

“A House Divided”

*A Sermon Written by the Rev. Stephen R. Silver
for First Congregational Church of Lebanon
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Mark 3:20-30

²⁰[A]nd the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. ²¹When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, “He has gone out of his mind.” ²²And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, “He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.” ²³And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, “How can Satan cast out Satan? ²⁴If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. ²⁵And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. ²⁶And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. ²⁷But no one can enter a strong man’s house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered. ²⁸“Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; ²⁹but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin”—³⁰for they had said, “He has an unclean spirit.”

“A house divided” is one of the most famous images in the history of American oratory. It’s a powerful phrase, one that resonates with us, perhaps because we live in a polarized society at what seems to be a critical juncture in the life of our nation. So, it seems apt for us to spend time thinking about Abraham Lincoln’s words, and the Scripture that inspired them, on this Independence Day weekend.

Lincoln most famously used these words in 1858, at the Republican state convention in Springfield, Illinois, where he was nominated for the Senate seat held by Stephen Douglas. At this point in time, such a nomination was still a rarity; the second on record, to be specific. You may recall that prior to the early 20th century, U.S. Senators were elected by the state legislatures, not the public at large.

In Illinois, there was some talk about the Republicans supporting the Democrat Douglas, because he had opposed the Lecompton Constitution for Kansas in 1857. This was seen as a big deal by some, since this proposed charter would have allowed slavery to continue in the territory. It was supported by President James Buchanan, an ardent supporter of slavery, along with Southern Democrats.

Stephen Douglas was a different case. His issue was “popular sovereignty,” the idea that each state should be able to decide how to govern its own affairs. Locals, not far-away politicians in Washington, were better positioned to decide their future. Since the

majority of settlers in Kansas Territory opposed slavery, Douglas supported their position—but that wasn't the same as opposing slavery itself.

Abolitionists and other Republicans were thus opposed to Douglas' serving another term in the Senate, and so they supported another candidate: Abraham Lincoln.

Now, we remember Lincoln as perhaps the greatest of presidents, a martyr to the cause of the Union, a giant among men. But in 1858, all of this was in the future. Then, Lincoln was just a one-term representative long out of office—a successful lawyer, yes, but not the equal of Stephen A. Douglas, the “Little Giant,” who had made his mark in the Senate and the nation with legislation like the Compromise of 1850 and the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Douglas had been a contender for his party's presidential nomination more than once. A shrewd politician, he recognized Lincoln's talents and would take him seriously as an opponent.

The speech that Abraham Lincoln gave on a hot, muggy night in Springfield was in many ways the beginning of his presidential career. This address would set him on the path to the highest office in the land, just two years after he failed to gain election to the United States Senate.

His case was simple: Douglas did not care whether slavery existed. If the voters of a state or territory deemed that desirable, then it should be so. Lincoln feared that this attitude, coupled with the infamous Dred Scott decision, would eventually lead to the spread of slavery throughout the entire Union. That, he believed, would be wrong. Lincoln's view on the matter of slavery and the role of black people in the United States had evolved over the years and would continue to do so through the Civil War. But it is clear that by this time he was implacably opposed to the idea of slavery and its further spread, and he foresaw a day when the institution would be gone. That, however, would require people to take a stand against it. Lincoln was in danger of being labeled an abolitionist, still a risky thing in those days. He jeopardized his future by doing what was right and just.

In his speech, which was far more eloquent than I may ever hope to be, he made the case that the Republic could not remain divided. He began his remarks by saying:

If we could first know *where* we are, and *whither* we are tending, we could 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.”

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.

He used language from the Bible, from a verse that may be found in Matthew 12:25 and Mark 3:25. There is also a similar sentiment in Luke 11:17. But notice that he makes no reference to Mark or any Gospel or even the Good Book at all. Was it because he was ashamed of his source material? Not on your life.

Lincoln was a voracious reader who knew his audience. He knew they would be familiar with his Scriptural reference. The Bible was a universal touchstone in those days, a text people knew. It was not just a religious work, but a cultural patrimony. It was a shared possession.

This verse appears early in Jesus' ministry, just after he has returned to his hometown and retired to a house that soon is crowded with a throng of people. There, he is confronted by members of his family and scribes from Jerusalem after performing a healing. His relatives suggest that he might be out of his mind, crazy, and that he needed to go with them. His claims to have healed people were seen as a sign of his precarious condition.

The scribes had a different theory: Yes, Jesus had driven out malign spirits, but not because of any special connection to God. Rather, he was in league with Satan, who had empowered him to slay the demons that had possessed people.

Jesus showed how absurd this claim was with a parable, explaining that it made no sense for Satan to let another attack one of his minions. It was the road to self-destruction, to suicide, and it made no sense. That was what Jesus meant when he said a house divided against itself cannot stand. The internal contradictions would be too great, and they would be fatal.

That was why this was a perfect passage for Lincoln to use: The Union was the house, and the tensions of its being part-free and part-slave could not continue.

Lincoln also knew that the parable Jesus used of the strong man needing to be bound before another could ransack his house was meant to suggest that Christ was the robber, as odd as that may seem. The strong man was the devil, and the devil's belongings were a captive people, enslaved to sin.

Lincoln counted on his audience's familiarity with Scripture to make his case. In this speech, he did not call for civil war. He was not looking toward a day when armies would take to the field. But he knew the issue would have to be resolved, one way or another, that a crisis was in the offing, not because of any words he might utter, but because of the divisions that defined America. Lincoln's preference was that the United States rid itself of slavery, not that her sons would go to war with one another.

When Lincoln eventually won the presidency, it was the Southern states that decided to bolt and to preserve slavery within their borders, a goal made clear in several secession statutes. When Lincoln waged war, it was first to preserve the Union; as the conflict progressed, it was to end slavery.

Lincoln was not a divine benefactor, able to deliver real freedom to the enslaved in one fell swoop. Word of Emancipation didn't reach Texas until Gordon Granger arrived in Galveston and announced General Order No. 3 on June 19, 1865—two months after Lincoln's martyrdom at Ford's Theatre and Lee's surrender to Grant at Appomattox Courthouse, and two and a half years after the Emancipation Proclamation went into effect. But what Lincoln did, what he struggled for, was good, truly good, and of the utmost importance.

Though Abraham Lincoln was not a member of any church, his thinking and his speeches were infused with Biblical themes. His Second Inaugural Address, on which I preached five years ago this weekend, is possibly the greatest piece of public theology in our nation's history, revealing a mind that was profoundly shaped by Scripture, not content simply to quote the Bible for convenience but to let it shape him.

Lincoln had learned from the Bible that one must act; that justice has a claim on each of us; that God is not always on our side, for often our cause is not just, contrary to what we might think; that when we believe we are the "good guys," the Lord might see things differently.

It is possible that Lincoln's life would have been easier had he equivocated on this issue. But he didn't. He grew, he learned, and, one might argue, he repented.

This is the lesson we all need this year—that to stand by silently, to not take a stand, is in actuality to take a stand. As Edmund Burke once wrote, "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing." Lincoln was a good man who recognized an evil and chose to do something. He saw that he needed to take a principled position. Yes, it was one with which a growing number of people sympathized. But many wished to ignore the issue, imagining that would simply make the problem go away.

I do not believe we are on the precipice of a civil war. But I do believe that our nation has become dangerously polarized, when people place partisanship over reality. In these days, we will be called upon to take stands, even ones that may alienate people. But Lincoln did just that. And long before him, Jesus, the one we claim to be our Savior, did that, too.

May God grant us the wit, the faith, and the courage to follow their example.