

Meditation “A House Divided”

Communion Sunday, June 10, 2018

Scripture Readings: I Samuel 8:4-11, Mark 3:20-35

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Our first scripture reading is I Samuel 8:4-11. This chapter is the story of Israel’s request for a king. The young boy Samuel who listened to God’s call in last week’s reading is now old and ruling Israel as prophet and judge. Apparently his sons have followed a different path, not unlike the sons of his mentor Eli. Their character flaws, taking bribes and perverting justice, indicate they show no promise for leadership. Because of the morally ambiguous characters, including Samuel who apparently gave his sons power which they misused, we are encouraged not to read this passage simplistically but rather with an honest recognition of the complications involved in justice, leadership and governance. Even Yahweh seeks a compromise with an answer to the situation of “yes, but.” Hear now God’s word.

4 Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah, 5 and said to him, “You are old and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations.” 6 But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, “Give us a king to govern us.” Samuel prayed to the LORD, 7 and the LORD said to Samuel, “Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. 8 Just as they have done to me,^[a] from the day I brought them up out of Egypt to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so also they are doing to you. 9 Now then, listen to their voice; only—you shall solemnly warn them, and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them.”¹⁰ So Samuel reported all the words of the LORD to the people who were asking him for a king. 11 He said, “These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots... Amen.

Our second scripture reading is Mark 3:20-35. Immediately after telling how Jesus began his ministry in Galilee, Mark records a couple pairs of stories about the less than positive response Jesus receives from certain persons amidst the affirmation of the masses. Last week we witnessed the animosity of the religious authorities in the Pharisees response to Jesus’ teaching on the Sabbath. Today’s reading provides a glimpse into the negative reaction of Jesus’ family and another group of religious authorities, the Scribes, with two stories sandwiched together for emphasis. Hear now God’s Holy word.

20 Then he went home; and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. 21 When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, “He has gone out of his mind.” 22 And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, “He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.” 23 And Jesus called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, “How can Satan cast out Satan? 24 If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. 25 And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. 26 And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. 27 But no one can enter a strong man’s house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered. 28 “Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; 29 but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin”— 30 for they had said, “He has an unclean spirit.”³¹ Then his mother and his

brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. ³² A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers and sisters^[a] are outside, asking for you." ³³ And Jesus replied, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" ³⁴ And looking at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! ³⁵ Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother." Amen.

The title of the meditation – A House Divided

Text: "And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand." Mark 3:25

Let us pray. Holy and loving God, whose ways are above ours, thank you for the wisdom in Christ's words and for the challenge and privilege to work together for justice. As we reflect on Holy Scripture, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

This week at VBS we will gather at Hero Central to teach our children about the strength and courage God gives each of us to "do good, seek peace and go after it..." (which is a loose paraphrase of Psalm 34:14b).

In April our children had the privilege of collaborating with friends from different faiths-- the synagogue, the mosque, and Grace United Methodist Church to "do good!" We met at the Old State Capital to create Hurricane Relief buckets on Earth Day, a community service project which was in-part funded by Westminster's Endowment. We were reminded on Founder's Sunday last month by a friend of Abiah Hale's that our children were continuing the good work begun by Abiah and the Dorcas Society she founded who also gathered at the Old State Capital to create care packages for our soldiers during the Civil War.

Prior to the service project we gathered in the chambers of the Old State Capital and the children learned that this was the very room where President Abraham Lincoln gave the historic *House Divided Speech*, paraphrasing Mark 3:25. The date of the speech was June 16, 1858, after he had accepted the Illinois Republican Party's nomination for the United States Senate. Although he would lose that race to his opponent Stephen Douglas, Lincoln's remarks rallied Republicans across the North by creating an image of the danger of the slavery-based disunion. Along with the Gettysburg and his second inaugural address, this speech became one of his most famous. The best-known passage of the speech is this:

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. Either the opponents of slavery will arrest the further spread of it, and place it where the public mind shall rest in the belief that it is in the course of ultimate extinction; or its advocates will push it forward, till it shall become lawful in all the States, old as well as new — North as well as South.

Lincoln's intent in the speech was to differentiate himself from Stephen Douglas - the incumbent - and to voice a prophecy publicly. Douglas had long advocated popular sovereignty under which the settlers in each new territory would decide their own status as a slave or free state; this would prevent slavery-induced conflict and would allow northern and southern states to resume their peaceful coexistence.

Lincoln, however, asserted that the *Dred Scott* decision closed the door on Douglas's preferred option, leaving the Union with only two remaining outcomes: the country would inevitably

become either all slave or all free. Now that the North and the South had come to hold distinct opinions in the question of slavery, and now that the issue had permeated every other political question, the Union would soon no longer be able to function.

Ironically, when Lincoln was elected President in 1860 by a narrow margin, he chose to bring together a “divided house” within his own cabinet in an act of political genius. Doris Kearns Goodwin told this fascinating story in her 2005 book *Team of Rivals*. The book focuses on Lincoln's mostly successful attempts to reconcile conflicting personalities and political factions on the path to abolition and victory in the American Civil War.

In our time of divided leadership, political polarization, and alleged corruption, we would do well to follow the enlightened compromise of President Lincoln for whom our founding pastor, the Reverend Albert Hale was a friend and counselor.

The words Jesus spoke in defense of himself after the accusation of the religious authorities that his power to heal came from Satan reveal a truth that is self-evident. Yes, a house divided against itself cannot stand!

However, Jesus' words also shed light on the danger of being so unified in our thoughts and viewpoints that we close ourselves off to others from whom we can learn and widen our understanding of the God who calls us to “do good, seek peace and go after it!”

Notice that the Scribes did not deny the reality of the power at work in and through Jesus; their point of contention was not whether there was real power at work, but whose power was active in the ministry of Christ. It was the good-religious folks who prove to be incapable of comprehending Jesus. Indeed, their certainty is a liability, for when Jesus does not fit their set religious expectations they declare that he is the enemy, theirs and God's! In their impenetrable unity of one point of view, they blaspheme the work of God's spirit.

The fact is, when any of us become convinced we know with certitude who God is and what God is about in this world, we are in danger of being closed to fresh perceptions of God's spirit at work in our midst.

As Christ's family gathered around this communion table to partake of the broken bread and overflowing cup, may we affirm Christ's wisdom that indeed a divided house cannot stand. May we learn to collaborate with those of different perspectives in order to seek peace... and may we not be so sure and undivided in our perspective that we demonize others who differ and close ourselves off from the wideness of God's mercy and the unfolding of God's grace in our world today. Amen