

Proper 5 B 2021

2 Corinthians 4:13—5:1

Mark 3:20-35

Jesus may have said it first,
But Abraham Lincoln made it famous:
A house divided against itself
Cannot stand.

And though we remember it now
As one of his great courageous moments,
The house divided speech
got Lincoln into trouble.

Almost as much trouble
As talking about a house divided
got Jesus into
When he said it
In the first place.

Lincoln only got called too radical.
Jesus, they said,
Had gone out of his mind.

And his family got so worried
When they heard the neighbors saying
He had gone out of his mind
That they came out to get him,
Tie him up,
Take him home,
Feed him,
And talk some sense into him.

Did he listen to his mother?

He rejected her.

This is harsh news,
For those of us who hope to find in the gospels
A certain image of family life,
Or rationale for loyalty,
Or a set of norms and expectations.

What is upsetting
Is that Jesus makes clear

That nothing we would expect to unify us,
To create bonds between us –
No family ties
No work relationships
No political stance
No solidarity with the oppressed
Or critical theory
Or aesthetic inclination
Or moral preference –
Makes any difference in his true family,
The family that takes his name,
The Christian household.

These things matter –
Family and work
And politics and art and ethics.
Our commitment to justice,
Our embrace of diversity,
Our willingness to change
For the sake of the common good.
And perhaps especially,
In these times,
Our work to keep the divided house of our nation from falling.
These things shape our lives
And the lives of others.
But beyond all these important things,
There is one thing of ultimate importance.
Our covenant with Jesus.

We have bound ourselves
To the one who cannot be bound.
Jesus,
The Jesus we see in this gospel passage,
cannot be tied down,
Or boxed in.

He cannot be made to conform to the norms,
The expectations,
The longings of his society
Or even of those who love him best –
Even when those norms
And expectations
Would seem to offer the best hope of a good life.

The loyalties, the rules,
The safeguards of his society

Are all things he sets aside
As he goes on his way,
Proclaiming the good news,
That God's kingdom has arrived.

And in God's kingdom,
Everything is new and different,
For him,
For his first followers,
And now for us.

In the kingdom of God,
Where the dream of God is real,
the household of Christ is our home.

When we enter that household of Christ
Through the waters of baptism,
We leave all the expected loyalties behind.
We leave our homes for a new home.

If this is good news,
It is shocking good news.

Tradition expects our loyalty
To be offered as it always has been:
To our families,
To those most like us,
To those with whom our lives are bound up.

But all that changes
At our baptism.
Jesus becomes our mother
And our brother –
Jesus, who does the will of God –
God's will for justice, mercy,
Welcome, acceptance, inclusion.

For the first Christians,
This new family tie
Cut across the dividing lines
That kept their world in order.
Male and female,
Slave and free,
Gentile and Jew.

In their ordered world,

Everyone had a place;
And some places were better than others.
Some people were better than others.
Some people were really people,
And others – were other.

But in the new world that unfolded
When they entered the household of Christ,
And sat down to eat together at God's table,
They were one in Christ.
Nothing else bound them together,
But if they proclaimed their unity in Christ,
Nothing else mattered.

A radical realignment like this,
For a new Christian,
Might mean a complete overthrow
Of the expected social world,
Loyalties, relationships.

Who are my mother and my brothers,
Jesus asks.
It's more than a rhetorical question.
It bursts all the bounds of expectation,
Duty, and even piety.
Remember his widowed mother and younger brothers
Depend on him.
But he shakes off their embrace, and proclaims,
My family are those who do the will of God.

It is this same unity in Christ
That binds us together now.
We each have most important things
We hold closest to our hearts.
This is the ultimate thing.
We set our hearts on Jesus,
The one who cannot be tied down.

When we take him as our friend and brother,
Our Lord and Savior,
We make some promises
In the baptismal covenant,
promises that have the power to change our lives.

We end that covenant with these questions:
Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons,

Loving your neighbor as yourself?
Will you strive for justice and peace among all people,
And respect the dignity
Of every human being?

Respect the dignity of every human being.

This is, perhaps,
The most radical thing we do.
Like the first Christians,
We promise to make nothing
Of all those things that separate us.
It is an act of will,
A hallmark of faith,
A sign of the presence of God,
That in the household of Christ
we promise to overcome the divisions and differences
that give shape and meaning to the rest of our lives.

We may believe that we are one
For some reason other than our baptism.
We may believe that we all hold certain truths
To be self evident.
We may not see that
The loyalties we unconsciously affirm
Are not hallmarks of our life in faith,
But signs of our attachments,
And our assumptions.

Unless we remember this:
It is only our baptism that makes us one.

Nothing but Christ unites us.
Nothing else matters here.

This is the house of God.
It is formed and maintained for no other reason
Than to proclaim and live the gospel.
Even in this year and more when we have been apart,
We have been proclaiming and living the gospel.
Some of us in acts of service.
Some of us in loving companionship
With those facing need or loss.
Some of us with dedication to formation.
Some of us by sharing worship with the world.
Some of us by taking to the streets,

With masks on,
And mindful of the risk.

Even apart,
We have been members of the household of God.

If we remember that,
If our words and actions
Undertaken in faith
Show forth the living Christ
Who gives meaning and purpose to our lives,
Who heals and renews us
Even as he heals and renews the world through us,
Then we will be one.

We will be one as we are reunited,
Gathering again in the sanctuary
That has become our home.

As we regather,
There is nothing more important than this:
We are bound together, ultimately,
Only by our way of faith.
If we begin to imagine
That we ought to share anything else,
Any musical taste, any opinion,
Any political stance,
We will find ourselves at odds;
We will leave some out
While counting others in.

We live in the world,
And it matters how we live in it.
We are not called to be above the fray.
These times demand commitment, and courage.
We must discern how we see God's will for justice and compassion
Reflected one place or another,
Or nowhere.

We live in the world,
And we struggle to make good choices.
And we live, already,
In the kingdom
That is not yet here,
Where we will gather again at the table,
United, at one with each other and with God.

That is the ultimate,
The essential truth.
If we are united in this essential,
And in charity with one another,
Nothing else can divide us.

If we can be, as we come together again,
A house united,
We will offer something precious
To our neighbors and the world.

The world is a place of bitter division.
It always has been,
But this is our moment to experience it.
Our nation is a house divided,
And the fear that it might not stand is real.

What can we show the world,
How can we witness in a way that makes a difference?
By living in harmony,
And witnessing to the power of love.

See how they love each other,
Said an amazed world
When they saw the first Christians
Bear witness to their faith.
There was nothing else they shared in common
But that love.

How can that unity
Translate to our communities and our national life?
If we are bound together in a love like that,
We can,
Like the leaven that disappears into a lump of dough,
Be part of the transformation
That brings forth something good,
And gives life to the world.