“A House Divided Against Itself Cannot Stand”
I Samuel 8:4-11, 16-20; II Corinthians 4:13-1:1; Mark 3:20-35

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From the Pulpit
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A communion meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Pentecost 2, Proper 5, June 7, 2015, dedicated to the great staff of First Congregational Church and all their amazing work to glorify God, to American Pharoah to celebrate his Triple Crown Victory and always to the glory of God!

“A House Divided Against Itself Cannot Stand”
I Samuel 8:4-11, 16-20; II Corinthians 4:13-5:1;
Mark 3:20-35

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

As our Gospel Lesson from Mark opens, there is darkness in the land. Evil seems ever-present. The light seems overwhelmed by the darkness. As such, evil and demonic presence breaks through human mental and physical defenses. It feels as though this presences has come like thieves in the night to steal hope, to destroy those who have faith and belief. Family members call other family
members evil. Friends turn against friends. Houses are divided. Life together is under assault.

There are a few who valiantly battle these spirits. But, the force of the onslaught is great. A broken and fractured fellowship is all that stands between the hope and life which once lived in this land and the evil that now consumes it.

According to First Century Historian Josephus, First Century Palestine is a place overrun with demons and the presence of evil. There is a bull market on madness. Exorcists are in high demand. That is why Jesus and his disciples are in such demand. He is an exorcist extraordinaire. He wields exorcism the way a soldier swings a sword. It is one of the most lethal weapons in his arsenal.

All exorcism means from the Greek is “binding by oath.” It means that faith in God is the pathway to healing. When Jesus encounters a demon he simply calls it to make an oath to God or to pledge faithfulness to God.

According to Mark's Gospel, the three purposes of Jesus' ministry are to teach, to heal and to exorcize demons. These, by association with him, become the purposes of the Christian life. While most of us feel somewhat comfortable with the purpose and power to teach and heal, the power to exorcize is different. It is fraught with challenges. It conjures up images of a 1970’s film and steep steps in Washington DC Georgetown neighborhood leading to a certain
teenager’s bedroom. Hollywood aside, the power to drive out evil and to exorcize demons is a power Jesus gave to the whole church! In other words, by association as his followers, Jesus calls you and me to be exorcists. (When was the last time you saw yourself as an Exorcist?)

Already in Mark 3:20ff, we read about the effect of battling evil on Jesus himself. Immediately after calling the twelve, he goes home to Nazareth. The growing crowds continue to gather around him. His own family welcomes him home by coming out to "restrain him" – in other words to “forcibly stop him” - from being with the crowds. Some family members are saying he has lost his mind. The teachers of the law say he is possessed by “Beelzebub” which means, “Lord of the Flies.” They have come to believe that only the ruler of the demons could cast out demons.

But Jesus asks a great question, "How could Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself it will not stand. If a house is divided against itself, it cannot stand” (Mk. 3:23-25). Divided – kingdoms fall. Divided – houses fall. The work of the demons and the power of evil on an individual basis, a familial basis and on a national basis is the work of dividing and conquering – from the souls of the one to the soul of the nation.

Jesus reminds the crowds they are messing with the Holy Spirit when they begin calling what is the power of
God, in effect, the power of evil. They must not interfere with the power of God's coming kingdom.

As Dr. Brian Blunt, of Princeton Theological Seminary explains when addressing this passage, "The kingdom of God is a force, not a place." Jesus is speaking to the crowds admonishing them not to mess "with the force of God." God’s Force is a mighty strong presence which will not simply go away. We don't go a Kingdom Place. Rather, this Force comes to us!

Dr. Blount is right. The kingdom of God is a force. It is a force which, in the case of Jesus' family, they couldn't see. They were frightened when their brother came home with a hoard of people following him. "What is going on?" they must have wondered! "This isn't the same nice, 'Lil Jesus' that left home some time back." "What has gotten into him?" they must have thought. They completely misnamed it. It was not the power of the devil. Clearly, it was the power of God, the force of the kingdom of God alive within him. He could not be divided. He would not yield to all these threats and accusations, all this Satan talk – all these invectives – swirling around him and headed right at him!

The power of God to change evil to good, to unite the demon-possessed individuals, households, and nations throughout time is a force with which we must be reckoned. It is a force and a power which will not be moved when it
stands strong. And some will tell you when YOU are standing in the “force of God” – the Power of God – that YOU are doing the Devil’s work. (Believe me – I know!)

This “God-force” knocks down doors of injustice, doors that have been constructed to hold back the powerless and to hold in the powerful. When yielded by us as Christian people, it is a force of exorcism! I am reminded of one such Christian exorcist.

Again, Brian Blount speaks of a woman filled with God force in his sermon, “The Exorcist.”

“She was born in slavery as Isabella Baumfree. But by the time she kicked down the door of polite, white, Christian, feminist society, she was a powerful black woman preacher dedicated to the cause of exorcizing slavery, racism, and sexism from this land. Everywhere she went, she was told she was an outsider who didn’t belong. Everywhere she went, she kicked down doors on her way inside where she was determined to make herself at home in her own way, not the way others thought was appropriate.

She broke into a meeting of white women in May 1851 in Akron, Ohio and exorcized the spirit of American Christian womanhood and opened up the possibility at least, that black women, even black slave women, should have all the freedoms and rights that white women were enjoying and were fighting for in the future. This exorcist
on the outside making a way out of no way, was stepping inside for herself, her sisters, and her people” (drawn from Brian Blount's sermon, “The Exorcist,” 1/11/04 at The Roundtable Connection, Pilgrim Congregational Church, Coconut Grove, FL.).

You know Isabella Baumfree as Sojourner Truth. Here are some of the words she preached in one of the most famous short sermons in American history as she took the stage by “God Force”:

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! Ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And Ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man - when I could get it - and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seem them most sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?

Sojourner Truth invokes the name of Jesus for the healing of our nation, for the exorcism of our souls. She was spitting out the evil spirits of slavery, racism, segregation, and hatred. She was a force that could not be stopped. Thanks be to God!
In each generation when God sees Kingdoms tottering and houses divided, God calls people to exorcise – and then to heal and to unify. We are living in a such a time - right now – when the House and the Senate are divided – nationally and in our state. Where is Abraham Lincoln when we need him? Watch daytime TV, the news and cruise through the internet to see that families and households are divided and stand in need of healing and reconciliation. Lord knows we need a Sojourner Truth for our time!

I believe in all generations, Exorcists or “Oath Binders” come to us and show us how to stop the house from dividing all over again – knowing that a house divided cannot stand. It cannot last.

It is hard to go home in the face of such madness. And while we may find it impossible to believe that Jesus’ teachings and healings led to divisions, we certainly can see cases where people with mass appeal have gone astray and led others there. But, in the case of Jesus, Abraham Lincoln and Sojourner, the truth prevails and the force of God, the kingdom of God arrives.

Do not look to the heavens for answers.
God has provided the answers in the gospel of Jesus Christ and in the inspirational model of such Christian exorcists as Sojourner Truth. And remember that our Savior, upon returning to his own hometown and family, was not even seen as the force of good! But, he answered his critics – in his family and beyond. He stood his ground and delivered love-force in this world. He calls us to do the same. Amen.

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