

A House Divided
Mark 3:20-35

Our text is the Gospel Lesson assigned to the 3rd Sunday after Pentecost. From Mark chapter 3 we listen again to verse 24:

If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand.

Dear Friends in Christ,

Have you ever been told that you look just like someone else? Have you ever been mistaken for someone famous? Many years ago I served a congregation in East Brunswick, New Jersey. When I first arrived at the church, one of the first things the chairman of the congregation said was, "Pastor Clemons, you look just like the governor." Over the course of my years in New Jersey, I was told I that I looked just like Governor Thomas Kean probably a hundred times. Twice I was actually approached by people who addressed me as "Governor Kean," once in the Federal Building in New Brunswick and once at the Newark Airport. Both times I was wearing a suit and carrying briefcase, so I looked the part. Mary and I thought it was funny to be mistakenly identified as the governor. But in the back of my mind, I was hoping Gov. Kean did nothing during his tenure to upset the New Jersey organized crime syndicate, especially in central N.J. where we lived.

There is one person in particular that we will all want to identify correctly and that person is Jesus. Get his identity wrong and you'll be more than embarrassed come Judgment Day. Who do you say Jesus is? Some in our sermon text thought Jesus was out of his mind, a madman. Others said he was a double agent, posing as a force for good, but actually working for the forces of darkness! Still others considered Jesus family. Let's find out how Jesus himself wants us to identify him.

The first identification attempt in our text comes from those who should have known Jesus best of all, his mother and his siblings. However, when they heard that Jesus was so busy teaching and healing that he didn't have time to eat, they told anyone who would listen that Jesus was out of his mind. (Mark 3:21).

His beloved mother Mary thought that Jesus was out of his mind? Maybe that's not so surprising when you consider how we often think the very same thing. "You want me to worship every Sunday AND attend Bible Study every Sunday AND go to midweek Bible class every week AND give back 10% of my income to the Lord? You want me to honor and obey my parents who are so un-cool? You want me to keep my body for my spouse alone? Really, Jesus? You've got to be out of your mind!"

The thing is Jesus is out of his mind. He's crazy about you and he doesn't want to lose you to Satan and to eternal damnation. Wasn't that Jesus' point when he told the parable about the shepherd who left behind 99 perfectly good sheep to go looking for the one lost sheep? Why didn't the shepherd just cut his losses? Why spend the time and effort looking for an animal that had probably wandered off before, and would probably wander off again?

Or take the parable of the lost coin. There Jesus compared himself to a woman who gets down on her hands and knees to find a coin she has lost. There's nothing unusual about that, but when the woman finds the coin she calls in friends and family to celebrate. I've often wondered whether that party cost her more than the silver coin was worth. It certainly would illustrate how our rescue from sin cost Jesus a price so high that makes us marvel at his willingness to pay it, rejection by his heavenly Father and a painful death on the cross.

So should it really surprise us to hear that Jesus willingly skipped meals to help sinners he had come to save? He seemed out of his mind because he had given his mind and his heart over to serving and saving lost souls. How comforting that thought is for you and me who keep falling into sin. It would be easy to believe that Jesus could never love us. But he does. He's crazy about us, and we'd be eternally lost without him.

There were others in our text who thought they knew who Jesus really was. When the religious leaders saw Jesus cast out demons they said he did so by Satan's power – as if Jesus were a double agent trying to make it look like he was from God by driving out these demons, but was really doing that to gain people's confidence so he could later mislead them.

Jesus responded, ²³. . . *"How can Satan drive out Satan?"* ²⁴ *If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand.* The thought that Jesus represented Satan is absurd. The goal of Satan is not to remove himself from the lives of people like you and me. His goal is to remove God from our lives. How inconsistent, how counterproductive for Satan to work against himself! He's too smart for that.

Satan's goal is to drive a wedge between us and God, to create a division, a divided kingdom. He wants to get us to ignore God, or better yet, to rebel against him. It's been his goal right from the start. In our first lesson today we heard about the aftermath of Satan's temptation of Adam and Eve. In the Garden of Eden, Satan got Eve and Adam to doubt God's word, "Did God really say . . ." and he got them to doubt God's love, "If God really loved you he wouldn't keep something so good from you. If you eat this you will be like God." Satan uses the same line of attack today. He wants you to doubt God's Word and to doubt God's love for you. "How can Satan cast out Satan?" The Devil is too smart for that. He knows ²⁴ *If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand.*

Jesus wasn't a double agent working for Satan. Instead he compared himself to a strongman who had come to bind Satan so that he could rescue all those who had been held hostage

by the Prince of Evil, the Father of Lies. The Apostle John saw that truth illustrated in our second lesson this morning. (Revelation 20:1-6). There he witnessed an angel bind Satan for a thousand years. Jesus did that, not just by casting out demons, but by preaching the truth of God's Word and pointing out man's inability to save himself. Jesus urges us all to put our faith in him. When we believe the truth about Jesus, we are no longer held hostage to Satan's lies.

Because Jesus was intense about saving everyone – even those religious leaders who kept rejecting him, he issued a serious warning in our text. Jesus said that if the religious leaders continued to willfully reject his witness and all the miracles he had done, and if they continued to call his activities “satanic,” they would become guilty of the sin against the Holy Spirit for which there is no forgiveness. “Now wait a minute,” you may be thinking, “I thought all sins are forgivable, and in fact are forgiven? What's Jesus talking about here?”

Yes, the death of Jesus was sufficient to pay for every sin. However, you only receive the benefit of Jesus' death when you believe in him as your Lord and Savior. Unbelievers don't receive the benefit of Jesus' death (the forgiveness of sins) because they don't believe in Jesus. It's the Holy Spirit's job to bring people to faith. So if a person keeps rejecting the Holy Spirit, (and we are able to do that) if a person keeps rejecting the Holy Spirit, that person will never come to faith and never benefit from the forgiveness that Jesus won for him.

Think of it like this. If a hiker carelessly strays off the trail and gets himself into a situation he can't get himself out of, he should be glad when he sees the rescue party arrive to take him to safety. However, if the hiker tells the rescuers to go away, if he refuses their rescue attempt, there is nothing the rescuers can do but leave the stranded hiker to fend for himself, and of course, eventually die. The foolish hiker would perish, not so much because he strayed off the trail, but because he refused those who had come to rescue him. That's also the nature of the sin against the Holy Spirit.

Now we certainly wouldn't resist the work of the Holy Spirit, would we. Well, think of this, whenever we ignore God's Word, whenever we treat God's Word with a bored indifference, we're telling the Holy Spirit to ‘buzz off’ as if he's a bothersome fly. If he were to do that, if he were to leave us on our own, we would eventually lose our faith. And without faith in Jesus there is no salvation – only a fearful expectation of eternal wrath. But the Holy Spirit doesn't leave us on our own. The Holy Spirit works to strengthen our faith and keep us in the one, true faith.

So far we've heard Jesus identified as someone out of his mind and as a double agent, an agent of Satan. But how does Jesus identify himself? When word reached Jesus that his mother and brothers were looking for him, Jesus looked around and said, ³³ *"Who are my mother and my brothers?" he asked.* ³⁴ *Then he looked at those seated in a circle around*

him and said, "Here are my mother and my brothers!" ³⁵ *Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother.*" (Mark 3:33-35 NIV).

Jesus identified himself as family to all who do God's will. God's will is that we repent of our sins and put our faith in Jesus for salvation. Jesus considers such people his own flesh and blood. Jesus literally said, "*Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother.*" (Mark 3:35 NIV). In other words Jesus treats you as if you're his mother or his brother or his sister! It's sadly ironic then, when many insist that it's better to offer prayers to Mary than to Jesus. The thinking is that Jesus wouldn't turn down any of his mother's requests so it would be better for us to ask Mary to pass along our requests to her son. But what does Jesus say? If you put your faith in him, you are a mother or brother or sister to him! You can go directly to Jesus yourself and share with him whatever is on your heart.

Of course this doesn't mean that Jesus will give you whatever you ask for. Think of how Jesus treated his mother Mary in Cana when she indirectly asked Jesus to take care of the lack of wine. Jesus flatly told her that his time had not yet come. Still, Jesus did what was best for that wedding couple, and he did so in a way that was probably better than anything Mary had in mind. Therefore you too can go boldly to Jesus with your prayers but at the same time you'll trust that he knows what is best and will give you what you need when you need it. After all, Jesus is family.

On both occasions when I was mistaken for Gov. Kean, the people quickly realized it was a case of mistaken identity, laughed it off, and went their separate ways. There will be no laughing on Judgment Day, however, when many come up to Jesus and slap him on the back as if he's been an old friend only to hear Jesus say: "I never knew you. Away from me you evildoers!"

Do you ever worry that Jesus might say these words to you? Well, it depends on who you say Jesus is? Do you think he's out of his mind when he urges you to follow his Word and not just listen to it? Do you think he's an agent of Satan as did the religious leaders of Jesus' day? You would never dare say such a thing but do you treat coming to hear and study his Word as if it's a form of torture or as if it's something beneath you? Even if you have thought of Jesus and his Word in this way, Jesus extends his hand of forgiveness to you, a believer. He assures you that he has paid for those very sins. As Jesus said in our text, ²⁸ *I tell you the truth, all the sins and blasphemies of men will be forgiven them.*" (Mark 3:28 NIV). You can believe it, Jesus counts you as family. Amen.