

A House Divided – Not From Lectionary
10th Sunday after Pentecost - Year C - 08/18/2019
Psalm Reading: 80:1-2, 8-19
1st Reading: Luke 11:17-20, 2nd: 2 Samuel 2:8-16

In our reading from Luke, Jesus has been healing people. He has been driving out demons. As he is speaking to the crowd he comes to understand that some believe that he has been driving out demons using the power of the devil, or as our translation has it, by Beelzebub.

It is here that Jesus proposes some irrefutable logic. He says, “A house divided against itself cannot stand.” And, as we know, the devil is nothing if not logical. Thus, the devil would not countenance the driving out of demons by the devil’s power. So the power of Jesus must come from elsewhere, and that elsewhere, must be the opposing power of God.

While running for the Senate in Illinois, in 1858, Abraham Lincoln used this phrase, “A house divided...” in a speech. This was prior to the Civil War and he proposed that the nation could not continue to exist in a state where it was half slave and half free. He was basically saying that such a condition could only result in one of three things, that the nation become all free, that the nation become all slave, or the nation would end up chewing itself up in conflict from within, ultimately being divided in civil strife.

Most of you know that the acrimonious division in the United States at the time would result in a massive civil war. More than a half million people died in that struggle. Was the price paid in the conflict worth it? I would say that the conflict

was inevitable. It was fought over issues so fundamental to our being as a people that it had to be contested. I believe that there are indeed causes that must be supported even at the risk of division and destruction.

But I would also propose that such issues as those confronting the United States at that time: disagreements within families, within churches, within and among nations are rare. So rare, indeed, that most divided organizations are split over issues that are of no real ultimate meaning...And I would like to make it clear here that I do not think that we as a church are engaged at this time in a pointless conflict. I feel like I am preaching to the choir, so to speak, in this regard. But I do think there is a general need for an understanding of this concept when there seems to be perpetual acrimony and finger-pointing in secular society and, of course, there is occasional strife among families.

Now, this is a very complicated and nuanced issue because there is another point that needs to be made here. It is okay to disagree; it is okay to argue; it is okay to voice a contrary opinion. This is part and parcel of the exchange of information and the exploration for solutions that must perpetually go on within relationships. An organization is no longer vital when all discussion comes to a standstill just for the sake of getting along. The key is not to escalate on minor issues to the point of division or destruction.

I think the way to sort this out, to figure out what is so important that it is worth division, is to determine what the ultimate goal of an organization is. I think we can all agree on an ultimate goal in most organizations. For a family, for

example, it is to maximize the happiness and well-being of each individual. But where we may differ, yet work together is in the method for the achievement of ultimate goals.

Our second reading for today is a curious story I dug into because of my research into King David. I have never seen it in the lectionary, so it is a reading that doesn't come up too often. And though it has its gruesome aspects (but perhaps no more gruesome than grandma being eaten by a wolf in the Little Red Riding Hood story) I think it is quite instructive, an historical moral tale that bears repeating on occasion.

In our story, set about ten centuries before the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, King Saul, the first King of Israel has recently died in battle with the invading Philistines. David has been declared king of Judah, which is the southern-most part of Israel, and Ishbosheth has been elevated to be King over all of Israel by the army commander Abner. David sends his nephew Joab north with a force of troops and Abner comes south, probably with the intention of bringing Judah back into the fold of the Kingdom of Israel. The two forces meet at the Pool of Gibeon.

As the forces come together, they both stop at the pool with each group setting down on their own side of it. Then Abner proposes to Joab that there be a contest between some of the young men from each force. Now, we must remember that at this time, there has been no conflict no fighting between the two sides. And I can just imagine that this proposal is made rather lightheartedly by Abner as if he is proposing a soccer game or maybe a game of croquet. But no, this contest is going to be serious business.

Historians and commentators think they know pretty much how they would have arranged this “contest”. They would have chosen twelve young men from each side and lined them up facing each other. Then with a dagger or sword in their right hands they would have grabbed the beard of their personal opponent standing across from them in their left hand. Then they would have just waited until someone shouted “Go!” or for a horn to blow and then commenced hacking at each other. Not really a contest, not really a duel even, more like certain death for all the participants.

And as you can imagine, that was pretty much the result. The Bible tells us that they all “fell down together”. Now, they may not have all died, but all of them were at least seriously wounded. And if they thought by having this “contest” they might avoid a general battle, they were wrong on that score. A general battle immediately broke out on the conclusion of the “contest”. Many people were killed.

So, you can see that in the course of things we have a pretty sad ending for quite a few people. And I think their story is a good metaphor for what we can do to each other, do to ourselves, in a minor dispute that escalates far beyond what is reasonable. And what was the fight really all about? It was really about who was going to be the power over all of Israel, and even then this battle concluded nothing. There would be more fighting for years even after this episode. It was truly sad that there was not a more peaceful or equitable way of choosing a leader, or for dealing with people’s problems and differences.

I think that this is one of the strong points of our own system of governance, within our church, and within our nation. There are mechanisms for dealing with most problems, for dealing with most differences. I think it is when we wander outside these controls that we move into dangerous territory. This is where tragedy and division can occur.

It is when we descend into *ad hominem* attacks (name calling), or turn to violence that we begin to divide people, that we begin to destroy the reputations of groups or individuals. Instead the focus should ever be on the shared goals and let the differences over the means of accomplishing these goals be where engagement occurs. And the engagement should not be the kind of contest Abner and Joab conducted at the Pool of Gibeon, but logical, measured, productive discussion.

So, you are probably asking yourself, “Does God want us to simply give up all our principles so that we will all get along?” By no means. Jesus himself says, “Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No I tell you, but division!” (Luke 12:51) Here I believe he is talking about the fundamentals. And, indeed, Jesus was talking about the basics of our faith. He was speaking of our goal to live in faith when he refers to division of families later in this passage. These are the non-negotiable items I was talking about earlier. Additionally, this faith that we hold so close to our hearts is expressed by Jesus in other passages of the New Testament: Jesus told us to love one another, (John 15:12) and to love our enemies (Luke 6:27). These are ideas that are fundamental to our faith. These are non-negotiable items. It is non-negotiable that we love one another. It is non-negotiable that we love our enemies.

So ultimately, I think we must look at this issue from a practical perspective. We should understand that:

First: we are Christians living in faith, and this governs how we act.

Second: we have fundamental beliefs and goals that are, indeed, non-negotiable.

Third: there are many different ways to achieve the goals we set, or ways to maintain the principles in which we believe.

Fourth: we can disagree on the best way to achieve goals or maintain principles and still remain amicable with one another.

Fifth: we must love one another and operate by civilized standards.

I believe, in the course of our daily lives, in the course of history that we must always keep moving forward, forging ahead together toward a better future. For as you know, my friends, “A house divided against itself cannot stand.”

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