

Second Weekend After Pentecost (RCL/B)
Genesis 3:8-15, Psalm 130, 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1, Mark 3:20-35
June 5-6, 2021
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Abraham Lincoln wasn't a churchgoer but he was deeply religious and he knew his Bible. His "House Divided" speech quoted Jesus' words in today's Gospel. Lincoln gave that speech on June 16, 1858, 163 years ago a week from this coming Wednesday. Called by some "the single most important day in his career,"¹ it was the occasion on which the Illinois State Republican Convention nominated Lincoln to face off against the hugely popular Stephen Douglas in Illinois' U.S. Senate race. The series of debates preceding the election propelled Lincoln onto the national stage. Lincoln lost that Senate run to Douglas, but two years later Douglas lost to Lincoln in the presidential election. By then millions of Americans had read the House Divided speech.

We've all heard stories about how Lincoln wrote the amazing Gettysburg Address on the fly.... By contrast, he labored hard, in advance, on the House Divided speech. He even previewed it for some party leaders the night before he gave it. Their advice to him: chuck it; prepare something else! He didn't. The topic, of course, was slavery. In 1857 an enslaved man named Dred Scott had been transported to a U.S. territory where slavery was forbidden, and he had sued for his freedom. The case went all the way to the Supreme Court, which decided (5 to 4) that a slave is property and property cannot properly be taken from its owner. The decision said that the Declaration of Independence's assertion that "All men are created equal" didn't apply to "the enslaved African race."² 'Probably not a coincidence that 4 of the Supreme Court justices dissented from that decision and 4 of them happened to be from free states....

Lincoln quoted Mark 3:25 (which we just heard) to make his point: "*A house divided against itself cannot stand.*" He continued:

I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half **slave** and half **free**. I do not expect the Union to be **dissolved**. I do not expect the house to **fall**, but I **do** expect it will cease to be divided. It will become **all** one thing, or **all** the other.”³

We know our history. The Union was fractured by the secession of the southern states, but ultimately survived and thankfully became fully free, with enslaved people granted their freedom. In this instance, I think Jesus must have been glad to be quoted by a politician for a purpose of which He actually approved, for a cause that served the fuller coming of the Kingdom of God. Remember the passage our Lord read from Isaiah 61 the day He preached in his hometown synagogue?

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Luke 4:18-19*

Today's Gospel is one of those strange ones with odd details that may make us think, "What?? What did I just hear?" We're in St. Mark's Gospel, which starts with an adult John the Baptist in the wilderness urging the people to repent. There's no Nativity, no Christmas story in this Gospel, no angel visiting Mary in person or Joseph in a dream, no inn with no room, no birth story, not even the Holy Family's flight to Egypt or 12-year-old Jesus worrying His parents sick by staying behind in the Temple in Jerusalem. This is the first time any of Jesus' family appear in this Gospel, and they basically show up with a butterfly net, wanting to quietly capture Jesus and take Him back home where they can care for Him, because they think He's lost it. Totally nutters, gone bonkers, off His rocker. And even that unflattering view of Jesus is an improvement over the judgment of the religious leaders, who accuse Him of being possessed, in league with the devil.

But Jesus says it's **their** view that's **really** crazy. Here's the reworded version from *The Message*:

The religion scholars from Jerusalem came down spreading rumors that [Jesus] was working black magic, using devil tricks to impress them with spiritual power. Jesus confronted their slander with a story: "Does it make sense to send a devil to catch a devil, to use Satan to get rid of Satan?" (Mark 3:22-23)

Then He says: "A constantly squabbling family disintegrates." (Mark 3:24) That's the paraphrase of "... if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand": "A constantly squabbling family disintegrates." Then Jesus says He's come to tie up Satan and throw him out off the property he's been poaching on: God's property. Jesus has come to reclaim and further the Kingdom of God. He doesn't just describe what the Kingdom's **going to be like** in the future; He **makes it happen now**. The healing has begun! Already in Mark's Gospel Jesus has cast out a demon from a man in the synagogue, cured Peter's mother-in-law of her fever, cleansed a leper, caused the paralytic to walk, restored the withered hand of yet another synagogue-goer. Satan is running for the hills!

Yet Jesus' family fears He's crazy and His enemies charge Him with demon possession, a crime punishable by either banishment or execution. To give the religious leaders the benefit of the doubt, maybe they are so perplexed by the exorcisms and healings Jesus has performed that their minds are blown and they cover up their lack of understanding with an accusation of sorcery. Others see craziness in Jesus' lack of self-preservation, His willingness to go up against the powerful religious establishment, a very dangerous thing to do. People also see as insane all the energy our Lord Jesus pours into people of no account, the dismissed and almost invisible underbelly of society who won't be able to reward Him for His efforts: women, the poor, the differently abled. It's almost like they're saying, "It's crazy to care so much."

In **that** sense, may **we** be as crazy as our Lord! May we go beyond **imagining** what the world will be like once the Kingdom has come, and become channels **through** which God's Kingdom may come and God's will be done, as we pray in the Lord's Prayer. Has anybody ever said **to** us or **of** us, "It's crazy to care so much"? Why was the Social Ministry team out there in

raincoats to pull off the plant sale to benefit Common Ground Grief Center and Family Promise during the monsoon last weekend? Why do the Furniture Bankers and the Kitchen & Linen Brigade invest their precious time and limited energy in helping people they've never met before and will probably never see again? Why do our Stephen Ministers regularly volunteer their time to visit or call people going through rough patches? Why do our Sunday School teachers make a commitment that hems them in every Sunday morning? From the outside looking in, "It's crazy to care so much." But from our inside perspective, "It's divine to care so much."

Going back to Abraham Lincoln: he was president during the Civil War. It was ugly. It was bloody. During a reception after a Union victory a clergyperson approached him and said, "Mr. Lincoln, isn't it great God is on our side?" And the president answered, "Reverend, I'm more concerned that we're on God's side." Despite all that divides us, all the opinions that vary, all the disagreements we could name, we must be a house united, serving God's purposes, living out our vocation to preach the Good News, if necessary using words, in all things allowing God to use us to bring about the Kingdom. Here's how Paul put it in his letter to the Philippians:

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, ² make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. (Philippians 2:1-2)

Let's be crazy enough to care. Let's be possessed by the Holy Spirit, like our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

¹Philip B. Kunhardt, Jr., Philip B. Kunhardt III and Peter W. Kunhardt, *Lincoln: An Illustrated Biography* (NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 108.

²Carl Sandburg, Edwin C. Goodman, editor, *Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years and the War Years* (NY: Sterling, 2007), 81.

³Op. cit. Kunhardts, 120.

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham