

“Draw the Circle Wider”
Sermon by the Rev. Sudie Niesen Thompson
Mark 3:19b-35 with Genesis 3:8-15
June 9, 2024 — 3rd Sunday after Pentecost

If a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand.

We know something about a house divided. We are living in an age of polarization — political and otherwise. Not the first our country has endured, to be sure. Abraham Lincoln quoted this very Scripture in 1858 to describe a country that was “half slave and half free.”¹ A division, of course, that — three years later — led brother to take up arms against brother, that caused the house nearly to fall.

No doubt this will *not* be the last time that this verse from Mark has particular resonance. But, even with the perspective of history, the divisiveness and division of our day feels untenable. It feels like the foundation is crumbling — like the next fissure will be the one that causes the house to fall. It’s not just that breaking news shines a light, time and again, on cracks in the foundation of our common life. It’s that these fractures are shaking individual households, too. How many relationships have been strained because of deeply divergent views? How many siblings have become estranged from siblings, how many parents from children because political ties now seem stronger than family ties?

If a house is divided against itself, the house will not be able to stand, Jesus says.

Of course, families fracture for so many reasons. Political differences may mask deeper divides over moral values or cultural issues. Sometimes trial and tragedy tears families apart: a loss sends shockwaves that leave relationships in ruins, or addiction drives a wedge through the fabric of the family, or a survivor must flee neglect or abuse and find safety elsewhere. Sometimes families fracture because one person can’t accept the truth of who another is.

On this second Sunday of June, as our Queer siblings celebrate Pride, I cannot overlook how many stories of pain are woven through the celebration ... Stories of people who were afraid to live into the fullness of who they are because they feared rejection by their communities, their churches, their families. Stories of people whose fears, tragically, were realized.

Try as we might, humanity cannot break free from the tarnished legacy of “The Fall.” We are doomed, it seems, to repeat the sin of our ancestors, who — when given a chance to turn toward their Maker and tell the truth, chose instead to turn on each other: *The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree and I ate*, said the man. And, then, the woman passed on the blame to another: *The serpent tricked me*, she said.

¹ Abraham Lincoln, “House Divided Speech” delivered at the Illinois Republican State Convention in Springfield, Illinois (June 16, 1858).

We hear echoes of these accusations in so many fractured families:

- *God, the brother whom you gave to be with me, he drank the Kool-Aid and now I can't even talk to him.*
- *The sister whom you gave to be with me, she betrayed my trust. I can never forgive her.*
- *The father whom you gave to be with me, he won't accept me for who I am.*

If a house is divided against itself, the house will not be able to stand, Jesus says. And, boy, do we know the truth of his words.

It seems Jesus knows the pain of strained relationships, of fractured families and contentious communities. When we pick up the story in Mark chapter 3, Jesus has just returned home. This is his first visit to Nazareth since the beginning of his public ministry. And, already, Jesus has made a name for himself. So much so that the crowds are following him from town to town and the scribes have made the trek to the backwaters of Galilee to see for themselves what the fuss is about.

When Jesus arrives in Nazareth, he does not return to his childhood home. Perhaps because he can't. After all, Mark tells us, *the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat*. But it seems Jesus doesn't send word to his family either. His mother and siblings simply hear through the grapevine that their son and brother has returned. But, when they go out to find Jesus, it is not to welcome him. It is not to rescue Jesus from the crushing crowds. No, they go to *restrain* him. *When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, "He has gone out of his mind."*

We do not know what drives his family's response — whether their instinct to restrain Jesus is born of care and concern, or of fear and shame. I'd guess it's both, but that's not the point. The point is that they intend to rein Jesus in. When they hear others saying that Jesus "has gone out of his mind," they go out to put a stop to it. Which means intervening in his holy work.

Of course, the Nazareth gossipmongers are not the only ones with something to say about Jesus' mental health. And his mother and his siblings are not the only ones who try to put a stop to his ministry. The temple authorities, who have come all the way from Jerusalem, now chime in: "He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons!" Jesus is surrounded on all sides and, yet — in some ways — he could not be more alone. His family, the religious leaders — the very communities that have formed him — now stand against him. They find his work threatening, for it has disrupted the institutions of faith and family that have ordered their lives. They fear who Jesus has become. So they close in on him in an effort to shut down his ministry.

To no one's surprise, Jesus has a response: "How can Satan cast out Satan?" he asks.

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 his end has come.

This all seems rather straightforward. But, then, Jesus — in true Jesus fashion — begins speaking in parables. He tells a short and violent story about a home invasion: *No one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man.* Which raises a question: Who exactly is the strong man of whom Jesus speaks?

Jesus leaves the rest of the Gospel to answer this question — which may or may not have been good news for the scribes but is good news for us. Because the story Mark tells is a story about the reign of God coming to overcome another reign — the reign of the power which holds creation captive. It is a story about the Son of God proclaiming the Kingdom of God, by forgiving sins and freeing people from *all* the things that bind — be it debilitating illness or debilitating fear, be it the things of death or, even, death itself. It is a story about God's Messiah binding the forces of evil and delivering the Strong Man's plunder — namely creation, itself — to the fullness of life.

This is what Jesus is about. This is his holy work. And, as we see in this passage, it is work that others find threatening. Jesus' family of blood and family of faith try to detain him; they try to stop his ministry. Even though no one can stop it. Not the religious leaders. Not the cheering, chanting, dizzy crowd. Not even the authorities who hang Jesus on a Roman cross. We've known from the beginning of this Gospel that Jesus is strong. John the Baptist introduces him, saying, "One stronger than I am is coming after me" (1:7, CEB). Turns out this Jesus is not only stronger than John; he's stronger than the Strong Man. He's stronger than the forces of evil and death.

Jesus does not take kindly to the scribes mistaking the power of the Holy Spirit, that is upon and within him, for the power of Satan. So he utters condemnation that sounds rather harsh, even for the likes of the scribes. "Whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness," Jesus says. He doesn't explain why this one sin is unforgivable. But here's the most helpful interpretation I've read: Misidentifying Jesus as demonic is a particular blasphemy because, in doing so, "one drives oneself away from the true agent of forgiveness."²

With this rebuke, the scribes exit the narrative — at least for the time being — leaving Jesus to deal with his family. At this point in the story, they're standing outside ... outside whatever home Jesus has come to, outside the crowd that now encircles Jesus. So others relay the message: *Your mother and your brothers and your sisters are outside, asking for you.* And Jesus replies with another word that sounds rather harsh: *Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.*

If a house is divided against itself, the house will not be able to stand. As a mother, my heart would break if I ever heard such words from my daughters' mouths. And, so, it's no surprise that my heart breaks for Mary and her seemingly fractured family. When I hear Jesus' words, I imagine a crack opening up in the foundation of this family's common life. More than that, I imagine the house falling down and Jesus rebuilding, stone by stone, on an entirely new foundation, leaving

² C. Clifton Black, "Commentary on Mark 3:20-35," www.workingpreacher.org.

his family of origin to look in from the outside. As a mother, my first instinct is to hear his response as a signal of estrangement. To hear this as a story of a house divided.

But I'm not sure that's quite right. Because Jesus does not actually say that this *new* family — the one united by a common purpose — cannot include his family of birth, his mother and his sisters and his brothers. Nor does he say that they are permanently on the outside, looking in. He simply redefines what family is. He expands the circle of belonging. He opens the most basic and essential human community to anyone who does the will of God. Whoever proclaims the Kingdom of God, whoever does what they can to defy the forces of evil and death, *they* are my family, Jesus says.

In this scene from Mark's Gospel, Jesus' family attempts to detain him and to disrupt his holy work. And, so, at the end of today's passage, they stand on the outside, looking in. But that doesn't mean that's where they'll be tomorrow. That's the good news embedded within Jesus' definition of family: The circle can always be drawn wider. It can grow to include those whose fears or misunderstanding once kept them from seeing a fuller picture of God's grace. Fractured families can be healed; broken communities can be restored.

I remember listening to a sermon by Jeff Chu, who is a Chinese American journalist and theologian who wrote a book called *Does Jesus Really Love Me?: A Gay Christian's Pilgrimage in Search of God in America*.³ Jeff was raised in a southern baptist household — the grandson and nephew of preachers — and his family holds a more traditional view of sexuality.

In this sermon, Jeff tells a story of repair. It begins with an email from his mother, asking if she might come cook a meal for Jeff's birthday. Despite the sound of it, this wasn't an ordinary offer. Because Jeff's mother hadn't been to visit in years ... not since Jeff and his boyfriend had moved in together, not since that boyfriend had become Jeff's husband. Jeff's parents didn't come to their wedding. But, now, months later, his mother was reaching out. To see if she could prepare a birthday meal for her son.

When she arrived in New York, one of the first things she did was to pull a gift out of her bag. It was an antique pair of ivory chopsticks. Everyone in Jeff's family has a pair, inscribed in red with their names. And these were for Jeff's husband. That was the first gift of the weekend; it was not the last.

Eleven friends were due to come for Jeff's birthday dinner. And his mother prepared a dish for each of them. She started cooking 24 hours before the first guest arrived — "standing and stirring and chopping and tasting until her arms and legs ached and her own appetite was gone. She wanted nothing more than for us to simply receive," Jeff says in his sermon. "This was her gift, her gesture of lavish love, her way of saying that she is trying ... It does not mean that we agree on

³ Jeff Chu and Sarah Bessey, hosts, "The Theology of Compost with Jeff Chu," *Evolving Faith* (podcast), July 8, 2020.

theology or politics,” he continued. “[But] It does mean she’s working hard, and so are we, to love as best we know how.”

He went on to say that five years after that birthday feast, his mom came to visit him at Princeton Seminary, and he got to take her to the farm where the seminary holds some of its classes. It’s a working farm and students participate in tilling the earth and turning the compost pile. At the time of her visit, they’d just slaughtered chickens at the farm. So, Jeff had saved one to cook with his mom. And they salt-baked it, in the way of his father’s tribe. It was at this point in the sermon that Jeff’s voice caught. “My dad still won’t meet my husband,” he said. “He doesn’t think I should be in seminary. Honestly, I’m afraid of hurting more. But I also love my dad and I know my dad loves me. So, when I carved the chicken, I saved a drumstick to send home ... with my mom. A reminder to him that, even if we disagree on many things, we can agree that we are father and son and we love each other.”

In his sermon, Jeff described gestures — some seemingly small, others surprisingly grand — but each one a meaningful effort to repair the ties that bind. I imagine Jeff would say that the work remains unfinished. That there are still cracks in the foundation of their family life. I do not know if his parents were in the circle that surrounded him when he was recently ordained to ministry. I do not know if his father has ever met Jeff’s husband. But, in any case, I would call the work he spoke of holy. I would say that each step toward one another is an attempt to do the will of God, to draw wider the circle of grace. And, through such gestures of love and mercy, we witness one family’s journey toward healing; we observe degrees of reconciliation that bear witness to the Gospel promise: Christ is and remains stronger than the forces of evil and death — forces that threaten to divide and destroy. Christ still works to loosen the things that bind — the pain, the shame, the anger, the fear — and deliver us to the fullness of life. And, as faithful ones who strive to do the will of God, we pray that Christ continues to work in and through us to draw the circle ever wider. Until those who have been pushed to the margins, or those who stand on the outside because they can’t yet see the goodness of God’s grace, find healing and restoration, as one family, one community in Christ.