

Sermon for Pentecost 3—Year B 2018
Binding What's Torn Asunder

Before I get going on this sermon,
I just have to get one of my pet peeves off my chest.
Time and again I have heard the saying
“A house divided against itself cannot stand”
attributed to Abraham Lincoln.

Now it is true that Abraham Lincoln in a speech to Congress did
say these words, but he was quoting Jesus.

In fact, I have even read and heard Lincoln praised for being an
agnostic or “non-religious.”

This, too, is not accurate.

Yes, he was not much of a church-goer but he was a man of prayer
and an avid reader of the bible . . .

which is why he could quote Jesus.

So the next time you hear someone say Lincoln said . . .

I want you to correct them and say,

No! Actually Lincoln was quoting Jesus when he said,

“A house divided against itself cannot stand.”

(Phew! Now I feel better.)

Perhaps you can relate to what someone once said to me about
their greatest fear:

He said he was always afraid of someday being found out.

That someday people will know that he's not who he says he is;

that he's not who he wants them to think of him;

that he's not who he wants to be.

Beneath their fear they know there are cracks in their house.

He knows that a divided house cannot stand

and a divided kingdom will crumble.

From the very beginning of Mark's gospel,

Jesus has been dealing with divided houses and kingdoms.

He has cast out demons, healed Peter's mother-in-law,
cleansed a leper, and caused a paralyzed man to stand up and walk.
The houses and kingdoms of these people are divided.
The "strong man" has invaded their homes.
Their lives are not their own.
They live with inner conflict and turmoil, pain and suffering.
They are separated from their community
and all that gave them security and identity.
Their outer conditions of illness, paralysis, and possession
point to the inner conflict;
the battle between health and disease,
not just physically, but just as,
perhaps more importantly, spiritually.

The battle and interior conflict has been around
since Adam and Eve separated themselves from God
and hid among the trees in the garden.
It is evident in Israel wanting a king
so they can be like all the other nations;
forgetting that it has a unique calling,
that Israel is to be different from other nations,
that it is through Israel, God's chosen people,
that God will act for the benefit of all people.

This division and inner conflict is still
a reality of today's world and our lives.
Marriage divided is a divorce.
Nations divided results in vitriolic politics,
and, in the extreme, civil war.
An economy divided yields poverty and injustice.
A community divided becomes individualism and tribalism,
prejudice and violence.
Humanity divided is all these things on a global level.
Faith divided is sin.

One of the great preachers of the past century,
William Sloane Coffin has said:
*It is a profound Christian conviction that we belong one to
another, every one of us on the face of the earth—
from the Pope to the loneliest wino—
that's the way God made us.
Christ died to keep us that way.
Our sin is always that we're putting asunder
what God has joined together.*

We all can feel the truth and weight of Coffin's words.
We all know what it is like to live divided lives—
the times when our outsides and our insides don't match up.
That's what it means to be a house divided . . .
When we are one person at work and another at home.
When we act one way with certain people
and a different way with other people.
Life gets divided into pieces.
Behavior, beliefs, and ethics become situational.
There is the work life, the family life, the prayer life,
the personal life, the social life.
Pretty soon we're left with a bunch of pieces because we are
continually dividing and tearing ourselves apart.

It seems that we are forever trying
to put the pieces of our lives together.
That's why the crowd has gathered around Jesus.
That's why the religious authorities oppose him.
That's why his family tries to restrain him.
In their own way each is trying to put the pieces of their life
together but it's not working.
They won't fit.
They have been found out.
Their life and their world are
neither what they thought they were
nor what Jesus knows they could be.

However, one reality has fallen
and a new one is ready to rise.
Jesus always stands before us as the image of unity,
wholeness, integration . . . sanity!
He is the stronger One.
He does for us what we cannot do for ourselves.
He puts our lives and houses back in order.
Jesus offers a different image of what life might look like.
He does so by revealing the division in our lives,
the houses that cannot stand, the crumbling of our kingdoms.

Even when it is for our own good,
with the offer of new life and intended for wholeness,
that's a hard place to be.
It means that one way or another change of some sort is coming.
Most of us don't like that.
It's uncomfortable and it can be frightening.

The people say, "He has gone out of his mind."
The religious authorities accuse him of allegiance to Beelzebul,
the ruler of demons.
They project onto Jesus their own interior conflict and divisions.
They have declared that which is holy, sacred, and godly
to be unclean, dirty, and bereft of God.
Their accusations say more about themselves than about Jesus.
Their accusations reveal
the depth of the conflict and division within them.
Their accusations are a way of avoiding themselves and reality.
Who's crazy now?

But it's difficult to look at the divisions and inner conflicts within
us and our lives.
The beginning of wholeness, however, is acknowledging our
brokenness . . . and the brokenness of the world around us.

So . . . stop and think for a moment:
Where is our own house divided?
How and to what extent have we created or perpetuated conflict
and division within our relationships?
In what ways do we live fragmented lives,
parceling out pieces of ourselves here and there?
What is it that shatters your life?
Anger and resentment? Hatred?
Greed? Insecurity? Perfectionism?
Sorrow and loss? Prejudice?
Envy? Guilt? Loneliness?

There are all sorts of forces, things, events, and, yes,
sometimes even people we love and who love us
by which our lives are divided and broken
and through which we are separated from God, others and our self.
Christ is stronger than anything that fragments our lives.
He binds the forces that divide,
heals the wounds that separate,
and refashions pieces into a new whole.
There is nothing about your life or my life
that cannot be bound together by the love of God in Christ.

For this binding together for healing and wholeness
Christ came and for this he died and rose again.
Christ's love is stronger than the illusions and deceptions of evil.
Jesus comes to free us from both our inner and outer captivities.
Jesus comes to bind us together with forgiveness, grace and truth.
Blessed be the tie that binds
all that has been torn asunder in Christ's love!