

6.9.2024 Pentecost 3

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Genesis 3:8-15; Psalm 130; 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1; Mark 3:20-35

“The household of God”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Has anyone ever said to you, “Are you out of your mind?” “Have you completely taken leave of your senses?” It seems to happen to me all the time: “Pastor, are you out of your mind? We don’t do things that way.” Or, “Pastor, we’ve never done that before. Are you sure?” This has happened every place I have served. It happened in Japan: “McKenzie-sensei, you’re American and you don’t understand the way we do things.” In this country as well: “Pastor, you’re new here; you’re not from around here. That’s not how we do things around here.” These words are often used by folks who didn’t want me to rock the boat or challenge the status quo.

Jesus was rocking the boat in his small community, and people were starting to talk. His family was getting annoyed because they couldn’t even eat in peace and quiet. Jesus was out in front of the family home with a crowd of people and his family went outside to restrain him because people were starting to say, “*He has gone out of his mind.*” I imagine people were saying, “He’s welcoming all kinds of people! Have you seen the people he eats with? Sinners, outcasts, prostitutes, tax-collectors! All these transgressors and sinners gathered in front of our house! What will the neighbors say? *He has gone out of his mind.*”

The word used to describe Jesus means “insane” or “mad.” It literally means, “to stand outside of oneself.” Thinking that Jesus was insane, they called the scribes to come and assess Jesus, to do what today we might call “an intervention” on Jesus. Yeah, right, like you can do an intervention on Jesus! The scribes said, “*He’s possessed by Beelzebul.*” Possession by Satan is, of course, the general stock answer we give when we don’t like something or someone. We call them “crazy, evil people.” Of course, it’s easy to see through this sort of verbal trickery. Jesus was not insane, nor was he possessed by Satan. Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit that descended upon Jesus at his baptism, the Spirit that led him into the wilderness, was now leading him in ministry. This same Holy Spirit leads us in our ministry as we welcome all of God’s children as members of our church family – the outcast, the sick, the struggling, the addicted, the oppressed, the weak, those who are seen as unclean or different – we call all people “members of God’s family” – for that is what Jesus calls us. It is what we are – forgiven sinners. Our ministry is to unconditionally welcome others as Jesus has welcomed us.

“Pastor, are you out of your mind?” – this is what people say when I preach Jesus’ gospel of love for all people. Jesus commands his followers to love as he has loved us. Yet in our world, in our nation, and in our communities, we continue to be a house divided.

In 1858 running for Illinois state senator, Abraham Lincoln made effective use of Jesus’ words about “a house divided,” saying about America that, “A house divided against itself, cannot stand.” Lincoln said America “cannot endure permanently half slave and half free.” Lincoln did not expect the nation to remain permanently divided. Like a prophet, Lincoln said that our national house would eventually become one or the other. We would either be possessed by a spirit of freedom and welcome for all people, or we would be enslaved by a spirit of division and enmity.

Looking at the state of the world today, I wonder what Abraham Lincoln would think about today’s household of humanity as we continue to divide and separate people. More than at any other point in my lifetime, nations, communities, religions, and churches are divided and polarized. Jesus’ words continue to hold up a mirror to the sinful and divided state of humanity in this nation and around the world. Jesus recognized the insular and dividing nature of families, religions and nations. He who said, “*For God so loved the world,*” looked at the crowd gathered on his doorstep and said, “Here is my family. God loves you. ”

One of Jesus’ sayings that is often misunderstood is the so-called “sin against the Holy Spirit.” It is not that complicated; it simply means speaking against or denying the voice and work of the Holy Spirit. The sin of the scribes was that they had called good, “evil,” and evil, “good.” They had called the Holy Spirit dwelling in Jesus, “evil.” They called Jesus’ Spirit-led gospel of love and the acceptance of sinful people, “evil.” So in reply to them, Jesus said the unforgivable sin is to call the good things of the Holy Spirit, “evil.”

And yet this is what humanity continues to do every day. I see and hear it all around me all the time. Voices of nationalism around the world calling neighboring nations “evil,” invading and attacking their neighbors. Voices of nationalism and partisanship in this nation that call one another “evil.” Voices of so-called Christian people who withhold love and acceptance from others because of their ethnicity, nationality, gender, identity, or culture - calling them and treating them as unclean and “evil.”

Jesus responded to his family and the scribes’ hardness of heart saying, “*Who are my mother and my brothers?*” Looking at the crowd on his doorstep, Jesus said, “*Here are my mother and by brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.*” Jesus overcomes the

sin of limiting the Holy Spirit to only one family, nation, political party, or even religion. In calling all people his family, Jesus is seeking to unite the household of humanity, rather than to divide it. “*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son*” are words about God’s love for humanity.

“But Pastor, are you out of your mind? We can’t have those people in this church!” How many times have I heard this – often spoken in subtle and polite ways? Yet we welcome all at the door of this house, those seeking God’s blessing and those seeking to do God’s will. We welcome the hungry, homeless, and struggling; we welcome members of AA and SLAA; we welcome you whether you are old or young, gay or straight, rich or poor, no matter your skin color or complexion, or your ethnicity or national background. We welcome all people because we are all God’s children and members of Jesus’ family. The biblical promise is for all: “*Whoever calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved*” and “*Whoever does the will of God is my brother, sister, and mother.*”

“But Pastor, are you out of your mind? Family comes first, church family comes first!” Whenever I hear those words, they remind me that someone is trying to limit the Holy Spirit to one group of insiders. The Holy Spirit is always seeking to do a new thing among us – always seeking to widen the divine welcome of all people into God’s family.

As Christians we can tire of the struggle. But when I feel drained by the evil and dividing voices and actions of this world, I do not lose heart. As St. Paul writes, “*Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day.*” I remember words my father said to me when I was a young man beginning seminary, “Tim, the danger of this work is cynicism; the danger of being a Christian is thinking that the Holy Spirit is not alive in your work or in the work of the church.” The Spirit renews us daily so we can proclaim good news to all people.

As a church, as individuals, and as a nation, we can become cynical and jaded, thinking that our lives and our work are of little meaning. We can be tempted to call good, “evil,” and evil, “good.” Tempted to go along with the crowd, rather than walking with the one who says, “Follow me.”

We are building God’s house – not with human hands – but with the power of the Holy Spirit! God loves this world, and loves all people who call upon his name, seeking to do his will.

God has no hands and voices in this world but yours. God has no family in this world but you. God so loved the world. Let him love the world through you. Amen.