**Text: Mark 3: 20 – 35**

A House Divided

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. “Mr. President and Gentlemen of the Convention. If we could first know where we are, and whither we are tending, we could then 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.” This is an excerpt from one of the most famously quoted speeches in our nation’s history. The year was 1858 and the question of slavery in the United States had started to boil over. Slavery had always been an issue in the United States believe it or not. In 1787, the United States Constitutional Convention decided that in order to make things more equal for southern states, slaves were not to left uncounted, but rather they only counted 3 out of every 5 slaves toward the state’s respective populations. In 1820 the United States Congress passed the Missouri Compromise in order to balance the legislative power of free states against slave states. This was eventually repealed in 1854 and was considered unconstitutional in the landmark Dred Scott case of 1857 which declared that slaves and the offspring of slaves could not be American citizens. In 1858 Abraham Lincoln made this impassioned speech, after he had received the nomination from the newly formed Republican Party to run for Senator of Illinois. From the section that I quoted, Lincoln’s speech seems rather prophetic as he states that the United States needs to make the choice to be free or not. It can’t be both, despite the fact that it had existed as such for over 60 years at this point. The purpose of this statement was to assert that the Union of the United States cannot stand if it is so overwhelmingly split over this issue of slavery. Yet the decision point is coming where the United States must choose one or the other, whether through peaceful means, or violent ones. The idea of ‘a house divided’ was one that I have heard quoted throughout my studies of history, and what’s more, it’s a concept that makes sense.

It wasn’t until a few years ago that I learned that the source of this quote wasn’t Abraham Lincoln as I had previously thought, but rather it’s Jesus! In fact this is a quote that can be found, not just in our reading from Mark, but also in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. When reading it in context, Jesus is using it in order to counter the arguments of the scribes, who made the foolish assertion that it was through Satan that Jesus was casting out these demons. Jesus response is a simple one, how can Satan cast out Satan? How can evil get rid of evil? That makes no sense for a house divided against itself cannot stand. This argument can also be applied in the reverse. If God is responsible for giving us every good thing, how then can he be responsible for the evil that happens in our world? If God’s desire is to save humanity, why would he seek to destroy his reputation with them? It makes no sense. It would require God to act contrary to his very promises, which we know is something that he doesn’t do. Let us apply this to the church, for it seems that the Christian world and its variety of denominations embody the very vision of a house divided. What’s worse is that you can see the repercussions, especially those of you who were alive in the middle of the 20th century. In the 50s and 60s the church in America was at its height. Thanks to the baby boomers, infant baptisms shot through the roof from the immediate post war years until the second half of the 60s. Now here we are in the 21st century, and the bottom has fallen out of the graphs. Church membership has never reached that peak and in fact over the course of the past 30 years, it has declined rather remarkably. In that time, we have seen the rise of non-denominational churches that don’t really teach much about God, but certainly know how to boost your self-esteem. We have watched as the secular world has sent its tentacles into the church, in order to pull the church away from God and closer to “accepted societal norms.” We have seen this time and again, most recently in a supreme court case regarding a baker. And with each passing year, it seems that the church is slipping farther and farther into this black hole. Partially its because the world does not view the church as something sacred. Instead the church is just another organization. My friends I am here to tell you that the church is not just another organization, as I’m sure you already know. In fact this is not just any other building. But rather this is a sacred space.

Sacred. The word sacred is defined as, “connected with God or dedicated to a religious purpose and so deserving great respect and reverence.” This place, right here where we are sitting, where I am standing, is as sacred as the Church of the Nativity, it is as sacred as St. Peter’s basilica, it is as sacred as the very temples in which Jesus taught. It may seem rather unassuming to us, after all we are here all the time! My friends I tell you that there is nothing unassuming about the place where God comes to deliver his word and sacrament. The place where God delivers his gifts is a place to be set apart and treasured. For this is the very place where the promises of God turn into actions. God is not divided against himself. We are. Christians as a whole are divided. People leaving the church is not a result of faithful teaching and preaching of God’s word and administration of the sacraments. Instead it is people using the word of God for their own selfish gain that are leaving the church. It is people, who go to a church that does not teach a distinction between the standards of God and the standards of our society. These are the people leaving the church, and these are the churches that are suffering the most today. The churches that have divided the Word of God against itself have lost their purpose. For if God’s word does not carry weight, then neither do the words or actions carried on in a church. If we can simply cut out pieces of scripture to fit our needs and desires, then what surprise should it be to us that membership is falling.

My friends it is my joy to tell you this day that our God is not divided, rather he is unified in his mission. He is unified because if he is divided against himself, then we have no hope of salvation. Thanks be to God that his mission is clear. His mission, to bring all believers unto himself, has not changed. This is where we fit in. I’m certain that it is our desire that all Christian people would think and act a like. However, not even Abraham Lincoln got the satisfaction of watching the United States mend itself. The issue wasn’t even resolved after 600,000 people were killed in the bloodiest war on American soil. The racial issue, in fact, still exists today, over 150 years later. We are at the point now where the church must choose one or the other, it must choose to follow either God or the world. That doesn’t mean that the decision will be easy, that the road won’t be bumpy, for any struggle is going to result in heartbreak and sorrow. Yet believe it or not, we are the start of it. I’m not talking about the LCMS or the Michigan or English districts, I’m talking about us, right here in this room. We need to be an example of what the church looks like. We need to make sure that we are unified in our mission as the people of Hope/Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, to preach the gospel and bring the gifts of forgiveness and life to the people of central Michigan. When we are properly united as the body of Christ, we are an example of the grace and mercy which he gives to us. When we are united in the mission of the Church, we do not speak of the church as some intimidating place, but rather it is a welcoming, sacred, and unique place unlike any other. This is the place where we learn of our salvation. This is the place, where we learn, as Paul says, “**Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen…For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.**” That house, eternal in the heavens, was built by a God unified in his purpose for us. It was built as a place for us not with hands, but with blood. It was built for us because Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are united, not divided, in their desire save all of humanity. Let us not be divided in our mission, but rather let us unite together, as one body of Christ, to share the news of Jesus. Let us unite to show the world how God works in our lives every day. Let us unite to receive his gift of forgiveness of sins and his promise of eternal life. As God is united in his mission for us, let us be united in our mission for him. For it is through that mission that we have a foretaste of the everlasting unity that all believers will one day have with their God in paradise. Amen. Now may the peace of God which surpasses our understanding keep and guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus now and forever. Amen.