

“Mr. President and Gentlemen of the Convention. If we could first know *where* we are, and *whither* we are tending, we could then better judge *what* to do, and *how* to do it. We are now far into the *fifth* year, since a policy was initiated, with the *avowed* object, and *confident* promise, of putting an end to slavery agitation. Under the operation of that policy, that agitation has not only *not ceased* but has *constantly augmented*. In my opinion, it *will* not cease, until a *crisis* shall have been reached, and passed. ‘A house divided against itself cannot stand’.”



How many of us think of Abraham Lincoln – rather than Jesus- when we hear “a house divided against itself cannot stand”? Lincoln used that phrase in his speech in 1858 accepting the nomination of his party for a seat in the Senate. A race in which Lincoln would face Stephen Douglas and be defeated.

According to commentators, “even Lincoln's friends believed the speech was too radical for the occasion. His law partner, William H. Herndon, believed Lincoln was morally courageous but politically incorrect. Lincoln read the speech to him before delivering it, referring to the "house divided" language this way: "The proposition is indisputably true ... and I will deliver it as written. I want to use some universally known figure, expressed in simple language as universally known, that it may strike home to the minds of men in order to rouse them to the peril of the times.”

Reflecting on it several years later, Lincoln’s law partner Herndon said, "Through logic inductively seen, Lincoln as a statesman, and political philosopher, announced an eternal truth -- not only as broad as America, but covers the world."

Another lawyer, Leonard Swett, said the speech defeated Lincoln in the Senate campaign. In 1866 he wrote to Herndon complaining, "Nothing could have been more unfortunate or inappropriate; it was saying first the wrong thing, yet he saw it was an abstract truth, but standing by the speech would ultimately find him in the right place."¹ Jesus was Lincoln’s model for speaking truth to power. For speaking God’s truth even when it would ultimately result in Lincoln’s as well as Jesus’ death. Jesus spoke to all – not just to those related by blood – the very ones who were afraid that he had “gone out of his mind.”

Sometimes, as family, we are too close to a person or a situation to see the truth of the matter. Too often, as family, our first instinct is protection and preservation of the status quo. I love you, but don’t you think you could turn down the rhetoric? I love you, but you’re upsetting Grandma with your talk of trekking in Nepal. It’s too dangerous. It’s too far away in case something goes wrong. How can we be sure you will get good medical help? They are good questions and

¹ <http://showcase.netins.net/web/creative/lincoln/speeches/house.htm> June 7 2012

legitimate concerns but they seek, too often, to preserve the status quo rather than considering how we might need to grow and spread the love of God into the world.

Jesus urges his followers, his family and those gathered so closely around him that they could not even eat to consider “who are my mother and my brothers?” Are my mother, brothers and sisters only those related to us by blood? Or by similar political ideology? Or maybe, as we know from the parable of the Good Samaritan, my mother and my brothers and my sisters are the ones who show mercy. Or, as Jesus says in this passage in the Gospel of Mark, “whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”

Jesus knows what the psalmist tells us this morning: “Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you keep me safe; you stretch forth your hand against the fury of my enemies; your right hand shall save me. The Lord will make good his purpose for me; O Lord, your love endures for ever; do not abandon the works of your hands” (Ps.138:8-9).

Jesus knew, against all evidence pointing the other way that even though he would give his life in doing God’s work, that God’s love endures forever and Jesus was not abandoned. Jesus was not abandoned, even on the cross. The resurrection was God’s “yes” to the world’s “no.”

In the letter of Paul to the church at Corinth, Paul reminds us that when we believe, we are to speak. We are to speak of and through faith resting in confidence that “the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and will bring [us] into [God’s] presence (2 Cor. 4:13-14).

The knowledge of God’s abiding love doesn’t mean we might not be afraid when we choose to speak the truth to power. When we choose to voice an unpopular opinion. When we decide to move forward despite what we know will be fierce opposition. When we decide to move outside our family’s norms and might even be ostracized. We might not be welcome at the table on Thanksgiving.

Speaking God’s will can result in our being ostracized or separated from those we love most. The ones we love most are also the ones who often can hurt us most. Well-meaning and believing, but we’re sometimes called to speak and to act as we understand God’s will which may not be the same understanding of those with whom we share familial ties.

What is the will of God for us in this place and this time? The prophet Micah (Mi. 6:8) tells us:

He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?

Jesus tells us:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets’ (Mt. 22:37-40).

And we're back again to the question that Jesus poses to the crowd: "who are my mother and my brothers and my sisters?" And the question Jesus poses in the parable of the Good Samaritan:

Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" [The lawyer] said, 'The one who showed him mercy.' Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise' (Luke 10:36-37).

A house divided cannot stand. When we insist upon seeing the world as who is "in" and who is "out" we will remain divided. We will be weaker than we can be if we see everyone- regardless of race, gender, age, intellectual capacity – whatever the criteria is- as a child of God, worthy of respect and dignity and love.

If you have trouble seeing where we are divided, I invite you to watch the evening news- just one evening will give you more than enough examples of how we are so very divided and how our world is broken and far from the realm of God that seeks health and well-being for everyone.

If you need a reminder of our call to care for our brothers and sisters, I invite you to you're your Prayer Book to our Baptismal Covenant. Several times a year, we say together words found in our Baptismal Covenant (BCP 299, et seq). We say these words when we have a baptism and we say these words even when we don't have someone to welcome into the body of Christ. These words are a reminder to us of God's will for all the world. Of God's call to us to be a house united and not a house divided. When we say our Baptismal Covenant, the priest asks the congregation: Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

And the people respond: I will, with God's help.

Note especially: *With God's help*. With God's help we can each do our part in carrying out God's will for this world. *This is not something we do alone*. We act in conjunction with our families, with our business and social connections and we act in response to God's love for us. The greatest difference we can make in this world is to act out of love and not out of fear.

Take some time this week to consider where you can act to heal the house divided. Where you can respond in love and not in fear. Where you can bring that bit of the Garden of Eden that resides in us² to the surface.

Ponder Lincoln's words on the eve of the Civil War: "If we could first know *where* we are, and *whither* we are tending, we could then better judge *what* to do, and *how* to do it." Where are you, what are you tending, what can you do and how can you tend to God's will in this world at this time and in this place? *Amen*.

² See Mark Barger Elliott in Feasting on the Word, Year B, volume 3 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox), 111 (quoting Emil Brunner).

2 Pentecost/Proper 5

June 7, 2015

1 Samuel 8:4-11, 12-15, 16-20, 11:14-15; Psalm 138; 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1; Mark 3:20-35