

June 7, 2015

TEXT: Mark 3:19b–27

TITLE: Healing Divided Houses

I don't usually begin my sermons with a joke, because ministers that do that every week have congregations that remember the jokes but forget the sermons. I recently read a great quote by Albert Einstein, but for the reason I just mentioned, I'm not going to tell it to you now. I want you to remember the rest of the sermon. I want you to remember how different Jesus sounded in this passage from Mark 3 from how he usually sounds.

Our tendency as modern church members is to tame down Jesus' message. We love the image of Jesus in freshly-pressed robes blessing the little children. We gravitate to the gentle teacher sitting on the hillside saying "Blessed are the meek and pure of heart, for they shall inherit the kingdom of God." But we do Christ a disservice when we sentimentalize the gospel. The same Savior who sat at table with Simon the Pharisee spent most of his time tired and dusty from walking back roads, reminding people "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (Lk 9:58). The same Messiah who is the humble Lamb of God—"a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench" (Isa 42:3)—is also the one who in this passage compares himself to a thief, suggests that he is able to tie up a strong man and then rob his house of all its valuables. It's a surprising message, to say the least.

Jesus has not been having an easy day. He has a crowd following him around Galilee that is so big and so demanding that he doesn't have a spare moment even to eat a meal. Outside the house, his own family is worried about him, thinking he is ill or worse, mentally unbalanced. And closer at hand, some religious leaders from Jerusalem have just upped the ante in their accusations about him. No longer is Jesus just a misguided teacher from the backwaters; no longer is he a dangerous rule-breaker who heals people on the Sabbath and socializes with tax collectors and sinners. No, now the scribes insist he is only able to cast out demons because he is in league with the devil.

Jesus finally has enough of this and calls out his critics. Right in front of the huge crowd, he tells them their logic is lousy. "How can Satan cast out Satan? A house divided against itself cannot stand. If Satan's kingdom is divided in the way you suggest, then his end is surely about to come." Then Jesus talks about entering a strong man's house, tying him up and plundering his property. In this case, the image is like a soldier bursting into a house when someone is holding others hostage. Jesus suggests he has come to bind up Satan, to bind up strong men who hold others captive, so that their house will be plundered – the captives will be set free—the lies and liars will be bound up and God's truth will rule the day.

It's straight talk from Jesus, spoken both to that crowd long ago and to us today. No divided house can long stand, whether the division is in our nation or in our

community or in each of our individual hearts and lives. If something is holding our souls captive, we need to bind that thing up. We are to turn from sin and turn back to God. We are to serve the Lord only, loving God and loving our neighbors as ourselves. That's the core message. But it's a message that we too often water down and sentimentalize. Just like we prefer the gentle Savior offering the Beatitudes on the hillside, we are prone to turning Jesus' emphatic words about the two great commandments into candy-coated confections that will gently melt in our mouths on Sunday mornings. In order to get you to hear Jesus' words about how he is a thief plundering houses to set us free, tying up strong men who would hold us captive, I need to talk about something else for a while.

So let's talk a moment about your driving skills, OK? If I asked you whether you are a good driver or not, most of you would say, "I'm a good driver. I haven't had an accident in years." Now, just because you got home without having an accident doesn't mean you're a good driver. Getting home safely doesn't mean you didn't cause an accident somewhere along the way. In the course of driving around the 'Burgh, I'm sure there are times you didn't quite stay in your lane, times when you had to hit the brakes or swerve suddenly or caused someone else to hit their brakes or swerve; times when you went through a light that was a little bit red, or drove a bit too fast or a bit too close to someone else's bumper.

One of the main reasons we all are occasionally bad drivers is that too often we drive while distracted. Now, here's the quote I mentioned to you at the beginning of this sermon. Albert Einstein once said this: *Any [person] who can drive safely while kissing a pretty girl is simply not giving the kiss the attention it deserves.*¹ Kissing someone is a pretty serious driving distraction. But as we all know, other driving distractions include tuning the car radio or trying to unwrap a McDonald's hamburger. One study found that almost 80% of car crashes involved drivers who were not paying attention to traffic for only about 3 seconds before the event. One of the worst distractions now is cell phone use while driving. Even if you are watching the road while talking on the phone, your brain is a house divided and you're at risk of an accident. What typically happens is that cell phone users lock their eyes on the road ahead—which means they are not looking down to check their speed or looking left and right to notice traffic patterns or pedestrians in their peripheral vision. Having your eyes on the road doesn't do any good unless your attention is on the road too. A house divided can neither stand nor safely drive in rush-hour traffic.

Jesus is accused of doing good while actually working under the authority of that which is evil. The religious leaders knew he was performing healing miracles, but they accuse him of doing so in allegiance with the devil. They wanted to protect their influence. They wanted to maintain a status quo instead of seeing that the Kingdom of God was right here in their midst. Jesus pushed back on their faulty logic and told them to snap out of their spiritual distractions and focus on what's most important. Divided spiritual houses cannot stand. Jesus said in effect, Stop doing what isn't helpful—no, more than that, you need to tie up and subdue what

isn't of God in your life, so that what is righteous and true and life-giving can be set free at last. There's no shortcut here. Sure, you can drive distracted—but in the long run, it's not safe. You can live spiritually distracted, but that's not the life Jesus calls you to live.

There are lots of distracted, divided houses right here in our community as well as here in our individual lives. There have been 36 homicides in Pittsburgh so far this year—and 30 of them have been African Americans. There's a real problem with racism and guns and criminal justice and economic inequality here in our city. When we say "Black lives matter," it is not said as if other lives don't matter. It's spoken to snap us out of our distractions and focus our attention back onto what's right in front of us—this sin of daily violence so that we will move and act in ways that bring justice to all people, especially those dying on our streets now. When we follow the media story about Bruce Jenner, now transitioned to Caitlyn Jenner, some want to distract us and claim her story is just some awkward entertainment hype. We need to bind up those prejudices long enough to ask, "Why haven't I heard stories about other transgender people until now? Where was my attention focused or distracted on while others in the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender communities were at risk, made homeless, or pushed to commit suicide over the years?" Or when we read news stories about boat people fleeing North Africa and drowning at sea, or Latinos dying in the deserts of American border states, we need to subdue the political rhetoric about immigration issues and asked instead about migration issues—about how humans for millennia have traveled across continents to survive and how our privileges today too often require someone else being oppressed in another land.

Jesus asks each of us to consider how strong men are holding us captive to sin and prejudice. Jesus warns us about how strong men use modern chains to control us—keeping us constantly distracted; so busy that we hardly have time to eat, sleep, nurture healthy relationships, or focus on what matters. Think about how many times, out on the road, you wanted to shout "Put down your phones and drive!"? How is Christ trying to get you to hear that same message today? To stop being distracted by sins, addiction, fears, secrets and doubts that divide you body and soul?

In the end, the answer isn't complicated. It just requires your undivided attention—your undivided focus in a world that will always try to distract you for its own advantage, not yours. Jesus says, "The two greatest commandments are these: Love God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength—and love, yes, love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus says, "Turn from sin. Tie up these strong men in your divided houses. And come to me, all you that are heavy-laden. Follow me and I will set you free." And something has to be the first step in this process of healing division. So why not a meal? Why not this meal? It only takes a second to put down the phone and re-focus on the road. It needn't take any longer to do the same with your soul. Come to the table. Come to Christ, a house that's not divided.

AMEN

¹ Tom Vanderbilt, Traffic: Why We Drive the Way We Do, 2008, p. 74.