

“The End of the Civil War”

Psalm 138; II Corinthians 4:13-5:1; Mark 3:20-35

June 7, 2015, Pentecost II

Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut

The Rev. Dr. Brian R. Bodt, Pastor

“A house divided against itself cannot stand.”

These words of Jesus from today’s Gospel were made famous by Abraham Lincoln as a candidate for U.S. Senate. Nominated by Illinois Republicans as a candidate for U.S. Senate, he went on to engage Democrat Stephan A. Douglas in the Lincoln-Douglas debates amidst the gathering clouds of war. Lincoln’s nomination speech on June 16, 1858 prophesied the conflagration to come with these words:

“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.”

The conflagration to come was, of course, the American Civil War. While social, economic and military historians attribute the Civil War to multiple causes, there is no question that the future of American slavery was at its heart, described nearly 100 years earlier by our founder, the Rev. John Wesley, as “the vilest that ever saw the sun.”

We now near the end of the 150th anniversary of the American Civil War. Many Americans typically think of the war’s end on April 9th, 1865 when Confederate General Robert E. Lee surrendered the Army of Northern Virginia to Union General Ulysses S. Grant and the Army of the Potomac at Appomattox Court House, Virginia.

Yet due to poor and uncertain communication, conflict continued throughout the southern United States until June 19th (known in the African-American community as “Juneteenth”) when the last Confederate armies surrendered and fighting ceased.

These early days of June and today’s Gospel reading (Mark 3:20-35) reminded me of this history. The end of the American Civil War determined finally that slavery would end and that we would truly be “the land of the free,” though as recent events have revealed the struggle for true emancipation continues.

Jesus’ declaration announced the end of spiritual civil war. His retort – “A house divided against itself cannot stand” – was in response to critics who accused him of being Satan, saying “*He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of demons he casts out demons.*”

If that is so, Jesus says in effect, you won’t have to worry about me because I’ll collapse, like a family divided against itself.

But Jesus and his house—the church—doesn’t collapse. Except when we do.

We remain united and standing because the Christian faith has prospered for over 2,000 years and because we see evidence of God constantly if we have eyes and hearts to see and because this community is here united in mission and ministry.

But we divide and risk collapse when little things—at the Fair on the Green or in our lives—become big things because we are tired or lose our perspective or fail to pray or forget that we are all doing the best we can or forget that our fellow travelers on the spiritual path are also children of God.

We divide and risk collapse when, as the national United Methodist Church has recently proposed, the welcome to all people regardless of sexual orientation or identity becomes conditional on a pastor’s opinion or a local judicatory, rather than being a full and inclusive welcome for all throughout the whole church.

We divide and risk collapse when we think that our faith is something we can nurture in one hour a week and expect it to stand up to challenges big and small.

We divide and risk collapse when discord in our families remains unaddressed and festers, only to erupt at the least convenient time with the most destructive results.

What to do? Let me offer three seeds from today's scriptures that are worth planting:

We're all headed the same place. It's the grave. Sorry to be "Donald Downer" but that's the way it is. I got good-natured ribbing yesterday by wearing a clerical collar and suit at the Fair on the Green until I said, "Well, I had a burial at King's Highway Cemetery." Oops! Paul says it like this in Second Corinthians: "*For we know if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.*" Keeping our ultimate destination in mind is a great corrective to our inclination to serve our own needs.

So we do not lose heart. Whatever things are dividing us from God and one another, we do not lose heart. Difficulties are temporary and obvious; blessings are eternal and must be seen with the eyes of faith. There's an old saying about the church that it's like Noah's Ark: you couldn't stand the stench inside if it wasn't for the storm outside. I'm not willing to adopt such a jaundiced view of the church. But I do think that if we are placing our confidence in the church it is misplaced. Our confidence is in Jesus who corrects our faults as well as comforts our afflictions.

Whoever does the will of God is Christ's family. Jesus says the spiritual civil war is over because there is one family in him: "*Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.*" Jesus offers this corrective to a clannish view of family that places family of blood and birth above everything else, including the sovereignty of God. But he also offers it knowing

that our earthly families invariably get embroiled in conflict that, when we forget God, will destroy us. Many families and many churches, including our own, know this truth from difficult experience. Rather than become embroiled in those things that too easily distract and destroy us, Jesus offers a simple prescription: do the will of God.

Of course, most things that are simple are not. We have just finished four weeks of adult study grappling with what the will of God is with respect to innocent suffering, unanswered prayer, God's purpose for us and why God's love prevails. These conversations move us to deep water, deep revelation and deep faith. Simple, they are not. But the alternative is to place our faith in something less than the Lord of heaven and earth. It seems to me that life is too challenging, complex and, at times, down right hard to place my faith in anything else than the power of God: not in this church (as much as I love you all), not in my family (as much as I love them all), not in the good will of others (who are as fickle as I can be) and certainly not in myself (as a sinner saved by grace).

The adult study we just concluded was written by Rev. Adam Hamilton, pastor of the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kansas. For twenty years he has ended his Easter sermon this way: *"The worst thing is not the last thing. People ask me 'Do you really believe that ultimately good will triumph over evil and God's plans will ultimately prevail?' And my answer is always the same, 'I not only believe it, I am counting on it.'"*

The worst thing is not the last thing. The civil war is over. I'm counting on it, thanks to Jesus. And just in case we forgot, the Words of Institution in the Holy Communion seal the deal: *this is my body, broken for you. This is my blood, shed for you.* To God be the glory. Amen.