. And perhaps in part because Jesus often flouted “the Law”, such as healing a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath as you heard last week.

Apparently, since he was a law breaker in their view, this ability to cast out of demons must come from demons; it couldn’t come from God.

Specifically, they say “he has Beelzebub” a name found nowhere else in the bible outside this story in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. By context it appears Beelzebub is ruler of the demons and reports to Satan or is Satan himself.

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Jesus points out by analogy that a demon casting out a demon would only work against itself. It's a like if a kingdom or a house or even Satan divided, they fall. You might say it's like trying to physically beat yourself up to get rid of yourself.

Now you might imagine that if Jesus was performing stunts, like flying in the air or literally moving mountains that maybe the scribes would have a point. Such feats of power perhaps could come the evil one to entice people to follow him and they serve as self-aggrandizement.

But that is where they are blinded by Jesus not following the Law as they, and, and frankly, most fellow Jews, believed. They couldn't see past that to see what Jesus was doing—helping people in need. Jesus saw obeying God's will was helping God's people more than rotely following the letter of the Law despite people's needs.

Jesus always views himself as a humble conduit of God and God's spirit. So the scribes accusing what Jesus did as the work of Satan is an insult to God and so is an “eternal sin” that cannot be forgiven.

That underscores that if people aren't following the bible the way you see and you condemn those who are helping and healing people through the spirit of God, then you are the one who sins—not them.

Jesus is more about doing the right things than doing things right.

And he uses this to define family. In Jesus time, and frankly until recently, family was everything, it was your identity. You didn't exist apart from it. And for good reason—you needed family to survive. Society was built around it.

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So when Jesus’ family hear that he is doing and saying crazy things, they go to “save” him. And, yes, while it might have been a bit out of embarrassment, it was also out of love; family takes care of family.

But Jesus radically redefines what a family is. For him those who do the will of God are his family. While for traditional families they may be upsetting, for widows and orphans and the ostracized it was heaven on earth—which was Jesus’, and later Paul’s, message.

It is not about bloodlines or societal position that matters. Simply put, it is not status but action in response to the call of God in the person of this Jesus that marks what it means to belong to his “family.”

Relationships in this family are dynamic; they flow from the encounter and response to Jesus.

As Jesus himself, and his followers experienced, though, it is not without suffering. Suffering itself is not redemptive, but it is an inevitable part of living and preaching the gospel of life and truth in a world where the powers of death and deception still attack, until the fullness of God’s purposes is realized.

Going up against tradition, culture, and power has consequences. But you’d do that for family, right?, particularly the more vulnerable?

Jesus wasn’t really rejecting his biological family. He was simply saying that he belongs to the family of God first. And, indeed, his mother and at least his brother James eventually become believers.

In today’s story Jesus also alludes that Satan, as a “strong man”, does have power in this world, but that Jesus has tied him up and now Jesus can plunder his stuff in the healing of sickness, leprosy, paralysis, and withered limbs along with God’s spirit and proclaiming the good news.

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It is an odd way to put it, but it is to show God’s inbreaking into the world. It began with Jesus and will culminate when he comes again.

But it does not just have to do with an afterlife. It has to do with relying on God now amid whatever may be happening to us -- trusting that the one who has rescued us in the past will continue to rescue us.

As Paul writes in today’s epistle lesson from 2 Corinthians, Jesus’ resurrection provides hope that God is present in broken lives, relationships, and communities, working to bring new life out of pain and strife.

The faith that we know through Jesus Christ and in which we participate through the Holy Spirit is a faith not found in ourselves, or through our own effort. It is a faith outside of us, a faith that the Holy Spirit awakens, nourishes and strengthens within us.

Rather, faith has to do with grace -- God’s gift freely given for all -- which always shifts our focus from self-interest to the interests of others. As this grace extends to more and more people through us, it increases thanksgiving of lives that also overflow with this grace.

Jesus read deeply in the scriptures to see that performing demonstrable acts of love was more important than religiosity. Abraham Lincoln in his own way did that same thing.

Both saw that scripture was not meant to oppress people but to liberate them; not to divide but to unite.

So we do not lose heart. Even when we may be worn down, our inner nature is being renewed day by day so that we can continue our mission as children of God for the family of God.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.