

A House Divided

In the name of him who has freed us from the curse of sin and made us members of the family of God, dear brothers and sisters in Christ: From time to time I have encountered people who simply seem to thrive on conflict. It's like they enjoy it; but I think it's fair to say that most of us would rather avoid conflict if we can. We prefer to be at peace: at peace in our homes, with our neighbors, with our countrymen, and with other nations. But in this fallen world – because of *our* sin – peace is a very fleeting and fragile thing. It doesn't last. And so it happens that even though we don't want them, we do have wars and fights and conflicts of all descriptions. Some can be quite bitter and prolonged. A few weeks ago one of the networks ran a miniseries on the famous conflict between the Hatfields and the McCoys. Maybe some of you saw it. I did. And as I watched, it was interesting to see how things snowballed out of control. The two principal characters went from being comrades in arms, to opponents, then to enemies; and then finally their dispute boiled over into hatred and violence to the point that both of the families and all of their relatives wanted to exterminate the other. It was the classic "us against them" scenario: the side you were on was determined by which family you were born into.

But as bad as these "us against them" fights can be, the worse kind of conflicts are the ones that happen within a family – or between groups of people who are normally on the same side. Then things really heat up. These kinds of fights tend to be the most bitter and vindictive: like when the fight is between a husband and wife, or between siblings, or parents and their children, or the members of an extended family. It's the civil wars that are fought in ways that are most uncivil. Why is this? It's because there's a bond of trust and fellowship that's been broken. The result is that to the feelings of anger and animosity that you're naturally going to have in any fight are added the sense and pain of betrayal. It's: "I trusted you", "I was counting on you", "I *loved* you"; "and you stabbed me in the back". This is why in-house fights are so acrimonious and destructive. And sadly, they happen all too often. What's worse, when houses are divided against themselves, there can be no winners, only losers. For as Jesus says in this morning's Gospel, "A house divided against itself cannot stand."

What's interesting, though, is the context in which Jesus makes this statement. A group of scribes and religious authorities have come down from Jerusalem. The higher ups at headquarters have been hearing reports about this Jesus phenomenon – all the healings and the demons that are being driven out of people by this formerly unknown preacher from Galilee who has suddenly and so spectacularly appeared on the scene. So they've sent an official delegation to check him out. These agents have been watching Jesus for some time now. And apparently they've seen him drive out a number of demons, freeing the wretched hosts who were oppressed by the unclean spirits within them. You would think that these religious leaders would be happy about it; but they aren't. They don't like Jesus. They don't like some of the things he teaches. And they are jealous of his popularity with the crowds. So, because they cannot deny his authority to command unclean spirits, they come to the conclusion that Jesus must be driving out demons by the authority of the devil himself. They accuse Jesus of being possessed by Satan.

And hearing it, Jesus replies, in effect, "Are you really so foolish? How can Satan drive out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but is coming to an end." His point is that the powers of

evil are not divided. No, they are united in their quest to oppress and deceive people. Everything Satan does is geared toward leading people away from the truth and the freedom of the Gospel. Satan, though evil, is not stupid. He wants people to be under his control. It would make no sense at all for him to free them from demonic possession.

And then, in parable, Jesus goes on to state what does make sense: “No one can enter a strong man’s house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man. Then he may plunder his house.” The idea is this: Satan is like a great big bully who’s been going around stealing things from his neighbors. Up until now, no one has been strong enough to stop him. So his house is full of the things (meaning the people) he’s taken. But now there’s someone stronger on the block. It’s Jesus. He’s here to take back what’s been stolen. He’s come into this world, Satan’s house, to set the captives free. And to do it, he must first tie up the big old bully. That will render Satan powerless, and then he, Jesus, can restore the property in the strong man’s house to its rightful owner; namely, the Lord.

I should add that Jesus does this – binds Satan, the strong man, and sets captives free – by proclaiming his word of truth. You see, the power of Satan is to imprison people by guilt and by deception. He would have you believe any number of things that are not true; for example: that you are essentially good in the sight of God and don’t need to be forgiven. Or that God doesn’t take your sin very seriously, and is willing to receive you into his fellowship just as you are. Or, going the opposite direction, he would deceive you into thinking that your sins are so terrible and many that you can never be forgiven, or that even though you have sinned, there is some way for you to make up for it on your own and earn salvation for yourself. Contrary to what so many people think, you don’t have to be possessed by an evil spirit or worshipping false gods or be an outright atheist to be under Satan’s control. If you believe any of the lies I just mentioned, or any combination of them, then Satan has you exactly where he wants you to be. You are a captive in his house.

Jesus plunders the goods from the strong man’s house and sets people free by declaring God’s forgiveness and truth. He proclaims the full gravity of sin: that God hates it, and that he rejects you for it. He teaches that there is no way for you, a sinner, to save yourself from the righteous wrath and judgment of God. You can’t save yourself—but you can be saved. You can be saved by trusting in the Savior God sent into this world to free you from the devil, from death, and from sin and all of its consequences. These are the strong words that Jesus speaks, and by them he binds the strength of the devil and frees those who listen to him and who by the power of the Holy Spirit believe.

The scribes sent from Jerusalem do not believe. They fall into the category of those who think they’re pretty good on their own in the sight of God, and that they are doing what is necessary to make up for their very few and minor sins to earn salvation all by themselves. Therefore Jesus warns them of the danger they are in. He says, “All sins and blasphemies will be forgiven people, but whoever blasphemes the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin.” He says this because they are attributing the work of the Holy Spirit to Satan. They are saying that the Spirit in whose power and authority Jesus frees people from the lies of Satan and makes them believers in the truth is really the devil. Thus they are rejecting for themselves the work of the Spirit who creates faith in Jesus. And a person who does that – and keeps doing that all his life – can never come to faith in Jesus and be saved. It’s the one sin for which there can be no forgiveness. That person is forever divided from God.

And this is the real irony of today’s text. Satan’s house is not divided; but God’s is. His goods, his property, the people he eagerly desires to save, are in Satan’s house. And the very

people who should be on Jesus' side trying to help him do what he's come to do are fighting against him. On one hand you've got the scribes and religious leaders. If anyone should be backing and promoting Jesus, it's them. They are the experts in Holy Scripture, the ones who supposedly know all about the coming Savior. It's their job to teach people to recognize him when he comes; but they don't recognize him themselves. They end up steering people away from Jesus, accusing him of being an agent of evil – even though they can see with their own eyes that he is freeing people from demonic control. That's how blind they are. That's how divided they are from the Light of God.

But they aren't the only ones in the house who are divided against Jesus. The other attack comes from within his own family. His mother, Mary, and his brothers (half-brothers), have heard that Jesus has been working too hard. The crowds are coming at him constantly with all their problems and questions. He's busy around the clock, day after day. He hasn't got the time to eat or to rest. The family concludes that Jesus must be going insane – that he's not able to take care of himself. They decide that for his own good it's necessary that they come and rescue him – by force, if necessary, so that they can take him home. They want to put him under their care and keeping so that poor Jesus doesn't overdo it anymore.

In short, they don't believe in him either. And that's strange because Mary better than anyone ought to know who he really is. She's the one who conceived him miraculously in her womb by the power of the Holy Spirit. She knows like no one else that Jesus is the Son of God. But he's also her son; and what she's doing is allowing her mothering instincts, this need she has to take care of her little boy, to trump her faith in him. She should be learning from him; instead, she wants to take charge and tell him what to do. Now, let me say that she means well enough; but it often happens that people do exactly the wrong thing with good intentions. You know what they say about the road to hell. And think it through: what Mary and the brothers really want is to save Jesus from himself and to keep him away from the people he's come to save and set free by his teaching. The result is that if they had their way with their good intentions, they'd be interfering with his ministry just like the scribes from Jerusalem. They would also end up with a Jesus who doesn't suffer and die. With their good intentions, they'd keep him from going to the cross if they could. Thus they too are divided against Jesus.

And it's accurate to say that in a broader sense, we all are. Because of sin and unbelief all of humanity is divided against God the Father who created us, and his Son, Jesus Christ. He built this house. He built it for us and he placed us in it. But ever since our first parents fell into sin, we've been a divided house. We are separated from God and at odds with each other. And because it's an in-house fight, it usually gets pretty ugly. We fight and curse and steal from each other. We tell lies. We try to hurt people with our words and our actions. We are at war – a war that has no rules, knows no mercy, and takes no prisoners. It's every man for himself and the rest be damned. When all is said and done, that's the way we are. And that's why we are a house divided – which means that we are a house that's doomed to fall. And fall it will. The Day of Judgment is coming, and when it does this house and everything in it will be destroyed. At that time all sinners – those who are divided against God – must fall. They will not be able to stand.

But there is a house that will stand on that day. It's a house that is not divided: it's the household of God. It consists of all those whom Jesus calls his true mother and brothers and sisters. They are those who gather around him and actually listen to what he says. They don't try to tell him what to do. No, they receive his teaching. They hear his Word – and the Holy Spirit working through that Word gives them the light and understanding to know who Jesus is and what he's come to do. And the Spirit also gives them the ability to do the will of God.

What's that? Jesus answers that question in John chapter six. He said that the will of God is for you to believe in the one whom God sent – whom God sent to be your Savior. And oddly enough, he became your Savior by allowing himself to be divided from the house of God in your place. That's what happened on the cross. Jesus, bearing the penalty of your sin, was separated from everyone. All people turned on him, even his closest followers. But more importantly, he was separated from the love and mercy of his heavenly Father. He endured instead the wrath and punishment of God – *the division from God* you deserved. That's why he cried out in agony, "My God, why have you forsaken me?" At that moment, the house of God was completely divided. And when Jesus died, it fell.

But it didn't stay down. God raised Jesus from the dead. He gave him life and the Holy Spirit and the power to give life and the Holy Spirit to others – those who believe in him by listening to his Word and the work of the Spirit in their lives. And he is building with these believers a new house that is not divided, nor can it ever be. It's a house that confesses with one heart and one voice the truths of God's Gospel. We call it the Holy Christian Church. And though Satan tries to defeat it, to deceive it with his lies, and to divide it against itself, he can't do it. The gates of hell cannot prevail against it. The Church of Jesus Christ will stand forever – and so will we who are a part of it. Therefore let us remain steadfast and undivided in him. Let's stand with Jesus by sitting at his feet and hearing his Word where we receive his forgiveness and his truth, now and always. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!