

First Presbyterian Church
Matthew 12:22-32, “A House United”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 7/12/2020

I want you to take a moment and get your arms straight down along your sides,
and then pull your shoulders up as high as you can and hold for five seconds.
Release!

If you're like me, you felt that. I carry tension in my shoulders.
(Even after vacation!)

Your body might do something else with it,
but we've got a *lot* of tension in our world right now,
and I guarantee you that it is making its way not only
into your internet feed, but into your body.

Now look, if you're blessed with low anxiety right now,
I do not want to take that away from you,
but someone you know and love is feeling it right in their shoulders.

When we get anxious and tense like this,
we want to find someone to blame.
And oftentimes it is someone who we know and love,
someone right in our family, our friends, or in our church.

Instead of focusing our energy on the love of God for ourselves, our neighbors,
and the world, we get into petty disagreements
that heighten our tension and drive a wedge between us
and the people we are called into discipleship with.

There's nothing that hurts quite like someone who is a friend
taking on the role of the enemy.
Feelings of betrayal and bitterness take a long time to heal.

Thankfully, our God is a God of forgiveness and reconciliation.

[PAUSE]

As we continue through the book of Matthew, let's keep in mind
that this section has been showing how Jesus passed his ministry
onto the disciples, and told them that they can expect
the same kind of response that he had received.

So they're all going around from town to town
proclaiming the kingdom of God,
healing people and casting out demons
and having compassion on the people
who were abused by the authorities.

The scribes from Jerusalem (which is the power center of the land)
had also heard about what Jesus was doing,
and (for reasons that are entirely unclear to me)
they had made a determination:
Jesus was possessed by Beelzebul,
the prince of demons, and it was by this power
that he was casting out demons.

Perhaps the scribes felt that Jesus was a threat to their authority,
that these displays of power would draw attention away from Jerusalem
and onto Galilee in a way that undermined their influence.

Who knows? But for whatever reason, it's clear that these scribes
came from Jerusalem to deliver a critical blow to Jesus' election campaign
by making people afraid of him.

They have drawn a connection between Jesus' central relationships,
his core identity and the power which animates his life and ministry.
He has power to deal with demons
because he is associated with demons, or so they say.

Well, at least they got his attention.

Jesus calls to the scribes and speaks to them in parables:

- Basic question addresses their premise: How can Satan cast out Satan?
- How can you change the color of the ugly red wall in your house by painting it red?
- How can you keep ants from invading your home by leaving glops of spaghetti sauce on the floor overnight ... (that's, uh, kind of a personal one for my family)
- Jesus is better at this than me, and he suggests several versions: A kingdom divided against itself cannot stand, a house divided cannot stand, and in the same way if Satan is against himself, he cannot stand.

This is essentially a deconstruction of the scribes' logic.

When important people peddle fear to the population,
there's always a flaw in their logic, a leap they don't want you to notice.

I wonder if there's another angle that Jesus is hinting at here as well:

Is there an implication that the Jewish teachers are dividing their own house
by opposing the Jewish Messiah who has been sent by God?

Because the idea of a house divided in the enemy's camp is just a fiction
that has been made up to discredit Jesus.

But the betrayal of Jesus by the very people he came to share
God's life and love with? That's all too real.

Then in v. 29, Jesus adds a new wrinkle that goes beyond the scribes' accusations.

This is a distinct parable about a strong man who owns a house
and another person who wants to steal from it.

I would suggest to you that in this parable,

Jesus is describing his own ministry using the metaphor of a thief.

He has come to steal the goods that belong to the strong man –
who would be Satan.

The works of healing and casting out demons

that the scribes have complained about are depicted (in this parable) as
Jesus having his way with what used to be another person's property.

The point being, there's no way Jesus the "thief" could ever do such things
if Satan the "strong man" were not first bound up.

But if the strong man is bound up?

"Then he can plunder the strong man's house."

Verses 30-32, A warning

Jesus follows the parable with a warning:

All sins of humanity will be forgiven,

(whatever blasphemies they utter! – this is not, I must note,

an endorsement for blasphemy) *but* whoever blasphemes

against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven. Wow.

As a kid I was terrified about this special kind of sin,
one that there was no turning back from.
Step across the line of the unforgivable sin,
and it's a double dose of strychnine to your soul.
That's terrifying!

Not only was it terrifying, but it also was nigh impossible to figure out
if you'd done the deed or not. Blaspheme the Holy Spirit?
How do you even *know* if you've done that?

Well, Jesus is warning the scribes that, because he is filled with the Holy Spirit,
attributing his work to Satan is like calling God the Devil!
(Which is blaspheme.)

And if you think God is the Devil,
then how could you ever find forgiveness?

The unforgivable sin isn't a discrete act that can never be undone.
There's no lurking temptation to commit a sin
that will mar our souls forever.
If we are willing to call the work of God,
the work of God,
then we don't need to live in fear of this thing.

But there is the question... will we know the work of God when we see it?
Can we discern the work of the Holy Spirit even when it runs counter
to our pet-allegiances of our work, our family, our sports,
our entertainment, our country, our politics?

In this time of tension and anxiety, when we lash out at each other
and are all riled up, it's easy to find ourselves divided
within the house of God. A house divided cannot stand.

I think God calls Christians to discern what is happening and call out injustice.
There are times for hard conversations and uncovering the truth.
But it is not the job of the church
to be merchants of guilt, shame, or "I told you so!"

Because Jesus has bound up the strongman,
we don't have to play the division game.
We can choose the unity that Christ has purchased for us.

We are stacked up like living stones to be a house united through the Holy Spirit.
Which means we take all our pet-allegiances and say,
“The one thing that I hold onto is Jesus Christ
through the Spirit of love, and that holds me and you
together with the rest of humanity
in an unbreakable and holy bond.”

The world is tired and anxious and there's no sign of that letting up
over the next six months.
So as we carry out our ministry together,
take time to encourage someone.

Guess what? Today, July 12th,
is the official birthday of First Presbyterian Church, McMinnville.
Our church has been a house united for 169 years!
There's something really good happening for a church to remain vital for that long.
So let us celebrate the church's birthday by cultivating
a house united in Jesus' name.