

## “House divided” Mark 3:20-35

**Then he went home, and the crowd gathered again, so that they could not even eat. And when his family heard it, they went out to seize him, for they were saying, “He is out of his mind.”**

**And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem were saying, “He is possessed by Beelzebul,” and “by the prince of demons he casts out the demons.” And he called them to him and said 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 is coming to an end. But no one can enter a strong man’s house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man. Then indeed he may plunder his house. “Truly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the children of man, and whatever blasphemies they utter, but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin”— for they were saying, “He has an unclean spirit.”**

**And his mother and his brothers came, and standing outside they sent to him and called him. And a crowd was sitting around him, and they said to him, “Your mother and your brothers are outside, seeking you.” And he answered them, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” And looking about at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother.”**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

“And so, we also speak, knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence... So, we do not lose heart... [whatever happens] ... For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison...”.

And all of that is ours not because of our goodness, but because God so loved the world... despite the fact that it was our rebellion and foolishness that left the Son of God hanging naked on the cross.

How wonderfully encouraging, how comforting, how uplifting are these words of Paul the apostle of Jesus Christ. Paul knows what he is talking about: he had been taken to the third heavens, he had seen the glory of God’s presence, more, He had experience it. He also had lived through challenges and conflicts, dangers and betrayals beyond comprehension.

So, yes, Paul’s words strengthen us to endure in every situation, keeping our eyes on the wonderful hope, on the certain promises that we have in Jesus. And we need this. Especially now as we again enter *that* season in our church’s life.

What season? The season of divisions, suspicions, accusations, scheming, gossiping and the lack of love and grace in our relationships. The season which lately comes upon us every three years. Synodical season.

I say this with deep sadness, because I have no pleasure in engaging with the same controversial topic again, and again, and again. The truth is – quoting Jesus words from today’s Gospel reading – we are house divided.

On the one hand, this is nothing surprising, for the Church in this age is called the Church Militant. Why? Because the true Church is always under attack, always battling to keep the life-giving Gospel pure, free of errors.

But house divided cannot stand. That is not just a proverbial truth. We witness it with our own eyes. Our house is collapsing faster than we realize. According to reports at SA/NT District synod, in 10 years-time we will have only half of our pastors left and, I don’t know, maybe half of our members. Meanwhile ... again, we focus on the ordination debate.

I am not sure how you feel and what you think about this. I imagine that many are so tired from this arguing and feeling stressed and just want the issue to go away. You probably were hoping for that already in 2000, and then again in 2006.

I was hoping that it would go away after 2015, and then again after 2018. How much is enough? Just imagine, we spent the previous synodical term bringing together our brightest minds, holding more than 30 presentations LCA-wide, asking the entire church for constructive feedback.

All of that in effort to make a case from the Scripture that that is okay to abandon our current teaching and to replace it with something else. And the result was... a very poor document, so poor that it wasn’t even presented to the Synod. Why? For it was impossible to make that case based on the Word of God.

So, we prayed for the guidance of the Holy Spirit, that He would help us, would hear our prayers and would give us His answer, and for the fourth time the answer was ... the same. “Stay with what the Lord has commanded. He knows better.”

Today’s reading brought back some not so pleasant memories from the last synodical convention. I asked a lady at our table – how is this not enough, we have prayed as the church for the guidance of the Holy Spirit four times, and four times the answer have been the same.

Do you know what she said? Exactly as the Pharisees who accused Jesus, she said: “That was not from the Holy Spirit, that was ... from Satan.” How do you even respond to such statement?

Today I want to invite you to reflect on something that may help us to shed some light on where and why exactly we are so divided and, hopefully, by God’s grace, we can come up with some helpful guidelines for future.

This house is divided. It is not the roof. It is not the walls. It is the very foundation on which our church either stands, or falls. The crack is in how we think about, and what we believe about the Word of God, about the Bible.

There is this popular statement, I am sure you all have heard it many times during the last couple of decades. “The Scripture is not clear.” This is what I want to reflect on together with you today – is our Scripture clear or not, and what would that mean very practically?

Now, this has been the teaching of the Lutheran Church since the beginning and it is the official teaching of the LCA – that the Scripture is essentially clear (TA 8.10) A few comments are needed to clarify what is meant by this statement.

The clarity of the Scripture is not something that can be proved. It is an article of faith. It does not mean that the Scripture is clear to everyone and all the time, and it does not mean that there are no obscure passages in the Bible.

What it does mean is this – that with the help of the Holy Spirit, and with diligent studies the Scripture is clear on all the doctrines that are needed for our salvation. This is what Lutheran Church has believed since the beginning.

Now let’s try to look at this issue from another side. Let’s do a little thought experiment. Can you, please, tell me – what is our central and the most precious teaching? We could say – the Gospel – that we are saved by God’s grace alone through faith alone. Amen!

But let me ask you – are you sure that you are saved by grace alone and through faith alone? How can you be so sure? Five centuries ago, there was another debate that lasted for several decades and divided the Church.

On this very question – on how we are saved, and majority of the Church were convinced that, first, the Scripture wasn’t clear and, second, that we are not saved by grace alone through faith alone. They even cursed the teaching that we believe to be the very heart of God’s message to humanity. Isn’t that interesting...

Besides they made their case from the Bible. Just listen: “What good deed must I do to have eternal life?” And Jesus said to him, “If you would enter life, keep the commandments.” (Mt 19:16-17)

Or this one: “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.” (2 Cor 5:10)

Or even better: “You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.” (James 2:14) By works! Now, how can you say that you are sure that you are saved by faith alone? What makes you so sure?

Dear Brothers and Sisters, I don’t want to confuse you. The point I am making is this – if we believe that the Scripture is not clear, worse – if we spend years and decades trying to show that you can understand this or that verse differently, that this or that teaching is not clear enough, no teaching of the Scripture will stand.

Not the teaching on the Trinity. Not the teaching on Jesus’ divinity and humanity. Not the teaching that we are saved by grace alone and through faith alone. For

each one of these teachings, which we today assume to be clear, the Church has fought lengthy battles, many times faithful minority standing against majority: it was so in 4th and 5th centuries, it was so in 16th century.

If we say that the Scripture is not clear, nothing will stand! Do not just take my word, go and see for yourselves! For this is exactly what has already happened in many churches. They had stepped on that road, and the house has fallen.

Thus, for example, the ELCA have been ordaining people practicing homosexual lifestyle since 2009, and just recently ordained their first transgender bishop, that person prefers to be addressed as “they or them, or their”.

We are house divided... As it came up in SA/NT Pastors Conference – some believe that the Word of God is very specific in matters of ordination, as is our teaching in the LCA. Others believe that you can ordain whoever you want – male, female, heterosexual, homosexual, etc. (and other churches do just that).

Some believe in creation; others believe in evolution. Some believe that Biblical teaching on human sexuality is beautiful and wise, others believe that it is oppressive and outdated, and the worldly understanding is the way to go.

Some believe that the key message of the Bible is – repent and receive the forgiveness of your sins, because of what Jesus did on the cross. Others believe that the Gospel means everyone is welcomed and there is no need for repentance.

O wait, Paul said that there is no other Gospel, that the other gospel is no gospel at all... We are house divided. It is so sad. How can we experience genuine and deep Christian unity while being so divided?

Sure, we can talk about weather and local news, but we struggle to freely engage about the most important matters of our faith, for we just don't know what topic may be found as divisive. And what about mission and reaching out to the lost?

How could we do that? Which beliefs will we share, if we disagree on so many? So... we often keep silent. Or better, we settle on works of service or entertaining others, at least that won't hurt anyone. It is not surprising that our situation is what it is. Just think – why would someone want to join a church that is confused and doesn't even know what she believes?

Dear Brothers and Sisters, we should not grieve the Holy Spirit accusing Him that the Scripture is not clear. The Holy Spirit brings peace and truth, He does not lead us into confusion or division. That is another spirit at work. The Holy Spirit creates trust in the Word, it creates unity in the body of Christ, and this unity in one Spirit and in one true faith is what enables us to love one another.

The spirit who is at work to confuse and divide us is not the Spirit of Jesus. That is a spirit who sows discord in the family of Christ, who tricks us to look with suspicion to one another, to gossip, regardless on which side of the debate we are.

That spirit brings the worst out of us. Instead of brotherly love there is anger and bitterness, and desire to triumph over our opponents, who happen to be – our brothers and sisters. And I am no different – when I am accused of hating my church, only because I try to remain faithful to the teaching of the LCA and to the vows that I gave you – that doesn't create warm feelings of Christian love.

No, that stirs up anger, and for me it takes days and days to get over it. It takes prayers and prayers before I can again think of those people as my dear brothers and sisters in Christ with whom I will hopefully spend the eternity. So, please, forgive me when I fail to respond in brotherly Christian love!

This spirit of confusion, the father of all lies, he does everything to divide the house of God and he rejoices when he sees us at one another throat, knives out, gloves off, or worse – exhausted and indifferent to what is happening.

Therefore, we can and should take great comfort in the words of Paul: “So, we do not lose heart... For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison...”. That is most certainly true.

You know, this situation too shall pass. Remember Jesus words: “Truly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the children of man, and whatever blasphemies they utter, but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin”.

Every sin, every failure, every error, every mistake, every false teaching, every misplaced loyalty, every offence will be forgiven... as soon as we turn to our dear and gracious Lord in repentance. But let us not grieve the Holy Spirit!

I pray, dear Brothers and Sisters, that the Holy Spirit would help us to take this to the heart and to always remember what is at stake. If God's Word is not clear, we have no hope, there is no Good News. But when the Spirit of truth dwells with us, the Word of God becomes for us as bright light shining in darkness.

I pray, that the Holy Spirit would always help us to see one another as children of the same Father, as brothers and sisters of Jesus. He did not spare His life, but gave it up for us, for each one of you – not so that we may be confused or bitter or apathetic, but that we may whole heartedly rejoice in the wonderful and unshakable certainty of God's promises.

This trying season is here again. Let's sail through it as God's people, chosen for eternal glory, as people slow to anger and rich in grace and forgiveness, as people after the Father's own heart, glorifying Him with everything we say and do.

Amen.