

MATTHEW 12:22-32

The crowd brought to Jesus a demoniac who was blind and mute; and he cured him, so that the one who had been mute could speak and see. All the crowds were amazed and said, "Can this be the Son of David?" But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, "It is only Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons, that this fellow casts out the demons."

Jesus knew what they were thinking and said to them, "Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand. If Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself; how then will his kingdom stand? If I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your own exorcists cast them out? Therefore, they will be your judges. But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you.

Or how can one enter a strong man's house and plunder his property, without first tying up the strong man? Then indeed the house can be plundered. Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters. Therefore, I tell you, people will be forgiven for every sin and blasphemy but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. Whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come."

SERMON TO MYSELF

MATTHEW 12:22-32

I am preaching to myself this morning. I humbly invite you to listen in and perhaps you can find points of connection which resonate with your struggles and discover some benefits for yourself. Jesus said, "Physician, heal thyself" and I find myself in need of healing.

You see, since November 8, I have found myself fighting off anger, disillusionment and grief accompanied by a low level of persistent anxiety. I do not like what I am feeling. I believe you have come to know me as a very positive person so the pessimism I am

experiencing contradicts who I normally am. And I don't like it...not one bit!

These feelings actually began weeks before the election as the campaigns grew more ugly and waves of resentment and deep animosity arose among the various factions of our country. It is easy to blame the candidates, one of whom would inevitably win to the consternation of half the country. Unfortunately, our choices in my opinion, were less than appetizing. And unless we decided to stay home or cast a protest vote, we were forced to suck it up and choose whom we would stand with. We all had to overlook an awful lot of stuff to vote for either candidate. Whose stuff was worse? Well...that is what we had to determine.

In the end, winners rejoiced that the one they felt was more crooked lost while the losers are despondent over the victor whom they considered the more deplorable. And to add additional fuel to the already flammable mixture, the winner of the electoral college lost by over two million in the popular vote. I don't think the Founding Fathers had this in mind!

My fear is that the split in our country is becoming permanent. The campaigns, of course, did not create these divisions. They were already there. The genius of Trump is that he saw it and knew how to harness its energy to propel him into office while it went right over Clinton's head. The enthusiasm gap was enormous leading 11million people who voted four years ago, most of whom supported Obama, to skip the entire event.

So here we are. And the chasm between people has become the elephant in the room and can no longer be ignored. While that may be a good thing in some ways because many gripes on both sides are legitimate and need to be addressed, my fear is that walls are going to be built. And not along the Mexican border, but between our own citizens, between neighbors and even family members. I hear a lot of calls for unity, but it is hardly that simple. We have to actually talk to each other and acknowledge that those who disagree with us may have valid points of view. What I am seeing more of right now is the two sides sliding in opposite directions widening the gap between them.

That is the backdrop for my sermon to myself this morning. I take my spirituality very

seriously (as I should if I am to be anyone's pastor) and I find that within myself I am fighting a battle that is reflective of the conflicts occurring outside of myself. I am caught between judgment and acceptance. My progressive leanings are no secret to any of you. So Donald Trump's election has not sat well with me. But Jesus said—and he is so right—that a house divided against itself cannot stand. While that is perfectly obvious when it comes to the health of a nation, isn't it also true on the personal level? Over the years dozens of people have sought me out as a counselor to help them resolve the conflicts within themselves. And there have been three occasions in my own life when I needed assistance for the same. We cannot live happily if a war is raging within us. Many turn to drugs, alcohol or even worse, suicide, when they cannot inner peace.

Unity is the cure for division. But unity requires an operative principle—a cause, a purpose, a philosophical, theological or ethical point of reference which motivates us to marshal our energy toward achieving a common goal. And this is where it gets sticky. Americans are worlds apart in their utopian visions of how our country should be. And I don't sense that the Bernie Sanders' folk on the left are about to hold hands and sing *Kumbaya* with the Richard Spencers' Alt Right folks on the other side of the globe.

Jesus tackles this dilemma in our Scripture lesson for this morning. He is having quite an engaging debate with the Pharisees over the power by which he is casting out demons. The very fact that he is able to cast demons out in the first place is causing considerable discomfort among the religiously correct Pharisees for whom the Law is the gold standard by which one is judged. They accuse him of performing these frankly miraculous acts in the name of Beelzebul whom Jews derided as the lord of the demons.

It is actually even more insulting than it sounds. In earlier times, this Philistine deity was named Baalzebub which to them literally meant, "lord of the lofty abodes." The Hebrews considered this god to be an unworthy rival to Yahweh and contemptuously called him Beelzebul which translated into "lord of the dung." In our particular passage, the reference in

regard to Jesus' exorcisms is clearly intended as a putdown. The popular understanding was that Beelzebub was god of the same demons Jesus was casting out.

But Jesus traps the Pharisees in their own words reminding them that a house divided against itself cannot stand and that if he is casting out demons in the name of Beelzebub, the lord of the demons would in effect be casting out himself and thereby destroying his own kingdom. But if he is casting out demons by the Holy Spirit as he claimed, then the kingdom of God has arrived. That was one of those "leave 'em speechless" moments. How do you reply to that?

So what insight does this give me in my own struggle to make peace within myself? What I have to remember is that there is only one to whom we can give allegiance—and that is Christ. There is no other unifying principle than his teachings. And what this means is that as a Christian, I can neither offer blind allegiance to any elected leader nor can I pronounce blanket condemnation. And that is not just seeking middle ground. The ground can shift one way or another, sometimes dramatically depending upon the policies and directions our officials determine to take us.

It would be easy, I suppose, to just say to heck with it and the American people deserve any president they choose to elect—which is true, of course—but passivity is not an option for Christians. However, what we must be careful not to do is simply engage in an endless and divisive game of rope pull joining players on one extreme to oppose forces on the other. Extremism breeds extremism and nothing will bring down a house more quickly and decisively.

So when I say I am caught between judgment (which is exactly what drives us in the direction of extremism) and acceptance (which could be construed as passive compliance), I must find solid ground to stand on. And the solid ground I am choosing to place my feet upon has to be undergirded with patience. Overreacting serves no one, including myself. I have to wait and see. There will be give and take—hopefully. Nothing is going to be as terrible as people fear and nothing is going to be as wonderful as others anticipate.

But the lessons of history have often been severe. The Germans learned that the hard way. Where is the point of no return when the train is speeding down the track so fast that there is no way to stop it? So while patience may be a virtue, it can also pave the road to destruction.

The election is over and Donald Trump will be inaugurated as our next president on Tuesday. So the next hundred days will be very interesting and begin giving us clues as to where he wishes to lead the country. As voters and as Christians, we have overlooked way too much during the electoral process. My personal resolution is to give him time. It cannot be a zero-tolerance situation—no one can be successful under that sort of pressure. But at the same time, we must remember who we are and what we stand for and that our faith unceasingly tells us that we have a sacred responsibility to care for the widow and the orphan; to welcome the stranger, the refugee, the immigrant; and to always have special care and concern for the poor.

The only way I can resolve the tension within myself is to remember who I am and who I am called to be. Beelzebub cannot cast out Beelzebub—you cannot cure one evil by creating another. We can only unify around the Holy Spirit. It is only love that will keep our house from falling. Let us keep our nation and our new president in our prayers.