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July 8, 2019

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“At the sight of the crowds, his heart was moved with pity for them because they were troubles ad abandoned, like sheep without a shepherd” (Matt 9:38).

When Jesus drives the demon from the mute man, the crowds are amazed: “Nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel.” The Pharisees on the other hand accuse Jesus of consorting with the prince of demons to drive out demons. Jesus dismisses the absurd logic of their accusation. It is clear that God’s Kingdom has overturned the kingdom of Satan, and that no rival spirit, however powerful, can co-exist with the Holy Spirit.

Jesus demonstrates this by restoring harmony to a world divided against itself, out of sync and out of balance, torn by conflict and inner dissonance. The famous phrase, “A house divided against itself cannot stand,” describes family quarrels, civil wars and the divided heart, the real cause of so much illness and unhappiness.

This central theme of the Gospel applies to the very foundation of God’s call of the Patriarchs. One interpretation of the mysterious wrestling match in Genesis 32 between Jacob and the stranger is that Jacob was battling himself. His life had been filled with deception and division, beginning with his fight in the womb with Esau, his older brother. Later, he conspired with their mother to deprive Esau of his father’s blessing and the birthright. As Jacob returns to confront his brother years later, he must also deal with his own integrity if he is to be the model for the 12 tribes that descend from him. This fascinating story affirms that only someone who has resolved his own inner contradictions can lead others to unity.

In the complex history that produced the United States of America, the reality of a “house divided” was central to presidency of Abraham Lincoln. In his first inaugural address in 1861 on the eve of the Civil War, Lincoln pleaded with the southern states to remain in the union. He ended his address with these words:

“We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory will swell when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.”

Lincoln appealed to the shared spirit of unity that had produced the Constitution, which as president he had sworn to uphold. The bloody war over slavery predicted by the nation’s founders came to pass and, in many respects, continues in the divisions still wounding American society.

What is the Word saying to us in our time of national conflict? If we are at war with one another, with the environment and with other nations, then the work of Creation is incomplete as the Spirit hovers over the chaos of human conflict. Disciples of Jesus are called to be ambassadors of reconciliation and models for unity in diversity. Pope Francis challenges believers to carry out an evangelization of encounter, dialogue and accompaniment. If we do this, we can be the “better angels of our nature” for one another and for our country.

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