

“A House Divided”
Sermon on Sunday, June 6, 2021

Dear church,

Let me start with something familiar this morning, as we ponder a rather confounding text from the gospel according to Mark. As good Americans you have all heard the quote about a house divided that cannot stand. We know it from the mouth of one of our greatest presidents - Abraham Lincoln, who used it in one of the most important speeches of our history - the Gettysburg address. Lincoln, though not a frequent church goer, knew large parts of the Bible by heart, and he was familiar with this quote from Jesus that we heard this morning: “A house that is divided against itself, that house cannot stand.” Allow me to solely focus on this statement. It has lost nothing of its poignancy since it was uttered by Jesus two millennia ago, and it has lost nothing of its relevance since President Lincoln made it popular some 150 years ago.

Why can we all relate to this quote? Because we know what division is like and how it can rip apart families and communities, even an entire country. Many of our homes and families are under pressure. To give you but one example: more than a few parents these days deal with the difficult challenge of shared custody. In far too many cases it plays out like that: one parent is pulling in this direction and another parent is pulling in the opposite direction. Lawyers get involved. Feelings get involved. And frankly, I don't know which is costlier in some of those situations: the lawyers or the hurt feelings??? Not only have the children suffered from those constant battles. Everybody is. A house divided cannot stand.

Some families have been divided by the political culture war that has raged in our country for a while now. And while we are somewhat used to that (after all we have this old saying for a reason: don't talk about politics or religion at the dinner table!), it's gotten worse in recent years. I have heard from more than a few people that the topic of politics or elections and sometimes, by extension, the topic of wearing masks or not, has ripped families apart. Jesus would say to us: “A house divided cannot stand.” And Abraham Lincoln, I am sure, concurs from the grave and if it were possible, the marble statue of Lincoln at the Washington Mall would shake its head.

Some people in our country feel that they are frequently treated as less than an equal, as second class citizens. They are stopped and frisked more often. They feel that the color of their skin makes the difference in how they are treated and how the law applies to them. While we have made progress in that regard since the days of Lincoln, and while we have become more aware of the different experiences of different human beings in our society, this scripture quote is still relevant for people in small town and big town America, in urban America and suburban America, and in rural places as well. A house divided cannot stand.

Finally, I would like to add that we as individuals are sometimes divided within ourselves, strange as that may seem. No, that's not only the case of clinically diagnosed people who suffer from schizophrenia. I have seen individuals who are not at ease with themselves. I have experienced times when I was inwardly torn. Human beings, it seems, are good at dividing and creating dis-ease, even within ourselves. But a house divided cannot stand.

So, the million-dollar question is: how can we grow together more, as individuals, as families, as a church, as a society, because the issues we experience in all those different units of life are somehow related, are they not? At the risk of appearing either arrogant or stupid, I am actually trying to answer this big question: how can we grow together? Impossible in some cases, some of us would argue. The parent in an ugly custody battle is not going to be naïve, knowing that he or she can't change the other person or the other person's mind; and appeasing them might not be the right thing either. The person who passionately believes in a political issue or a justice issue will not back down easily and would probably tell me, "Pastor, sometimes we need a good fight!" I can respect that. And maybe they are right in being pessimistic about that elusive goal of unity. Our options are limited, so limited.

All we can do as human beings is trying to be on the right side of the force of life, whether people like it or not... and at the same time showing those who don't agree with us the utmost respect. Jesus might even say: showing them love. That can be an incredibly hard balancing act to pull off: to act out of integrity, following the law of God in terms of being fair and just and trying to do the right things, no matter how it is perceived, but also showing those who don't agree with you some respect. I have to tell you: I have fallen short of that ideal many times. Many times. And yet, every morning I get up, I pray, and I try again. Maybe I'm fooling myself, but I think it has gotten a little bit better with me over the years, by the grace of God. And maybe that's a big part of our journey as Christians: to acquire the spiritual resources it takes to live and be a positive force in this world. I would like to offer this as a guiding principle for the young people who are being confirmed today and the folks who are joining St. Peter's. **Acquire the spiritual resources it takes to be a positive force in this world!** And when you fail, get up and try again!

A house divided cannot stand. May we become more mature as individuals, as families, as a church, and as people of one country that is supposed to be united - under God! **Amen.**