

SAYINGS OF JESUS  
A CRITICAL DISTINCTION

Text on Sunday, July 25, 2010

*Luke 11: 14-23*

Jesus says to one who is testing him, "Every kingdom divided against itself becomes a desert." In Matthew's version—"No house divided against itself will stand." (Matt 12.25) You cannot help hearing a warning for the House of Representatives of the USA. The division in our legislative bodies is appalling. Power, not values, is in dispute. Already the airwaves are crowded with media sharks circling at the smell of blood come November. But let's be plain. The divided house is our house. *They* are not doing this to *us*. We are who are in trouble—this nation entire, its mission and every individual in it altogether, and every being on earth who is affected by the affairs of this nation.

The Sherrod affair in the news this week offers an x-ray of the crack in the foundation. At one extreme in this story, last Monday a well-known right wing fear-monger spread a damned lie about an African-American official of the Department of Agriculture named Shirley Sherrod. The liar used a brief video clip of a speech delivered by Sherrod at an NAACP convention to claim that she discriminated against a white farmer in need of a loan, and bragged about it. Fox News made the Sherrod accusation its lead in wall-to-wall coverage all day Monday. At the other extreme of this story—not a left wing extreme, to be sure, but an extreme—the president of the NAACP immediately excoriated Sherrod for racism and the White House immediately fired her, no questions asked. Literally. No superior asked Sherrod for her understanding of the brief video clip. That's extreme

By Tuesday, CNN had the story straight. The white farmer against whom Sherrod had allegedly discriminated was interviewed. He praised her. She had kept him from bankruptcy. Sherrod's whole speech was listened to at last. She was telling her audience about the inner process of doubt she had struggled with 25 years ago and how she overcame anger and resistance to the white farmer and set about helping him, for, as she said in the speech, "You know, God shows you things, and puts things in your path, so you realize that the struggle is really about poor people." <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N8VY2PHgOeE> The *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* did not get this story straight for more than a day.

Two extremes, a house divided. On one side, fear and hatred stirred by the changes coming upon our nation, changes which follow from our organizing principle, that all people are created equal. On the other . . . *not* strong democratic values. No, organizing principles are the center, the nucleus, the heart of the matter—never the extreme. The other extreme which we saw last week is also fear. The White House, the national papers, even the president of the NAACP all fled in fear from the blasts of a previously discredited liar spreading a malignant virus which has no program and knows no purpose but destruction. They all pilloried a good woman. Of course, apologies have since flowed, but as one news reporter put it:

Dear White House . . . believing spin about what's so wrong with you and then giving into that spin . . . and [then] apologizing for it, and doing whatever they want you to do doesn't make the problem . . . go away. In fact, it makes it worse. (MSNBC's Rachel Maddow)

A house divided is when leaders are distracted from affirming with their action and their being the organizing principles of their institution. A house divided is when leaders try to reason and empathize with and accommodate the demands of those who fear losing out in the processes of evolution and development underway in an institution, people who claw and terrorize to try to stay in power. This is not about liberal and conservative disagreements; they are normal and necessary. But when a great house is divided against itself, the issue is spiritual, for the house itself is at stake. Forces which have no organizing principle attack the very organs of the organization. Its identity, its integrity, its unity is

threatened. If unity will prevail, there is one solution. Leaders and followers alike must make a critical distinction between what belongs in the house and what does not belong: what values, what behavior, what vision for the future.

When Jesus cast a demon from a man, he restored integrity to that man's house, you might say, but those who feared the power expressed in Jesus attacked him again and again. It is obvious that their power structure was at stake. Less obvious is this. Jesus' healing ministry affirmed the organizing principle of the community of Israel, conceived under God: Humanity shall be whole; whole in mind and body; whole in relationships of family, work, and society. This is the vision. "They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea." (Isaiah 11.9) This was always the vision.

Therefore Jesus has no empathy for his attackers. He disarms them. *If I am bringing about the holy vision by means of Satan, as you say, then Satan is in trouble. His house is finished. But if it is by the finger of God I do these things, then the kingdom of God has come—and yours is done.* Jesus is committed to the vision, the values, and the behavior of all the law and the prophets of Israel. He will not back down. "Whoever is not with me is against me, whoever does not gather with me scatters," he says. Don't be put off by this fierce decisiveness. The desperate cowboy swagger of our former president has no part in this word. Neither does "being with him" mean being Christian, with everyone else cast out. Jesus is making a critical distinction between what belongs and what does not belong. He is standing for the whole people: the values, the behavior, the ancient vision for a whole world. This is the requirement of a leader. The strange Christian story is that when the world stretched its blood-filled hand to put to kill off such power as he expressed, it only drove his power into glory, so that it might descend again to dwell on earth in every man and woman with ears to hear and eyes to see how to make a critical distinction.

Jesus says that every kingdom divided against itself becomes a desert. That is sound history. His time already had plenty of examples to study. In our briefer American story, the question of a disastrously divided house has reached the crisis point two, maybe, three times. As it was in Israel, severe injustice has been at the heart of division. The biblical tradition holds that God so hates injustice that God brings nations to disaster to wake them up. In his second inaugural address, President Lincoln asked if it were not still so.

If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which in the providence of God must needs come, but which, having continued through his appointed time, he now wills to remove, and that he gives this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offense came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which believers in a living God always ascribe to him?

Lincoln made a critical distinction about what values, what behavior, and what vision belonged to the nation he stood for, "conceived in liberty and dedicated to the [organizing principle] that all people are created equal." "Whoever is not with me is against me, he said" We know this story. What is not so clear is that we are still met on a battlefield "testing whether . . . any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure." The hatred and fear flaming up in our house divided has to do with core principles of justice, marked by our particular history with slavery, racism, money, and power.

There is good news at the front. Here is some from the Presbyterian Church. You may be aware that this denomination has also been a house divided through recent decades—trying out whether we share organizing principles that include all God's children, gay and straight. You have in your hands a summary of actions from the recently concluded national assembly. I hope you will read it. Its first sentence tells the story: "With an unusually large number of contentious issues on the agenda, the 219<sup>th</sup> General Assembly could have been a stormy crossing. That it wasn't is a tribute to the spirit of civility and unity." Unity is spiritual. That is the good news. They elected a moderator with vision. They voted

to remove language from the church constitution which functioned to exclude gay people from ordination. They adopted a thoroughly rewritten guidebook for church government which decentralizes power, moving more initiative to local levels.

There's more good news. On the last day of June, the Presbytery of New York City, an infamously divided house, acted to balance its budget, a painful choice in terms of loyal staff who must be laid off. And we elected as interim leader Tony De La Rosa, an elder from Los Angeles whose experience and credentials are of the first quality. He is a gay man. His partner is moving east with him. The floor of the Presbytery meeting tensed for long minutes as part of our number lodged their arguments against admitting a gay person to this leadership position. Then the group made a critical distinction. We elected him by a substantial majority.

Organizations thrive if they make a critical distinction, if their leaders stand for the institution's organizing principles. Failure in this act of integrity adequately accounts for the muddle of the mainline church. How feeble is the distinction between the values of the general society and those within the walls of so many churches. Same anxieties, same prejudices and fantasies of salvation, same limited tolerance, same patterns of fighting and quitting as are found throughout the society, same lack of skill to distinguish good and resist bad behaviors—to make a critical distinction in what belongs and what not.

As for First Church and the critical distinction, consider three related ideas. One. First Church has thrived because it has made a critical distinction, weaving into faith and action a specific interpretation of the organizing principle of the love of Christ Jesus for all God's children. This has had costs. Would it be too much to say that on certain principles, First Church stands with Christ saying, "Whoever is not with me is against me?" This is not the American "whatever" way—but it is the way of truth. Two. There is no standing still on the beautiful beach of harmony. There is no treading water in this ocean. We must dive for the pearl again and again. To make a critical distinction about the meaning of the death and life of Christ requires that a church go ever deeper into their calling, their particular hearing for how to run risks for the sake of the gospel. Three. You cannot make a more significant offering to the peace and unity of this nation, and therefore of this entire planet, than to participate seriously in the local laboratory for love and justice called the church. In spite of the large numbers of church goers who seem to derive a message of fear and division from their Bible, I am persuaded that in this nation and in this time, no institution is able as the church is able to demonstrate how make a critical distinction in a spirit of love and hope, demonizing no one yet firmly differentiating the good will that belongs in our body from the illnesses we will cast out, by the power of God. Never let your sense for what you are called to be about as a Christian fall below the level of world peace. It is a critical distinction.

*Rev. Stephen H. Phelps*

*First Presbyterian Church  
Brooklyn, New York*

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