“Healing a House Divided”

3 Pentecost, June 10, 2018, Year B

Mark 3:20-35

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*“If a house is divided against itself, it cannot stand.”*

*Jesus, Gospel of Mark 3:25*

Do you believe in Satan? People in Jesus time did. Satan had many names in the Bible: Beelzebub, Lucifer, Serpent, Dragon, Tempter. Satan was held responsible for dangling the Seven Deadly Sins in front of us: pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, anger, and laziness. It seemed people did not want to take *personal* responsibility themselves for succumbing to sin: they would rather believe it was an *outside* force compelling them to turn against their neighbor. So goes the old saying, “The Devil made me do it!”

Today we tend to think of Satan, not as a person, but as a mythic figure who represents us at our very worst. When we are tempted to think we’re better than someone else, or we lust after what doesn’t belong to us, or when we anger easily, we’re actually demonstrating that we all have two natures inside us, competing against one another: one nature that tries to do good and the other nature that is bent on destruction. When we find ourselves in the struggle between our two natures, our first instinct *should* be to look for where God is in the midst of it all. We should always remember look for God to help us heal the divide between our divided selves.

If we can recognize the divide within us, surely the divide is even more obvious in our relationships. The world is full of opposites. Some people dive into every day as if it’s a new adventure, ready to discover new places, foods, experiences, and people. Others are more cautious, happy to live with a safe routine and in familiar surroundings. I used to wrinkle my nose up at guacamole, never even trying a little taste. But now that I know how good it is for me, I was glad to give it a try – and now I find I like it.

The same goes for trying new relationships, or remaking old ones. I knew a woman once at another church where I worked. She was the most ornery person I ever met. She didn’t like anything to be different at church – she wanted to preserve it exactly the way it was in her grandmother’s time. She’d complain about the altar flowers (too skimpy, too tall); that the children made too much noise; that the pastor changed some prayers; that the Christmas Fair wasn’t set up the way she liked it. She gave new pastors about three weeks, then made the decision whether she was going to support them or obstruct them. I knew her for 10 years and I never saw her smile. One day, she came in to see the pastor and he wasn’t in. She looked pained and turned to go. Although I had always put on an imaginary shield when I saw her, something inside of me melted, and I asked if her if she was OK. She was headed out the door, and she stopped suddenly, turned to me, and began to pour her heart out about some trouble she was going through. After a while, she calmed down, turned to go, then looked back over her shoulder, *smiling* (which was kind of a hard, scary smile, I guess because her face wasn’t used to being in that shape) and said, “Thanks for listening.” We both found God there, in that brief moment, and I think we were both changed by it.

Jesus was accused by some religious authorities of doing ministry so different from what was traditional that they accused him of being Satan’s lackey. What was Jesus’ crime? Healing people. That’s what he had been doing that made them so mad. He healed a man of leprosy. He healed a paralyzed man. When people heard about these miracles, they wanted to be healed, too. So whatever house Jesus was staying in got surrounded by crowds of people, bringing themselves or their loved ones to Jesus so he would heal them. Wherever he ended up, there were crowds, noise, and chaos.

This did not sit well with the powers-that-be. They liked nice, orderly worship inside a properly designated synagogue or temple. What was with this noisy rabble and this uppity Jesus person thinking they were communing with God? Didn’t they know that God was to be found *only* in the appropriate places under narrow sanctioned rules and regulations? They said, “This man is possessed by Satan! That’s the only way he could perform these parlor tricks he’s doing!”

So there was this clash of power over who had the wrap on God and who didn’t. The House of Israel was in a whirl because Jesus dared to show people they could have a personal relationship with God outside of the established authorities. The House of Israel was a divided house with no peaceful and equitable resolution in sight.

I remember my grandparents being totally at odds with one another. My grandfather would tell a story about what he did when he was younger, and my grandmother would immediately jump in to correct the story, always adding a sarcastic dig as an ending zinger. He would smile and sing her a snippet of a love song *(“Let me call you sweetheart, I’m in love with you…”)*, And she would fold her arms defiantly across her chest and stare at him stony-faced. This was very confusing for a young child, to watch this tennis match of love and love lost. I used to wonder, why do they live together when they don’t seem to like each other much? The house would hum along nicely with just one of them present, but put them both in the same room, and the house felt divided right down the middle. Weird family values, right?

Speaking of family values, Jesus didn’t mind breaking down the bonds between himself and his family! He is so blunt that it hurts to read this passage today. As Jesus is reading the authorities the riot act, we read, “Just then his mother and brothers showed up. Standing outside, they relayed a message that they wanted a word with him. He was surrounded by the crowd when he was given the message, ‘Your mother and brothers and sisters are outside looking for you.’

“Jesus responded, ‘Who do you think are my mother and brothers?’ Looking around, taking in everyone seated around him, he said, ‘Right here, right in front of you—my mother and my brothers…The person who obeys God’s will is my brother and sister and mother.’”

*How could Jesus turn his back on his own mother, and brothers, and sister?* It must have felt to the traditionalists like he was turning his back on a thousand years of religious history. Wasn’t there a middle ground Jesus could have found? Couldn’t he have preached *including* his traditional family- mother, brother, sister - *and* the new seekers he was trying to appeal to? Was there a way to more gently preach tradition *and* change? Jesus tried his best to accomplish this, to embrace everyone under the sun as children of God. But sometimes he just lost it because the resistance became too severe. In the end, obstructionism proved too much for him and, in fact, it killed him.

But his death did not stop the movement he began. Believers kept talking about his ideas and pretty soon found converts all over the Middle East, Europe, Africa, and Asia. Pretty soon the resistance was overwhelmed, and Christianity covered the globe.

And now, in our times, resistance is once again surfacing. Our house is divided; not just individual churches but Christianity in America. One faction tells a story of Christianity that Jesus would not recognize: an “I-got-mine, no-room-at-the- table, no-sharing-of-wealth, no-compassion-for-the-poor-and-the-sick, let’s-bully and-let’s-go-to-war” kind of religion. None of this is what Jesus taught or Christians should believe, and until we get on the same page, we will never move forward together to make positive changes in our world.

My hope and prayer – and the church’s difficult but not impossible task – is to be trailblazers in co-existence. How can we peacefully co-exist, in our merry band of traditionalists and progressives, without alienating one side or the other? Again, God must be invited into our midst, not in a vague and ethereal way, but in a very personal, profound way. God must be invited into our heads and hearts, so that we can truly remove the divide within ourselves and between each other.

Is Satan dividing us? I don’t think so. Rather, it is our own egos and the urge to protect what we believe is ours that is dividing us. The winds of change are blowing within religious traditions all over the world, toward what many see as a great renewal of faith and purpose. Healing a house divided is not so hard. We just have to be ready to answer doubt and fear with love and grace. *“Let me call you sweetheart, I’m in love with you…”* Thanks be to our loving God. Amen.

References

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*Zondervan NIV Study Bible,* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002).