

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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A HOUSE DIVIDED

Luke 11:14-20

America is deeply divided. More deeply divided than ever, it may seem. We find ourselves embroiled in a very uncivil war, at times pitting Republicans against Democrats, cultural conservatives against liberals, blacks against whites, women against men, immigrants against “native” Americans (meaning, persons born in America or to parent(s) holding U. S. citizenship), the 1 percent against the 99 percent, and the religious against the non-religious (or anti-religious).

The most recent evidence of this divide, of course, is the ugly spectacle of the Senate confirmation process for Supreme Court nominee Judge – now Justice – Brett Kavanaugh. While raising our consciousness of the evil, prevalence, and trauma of sexual assault in our culture, and rightly kindling our sympathy and compassion for anyone – male or female – who has ever been a victim of sexual assault or inappropriate sexual contact, the confirmation process has brought out the worse in some members of the United States Senate, members of the national media, many Americans in the expression of our First Amendment rights on social media and in protests that have crossed the line of civility.

If there is any doubt – and I hope there is none – let me say that if you or someone you know has ever been the victim of sexual assault or any kind of sexual misconduct, we grieve with you. We grieve for you. We care for you. Your church family cares about you. Jesus cares about you.

We must be clear that there is no place for sexual misconduct of any kind in the life of the church or the lives of Jesus’ followers. There is no place for sexual misconduct anywhere in our culture or our nation. Period. We must guard against sexual assault or any other kind of sexual misconduct because it is a gross violation of persons who are created in God’s image, who are valued and loved by God.

If you are the victim of sexual assault, Jesus cares for you. And so do we. Victims of sexual assault must always be treated with respect and compassion. Nothing less is consistent with the character and values of the Lord Jesus.

It must also be said that there is no place in our culture or politics for the kind of viciousness and character assassination we have seen played out in the confirmation process for Judge Kavanaugh, which has been uncivil at best. The lengths to which members of the Senate Judiciary Committee have gone to malign Judge Kavanaugh’s character and to destroy his reputation, career, and family are shocking and do not reflect well on them personally, or on the Committee, the process, the Senate as a whole, or the health of our republic. It is not unfair to ask members of the Senate Judiciary Committee if they would like to endure the same kind of “job interview” to which they subjected Judge Kavanaugh. While not all of them

are professing Christians, I'm confident they are all familiar with and would affirm "the golden rule" articulated by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, to "treat others as you would have others treat you" (Matthew 7:12), which follows close on the heels of Jesus' warning that "in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you" (7:2). This should be a sobering thought for the members of the Senate Judiciary Committee, for the U. S. Senate as a whole, and for each one of us. Imagine your husband or wife, your children, your parents – imagine your family as a whole having to endure what Judge Kavanaugh and his family have experienced.

There are times when we must make judgments about people and situations and accusations, but we must always make our judgments with charity in our hearts, on the basis of the facts, not on the basis of emotion or as part of a strategy for political gain. You don't have to believe Dr. Ford's allegation against Judge Kavanaugh in order to have compassion for her. You don't have to believe this accusation in order to believe that she has been the victim of sexual assault at some point in her life. Nor does questioning her allegation against Judge Kavanaugh mean you do not take the evil of sexual assault seriously. It should be our goal to see Dr. Ford – and Judge Kavanaugh – through the eyes of Jesus.

I'm not trying to make a political statement here. I hope you understand that. I'm trying to apply gospel principles and the teaching of God's Word to what I see happening in our culture.

The larger truth to which the Kavanaugh confirmation process points, is how deeply divided America is. Some people, no doubt, view this as the new normal for America in the age of Trump. And, no doubt, the presidency of Donald Trump has been a lightning rod provoking resistance and heated emotions.

But division is hardly anything new in American life. America has often been deeply divided. We have been deeply divided over abortion ever since the Supreme Court made it the law of the land in 1973 on what I believe to be the most dubious constitutional grounds. America was deeply divided over our involvement in the Viet Nam War. From almost the founding of the first British colony in the new world, though, the issue that has caused the most enduring division in America is race.

The first African slaves in colonial America arrived in Jamestown in 1619, almost exactly 400 years ago. Slavery was America's "original sin," a stain on our history, an ugly blemish on our character as a nation. In the decades leading up to the Civil War, especially, the issue of slavery was a tinderbox of sectional division and increasing moral outrage, ready to explode into flames at any moment. It took the Civil War and the loss of hundreds of thousands of American lives to finally end the institution of slavery. But the end of slavery did not mark the end of racism in America. Racism lived on in legalized segregation, Jim Crow laws, the tyranny of the KKK, the vigilante "justice" of lynch mobs, and a generalized animus toward people of different skin color. While we have made much progress in America since those days, we have not yet arrived at the "Promised Land" of which Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke. Racism still lives on. Racist attitudes still persist in America. We are still a nation divided by racism.

“A house divided against itself,” said Jesus, “will not stand” (Luke 11:17). A kingdom divided against itself will not survive. A nation at war with itself will be ruined. Abraham Lincoln famously applied the words of Jesus to the political realities of his day in 1858, two years before he was elected President and less than three years before the start of the Civil War. As a candidate for the U. S. Senate from Illinois (a campaign he lost), Lincoln said: “‘A house divided against itself cannot stand.’ I believe this government” – that is, the government of the United States, based on the U. S. Constitution – “cannot endure, half slave and half free.”

Lincoln was right, of course. It could not endure in that condition. If America were ever to live up to its founding ideals, the blight of slavery had to be eliminated. As for Lincoln himself, it is interesting that the man who is our most revered President was, during his presidency, the most hated man in America.

Many people today think the “house divided” quote originated with Lincoln. They don’t realize that it comes from Jesus.

The context for Jesus’ statement is the healing of a demon-oppressed man who has been left unable to speak by the demon (Luke 11:14). In his account of this miracle, Matthew indicates that the man was both “blind and mute” (Matthew 12:22). Not only could he not speak, he couldn’t see either. “But Jesus healed him, so that he could both talk and see” (12:22b). The crowd witnessing this miracle was amazed at the power of Jesus (Luke 11:14). Some wondered aloud if He could be the Messiah (Matthew 12:23). But they weren’t all in Jesus’ corner. Some were on the fence. They weren’t sure where Jesus’ power came from, and they asked for “a sign from heaven” (Luke 11:16) – some sort of miracle in the sky, I suppose, or perhaps manna (bread) from heaven, as in the days of Moses – to prove that His power was from God. Others in the crowd – Matthew identifies them as Pharisees (Matthew 12:24) – said He got His power from Satan. “By Beelzebub, the prince of demons,” they said, “He is driving out demons” (Luke 11:15).

“Beelzebub” came from *Beelzebul* (or *Beelzeboul*), the name of one of the gods of the Philistines. The Jews turned it into Beelzebub, a derisive name that means something like “lord of the dung heap.” It became a synonym for Satan. The Pharisees were saying that the power of Jesus, far from coming from God, actually came from Satan himself. In other words, they charged Jesus with collusion. They accused Him of colluding with Satan. Jesus, they said, had conspired with Satan and was working in concert with him.

The Pharisees could not dispute the miracles Jesus performed. But they refused to believe in Him. They could not and did not deny His power. It was clear that Jesus had supernatural authority. But they did not and would not believe His supernatural power was from God. To their way of thinking, it *had* to be the power of Satan.

To which Jesus said, in effect: “What is wrong with you? You must be out of your minds. What you are saying makes no sense. No sense at all. Why in the world would Satan fight against himself? Why would he oppose himself? Why would he destroy his own kingdom? He wouldn’t!”

“A kingdom divided against itself” will eventually destroy itself. “A house divided against itself” cannot survive. It is a principle that applies to most every area of life. It applies to marriage. It applies to the home and family life. It applies to business. To sports teams. To civic groups. To charitable organizations. It applies to governments. It applies to our nation and our governing institutions. It also applies to the church. It applies to *every* church. It applies to *our* church.

A marriage divided against itself will fall apart. A family divided against itself will fall apart. A business divided against itself will come apart. A team divided against itself will self-destruct. A nation divided against itself will fall. A church divided against itself will fall.

As followers of Jesus, we must not allow political differences or anger and disrespect toward those with whom we disagree to take root in our hearts and minds, or to grow up and cause trouble or defile others (Hebrews 12:15). Did you know that, according to the Pew Research Center, fewer and fewer Americans have friends of the opposing political party? A poll done last year (October 2017) revealed that 64 percent of Democrats and 55 percent of Republicans have just a few or zero close friends from across the political aisle. And the number has been declining. (Of course, if it is already zero, it really can’t decline any further!) According to the poll, the number of Democrats and Republicans who view the opposing party as “very unfavorable” has more than doubled from 16 percent (Democrats) and 17 percent (Republicans) in 1994 to 44 and 45 percent, respectively, today.

The Body of Christ is made up of Democrats *and* Republicans *and* independents *and* people of other or no political persuasion. We must not allow our political party preferences to become a source of division among us in the church, unless somehow the Essentials of Our Faith, the ministry of the gospel, or our constitutionally-guaranteed freedom of religion are at stake. We must not allow non-essentials in our public life to become a source of disunity in the life of our church or in our relationships with other Christians.

As one evangelical leader has said: “Our hope as a nation is not in the hands of a donkey (the symbol of the Democratic Party) or an elephant (the symbol of the Republican Party); our hope rests in the Lamb of God” (Samuel Rodriguez). He – Jesus, the Lamb of God – is the true hope of our nation and of every nation.

We must not allow non-essentials to become a source of disunity in the life of our church, in our relationships with other Christians, and in our relationships with the non-believers in our lives.

For hundreds of years, professing Christians and churches were complicit in (and, in many cases, defenders of) the institution of slavery in America and, following the abolition of slavery, the institutionalized practices of racism. It was wrong then. It is wrong now. And, as followers of Jesus, we must denounce and renounce racism in all its forms. We must repent of every vestige of racism wherever it is found, and treat every person with equal dignity, honor, and respect. The Bible is clear that “from one man (God) made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth” (Acts 17:26). We’re all members of the same family.

I'm not suggesting that some of us are guilty of racist attitudes or language. I can't see into your heart. What I *am* suggesting is the need for us, as followers of Jesus, to exhibit the trans-racial love of God in our lives. The gospel itself is trans-racial. It crosses all racial boundaries, and is explicitly intended for the whole world – for people of every nation, tribe, people, and language (Revelation 7:9).

The gospel is also trans-political. It bridges the political divide between liberal and conservative and moderate, between Republican and Democrat and Independent, between young and old, women and men, the wealthy and the poor, the powerful and the not-so-powerful, the weak and the strong. It is for everyone, and, as the Bible says in James 2:1-9, there is no place for favoritism among God's people.

The church is meant to give the world a picture of what the kingdom of God looks like. To paraphrase Eugene Peterson from his memoir, *The Pastor*, the church is “a colony of heaven” in a world of estrangement, of moral and spiritual darkness. “Church,” he says, “is a core element in the strategy of the Holy Spirit for providing human witness and physical presence to the Jesus-inaugurated kingdom of God in this world” (*The Pastor*, 110). Our mission is to give the world a picture, a taste of what life is like in the kingdom of God, and to invite others – whosoever will – to join us as citizens of this kingdom. The confirmation process for Judge Kavanaugh has given us a picture of our government at its worst. The church, on the other hand, is to present a very different picture – a picture of grace, a picture of love, a picture of humility, a picture of repentance and forgiveness, a picture of truth unchanging, a picture of compassion and respect for every person, a picture of unity in faith, a picture of mutual reliance on the saving grace and redeeming love of Jesus Christ that produces love for and harmony with one another.

Long ago (1984) Sally Field was in a movie called “Places in the Heart.” She won an Academy Award for her performance in it. The movie was set in Waxahachie, Texas, in 1935. It was the Depression. It was also the era of segregation and Jim Crow. Field played a widow and mother of two small children named Edna Spalding whose husband, the local sheriff, was accidentally shot and killed by a young black teenager named Wylie. A lynch mob quickly formed and carried out their vigilante justice against Wylie.

The movie chronicles Edna's efforts to save her family farm with the help of a black drifter named Moze (played by Danny Glover) and a blind boarder named Will (John Malkovich). With their help, Edna is able to save the farm. But it comes at a high cost to Moze. Near the end of the movie, he is savagely beaten by a group of Klan (KKK) members. Will, who recognizes the voices of Moze's attackers as local white men, confronts them and identifies them one by one. They all run off and Moze's life is saved. There is no guarantee, though, that they won't come after him again.

The movie ends with a moving scene in church in which the communion bread and juice are being passed from one person to another. Moze is there. So is Will, as are Edna and her two children. But so is Edna's husband, though he was killed at the beginning of the movie. And so is Wylie, the black teenager who accidentally shot and killed him. Edna passes the tray of

communion juice to her husband, who takes a cup and then passes the tray to Wylie, who also takes a cup. The sheriff and the young black teenager say to each other: "Peace of God."

Peace of God. The peace of God is a gift of God's grace, which comes free of charge to people who don't deserve it and never will. Like Moze and Will and Edna and Sheriff Spalding and Wylie and all the people of Waxahachie. Like you and me and everyone in our church family. Like all our neighbors in Kingstowne and surrounding communities. Like Republicans, Democrats, and Independents. Like conservatives, moderates, and liberals. Like every person in every category you can think of.

God offers us peace when we come to Him, when we trust *in* Him and entrust our lives *to* Him. The gift of God's grace and peace, made visible in the sacrament that commemorates Jesus' suffering and death on the cross for us, transcends the differences we often allow to divide us from one another in the body of Christ. And it compels us and propels us to present to the world around us a model of unity in a community of grace where Jesus is Lord and every person counts.

Lord, let it be so in us. And let it spread throughout our nation and culture. To the glory of Your name. Amen.