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Mark 3:20-35
June 6, 2021

“House Divided”
Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

And the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, “He has gone out of his mind.” And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, “He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.” And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, “How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. But 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 . . . Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, ‘Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.’ And he replied, ‘Who are my mother and my brothers?’ And looking at those who sat around him, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.’

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*In a world rife with division,
make us one, O God, even as you are one.
Unite us now by your spirit
that we might go forth from this place as witnesses
to the transforming power of love in our world.*

We've all seen Hollywood's classic depiction of the well-intentioned intervention gone awry. In this portrayal, half a dozen friends and family members gather in the living room and wait to broadside a worrisome friend with their fears of drug or alcohol addiction. Sometimes, these representations end in the unsuspecting friend being driven to a rehab facility by a family member or escorted there by orderlies in white suits. More often than not, the scenes conclude with the person running away feeling betrayed and angered by being brought face to face with an uncomfortable truth.

Not unlike these Hollywood depictions, an account of one intervention from the 1890s unfolded as follows: A family at wit's end was concerned by the alcoholism of one of its members—a young man. Those concerned gathered and determined to send the young man to Illinois' own Keeley Institute in Dwight, Illinois, about an hour south of here. Fearing the young man's ability to make the journey alone, an uncle was enlisted to accompany him.

Along the way, the young man convinced his uncle of the medical necessity of numerous stops for alcoholic refreshment along the way. He also convinced his uncle to imbibe with him. By the time they arrived in Dwight, the young man, whose tolerance was far greater than his uncle's, admitted the uncle to the Keeley Institute and absconded with the uncle's beloved car. It was four days before the young man had to face his uncomfortable truth once again and returned to the institute, this time as patient.¹

I share this story today because it's not unlike the situation Jesus found himself in. His antics had gotten out of hand, he was being declared "demon-possessed" by the religious authorities, and his family was on its way to *restrain him*, as our text says. However well-intentioned, this ill-fated intervention did not go as planned. He turned away his mother

¹ William White. "An Intervention Gone Wrong," Williamwhitepapers.com, May 12, 2017, <http://www.williamwhitepapers.com/blog/2017/05/an-intervention-gone-wrong.html>.

and brothers and responded to the accusation of demon possession with an often quoted and brilliant little piece of rhetoric: “How can Satan cast out Satan . . . if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand.” Jesus stated the obvious: the devil would gain nothing by consorting with Jesus to cast out the devil’s own minions. And truth be told, it wasn’t the devil dividing the people in Jesus’ day. It was wealth, class, empire, and power—an uncomfortable truth. Jesus knew that a house divided against itself cannot stand.

Echoing Jesus, in June of 1858, an Illinois politician delivered these now-famous words from the statehouse floor:

*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.*²

Pushing back against the Supreme Court’s Dred Scott decision denying citizenship to people of African descent and paving the way for the spread of slavery into new territories, Abraham Lincoln spoke an uncomfortable truth to those seeking compromise and middle ground on the issue of slavery.

This past Wednesday, nearly 100 years to the date, three surviving victims of the Tulsa Race Massacre testified before the House Judiciary Subcommittee that has been studying reparations for the descendants of enslaved people of African descent in this country. The Tulsa Race Massacre left up to 300 African Americans dead and 10,000 homeless. Unable to obtain even a modicum of justice through the courts after 100 years, survivor Lessie Benningfield Randle stated:

² Roy P. Basler. *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, The Abraham Lincoln Association, 1953.

*I am here today, 106 years old, looking at you all in the eye. We have waited 100 years - no, we have waited too long. And I am tired. We are tired.*³

An uncomfortable truth.

In recent weeks, the fight for truth itself is being taken up once again in the name of national unity. Expected to become an issue of significance in the 2022 midterm elections, Critical Race Theory is fast becoming contentious among those who believe that its proponents “want to teach our children to hate each other.”⁴ An academic approach to the reality of ongoing racism in America, Critical Race Theory centers “on the idea that racism is systemic, and not just demonstrated by individual people with prejudices. The theory holds that racial inequality is woven into legal systems and negatively affects people of color in their schools, doctors’ offices, the criminal justice system and countless other parts of life.”⁵ Opponents, however, claim that it “asserts that people with white skin are inherently racist, not because of their actions, words or what they actually believe in their heart — but by virtue of the color of their skin.”⁶ To the contrary, Critical Race Theory aims to compel “us to confront critically the most explosive issue in American civilization: the historical centrality and complicity of law in upholding white supremacy.”⁷ It is an uncomfortable truth.

³ Jauna Summers. “Survivors Of 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre Share Eyewitness Accounts,” Wbur.org, May 19, 2021, <https://www.wbur.org/npr/998225207/survivors-of-1921-tulsa-race-massacre-share-eyewitness-accounts>.

⁴ Barbara Sprunt. “The Brewing Political Battle Over Critical Race Theory,” Npr.org, June 2, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/06/02/1001055828/the-brewing-political-battle-over-critical-race-theory>.

⁵ Marisa Lati. “What is critical race theory, and why do Republicans want to ban it in schools?” Washingtonpost.com, June 1, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2021/05/29/critical-race-theory-bans-schools/>.

⁶ Barbara Sprunt. “The Brewing Political Battle Over Critical Race Theory,” Npr.org, June 2, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/06/02/1001055828/the-brewing-political-battle-over-critical-race-theory>.

⁷ Marisa Lati. “What is critical race theory, and why do Republicans want to ban it in schools?” Washingtonpost.com, June 1, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2021/05/29/critical-race-theory-bans-schools/>.

Unlike the young man in the anecdote I shared earlier, our religious tradition is founded on facing the uncomfortable truths head-on, rather than running from them. In fact, Jesus himself built a career on it and landed himself on a cross. There is little question, the fact is that we are still living in a house divided—divided along cultural lines, socio-economic lines, political lines, ideological lines, and, perhaps most insidiously, along centuries old racial lines. It is an uncomfortable truth, but that doesn't make it untrue.

Like the religious tradition on which it was established, this church, New England Congregational Church, was established on facing the uncomfortable truths head-on. In 1844, just 6 years after its formation, our founding church, now known as First Congregational Church, left the Presbyterian tradition due to its tolerance of slavery to become a leading local voice in the abolitionist cause and an important stop on the Underground Railroad. Just two decades after its inception, that congregation gave birth to New England Congregational church in 1858. An ardent champion of women's rights since its beginning, this church also carried on the legacy of support for the abolitionist cause. In 1863, the congregation adopted the following resolution:

1st That we as Christian men and women most solemnly protest in the name of our holy religion against any compromise or concession that shall add to our responsibility for or complicity with the stupendous wrong of American slavery. 2nd That we shall always feel in duty bound, by means of free discussion, to bring the system of chattel slavery to the test of right reason and the word of God, and that we shall always exercise ourselves to have consciences void of offense toward God and toward man, in respect to slavery by using all proper methods of keeping alive the agitation of the subject, so long as we shall live or until slavery shall disappear from the American continent.⁸

⁸ Gary L. McCann. *Through These Doors*, New England Congregational Church, 2007.

Friends, the uncomfortable truth today is that this work is not yet done. The effects of slavery persist. The conditions of inequality endure. We continue living in a house divided. Justice is granted to some. Truth is determined by some. And others still wait, though they have waited too long and they are justifiably tired. In 1844, 177 years ago our forebears made a stand—spoke an uncomfortable truth in a house divided. May we carry forth their cause, so long as we shall live or until slavery, in all its forms, shall disappear from the American continent, so help us God. Amen.