

## **A house divided against itself**

Mark 3:20-30, 4:35-41

January 21, 2018

I am distressed.

Last Monday, Jorge Garcia was deported to Mexico. Jorge is thirty-nine years old, married with a fifteen-year-old daughter and a twelve-year-old son. He was brought to the United States as a child thirty years ago by an undocumented relative. He holds a job, pays taxes. and has no criminal record, not even a parking ticket. But last Monday, he was torn from his family and sent to Mexico, the government arguing that he has been spared up to now only because of the repeated exercise of prosecutorial discretion.

Exactly! Isn't Jorge's case a classic example of the purpose of prosecutorial discretion, choosing to pursue cases which serve the interest of justice, instead of merely following the letter of the law? What justice is served by deporting him? What justice is served by leaving his wife without a husband and his children fatherless?

On Wednesday, the Department of Homeland Security issued a ruling barring anyone from Haiti from receiving an H-2A visa, a temporary visa granted to seasonal agricultural workers. I have regularly seen such workers in Maine, brought in in August to help harvest the annual blueberry crop. Why Haiti? Is Haiti a breeding ground for terrorists? Hardly. In all of 2016 only sixty-five Haitians were granted H-2A visas and only fifty-four last year between March and November. (Christina Zhao, Newsweek, <http://tinyurl.com/yb9ayhad>)

Do sixty Haitians pose a national security threat? What justice is served by denying them visas? What justice is served by preventing the entry of workers desperate to earn money to bring home to families struggling to recover from the devastating 2010 earthquake and from endemic poverty?

And on Thursday, the Department of Health and Human Services announced the creation of a new office charged with protecting the religious freedoms of health care workers. The new guidelines are explicitly intended to allow health workers to refuse to participate in abortions or gender reassignment surgeries, but many have raised concerns that the broad language of the new regulations will permit health care workers to refuse to care for LGBTQ people or others whose identity or lifestyle they may not support.

What justice is served by that? And what religious value is served? My faith in Jesus teaches me to love my neighbor as I love myself, not to pick and choose whom to care for based on merit or whim.

I am distressed and that's just this week! This week, the same week that saw a government shutdown and the presentation by our current president of fake news awards and the use of profanity by the same president to describe nations of majority black populations, including Haiti.

I am distressed. This is a crazy time. But you could argue that American politics is always crazy, almost always somebody is distressed. Are these days any different, any crazier, any more distressing than usual? I believe they are.

These days are more disturbing because of the demise of civil discourse. Political speech has become crass, vulgar, full of vitriol and innuendo.

These days are more disturbing because truth and lie have become indistinguishable,. "Truth" is what I want you to believe. "Truth" is whatever I say it is.

These days are more disturbing because it is not merely political opponents who are under attack, but the democratic institutions themselves which play a critical role in keeping our leaders honest and represent the hallmarks of a free society: a free press, an independent judiciary, the FBI, the office of Special Counsel for the Department of Justice.

And these days are more disturbing because it is the core value of democracy itself that is under attack, the protection of rights and the assurance of justice for the more vulnerable among us, for those who are not in the majority, liberty and justice for all.

We are living in a crazy time, a disturbing time, a time that prompted one of you to ask for "words of wisdom that will give us the confidence that we will survive this political turmoil." That was one of the suggested Epiphany sermon topics: "words of wisdom that will give us the confidence that we will survive this political turmoil." Words of wisdom. Now that's a tall order, an especially tall order if such wisdom is expected to come from me!

Because we may not survive. American democracy as we know it may not survive. Yes, we are a resilient people, and our system is built to be resilient, to flex and evolve and check itself as circumstances and times change. But the system needs buy-in to work. Enough of the people have to share belief in its core values, but now it is our shared values themselves which are disputed and disregarded.

Our desire for short term assurances and short term gains and short term security is overwhelming our commitment to long term accountability. We want what we want whatever it takes and whatever the cost, as long it is somebody else, somewhere else, or some future generation that pays the price. Consider our response, or lack of it, to climate change. Consider our rollback of environmental protections. Consider our rollback of financial regulations. Our long term future as a nation is uncertain. I can't speak to that.

But I'm not sure that is the concern of the person who suggested this topic. What "words of wisdom" can I give "that will give us the confidence that we will survive this political turmoil?" I read the question more personally, directed to us as people of faith. Will we survive, as human beings, as children of God, as followers of Jesus?

Yes, we will, and I say that with the utmost confidence, because my confidence is founded not on the resilience of any political system, but on God's faithfulness. When all is in turmoil around us, when the storms of life are raging, God does stand by us.

There was turmoil in Galilee. Jesus was causing quite a stir. Large crowds of people found him, followed him, wherever he went. They were stirred by what he said, "The Kingdom of God is near!" and they were stirred by what he did, healing people with skin diseases and fevers and paralysis, exorcising demons.

Some thought he was mad. They might have called him schizophrenic had they known the term. Jesus' own family was so concerned by the turmoil around him that they rushed to him to try to protect him and remove him from the danger.

And the teachers of the Jewish Law, the guardians of the faith, the pillars of righteousness, accused him of being demon-possessed.

*It is the chief of the demons who gives him the power to drive them out.*

Which, of course, doesn't make any sense. Which is why Jesus responds: "How can Satan drive out Satan?" Why would the chief of the demons empower Jesus to thwart his own purposes?

But I believe Jesus is not merely talking about Satan. Jesus is talking about the people. Jesus is talking to the people.

*If a family divides itself into groups which fight each other, that family will fall apart.*

A house divided against itself cannot stand. If we are at cross purposes, you teachers of the Law and I, it is the people we love, the people we serve, God's children, God's little ones, who will suffer the consequences. God's people must not turn on each other, because a house divided cannot stand.

God's people must not turn on each other. If you have ears to hear, then listen!

A house divided against itself cannot stand. Abraham Lincoln understood that, and he used this text in a 1858 speech warning that a nation simultaneously embracing both pro-slavery and anti-slavery sentiments cannot survive. He understood that slavery was no partisan issue, wherein differences of opinion can be tolerated and even celebrated because of a common core of shared values. He understood that slavery violated the core values essential to the endurance of these united states. Quite simply, when states, when citizens, put economic security and financial profitability and personal bias ahead of the inalienable rights of persons, they are wrong. The South was wrong.

When we, as citizens, as a nation, put economic security and financial profitability and personal bias ahead of the inalienable rights of persons, we are wrong, too.

I choose the news items cited at the beginning of this sermon quite intentionally -- the deportation of Jorge Garcia, the banning of Haitian agricultural workers, the endorsement of health care discrimination -- because these are not partisan issues. Justice is not partisan.

Equal protection under the law is not partisan. It is American.

Defense of human rights is not partisan. It is American.

An unwavering commitment to justice is not partisan. It is American.

And an unwavering commitment to love, even to sacrificial love, for each and every neighbor, is not partisan or even American. It is Christian. And so I believe that for followers of Jesus, for me and for you, the crucial concern in the midst of political turmoil is not survival, but obedience.

Will we walk with Jesus? Will we speak the truth, even when many people don't want to hear it? Will we stand up for justice, even for those most people don't care about? Will we welcome strangers into our homes, into our common home, even when most people want to turn them away?

These are my words of wisdom: follow Jesus. In the midst of this political turmoil, in the midst of any storm, follow Jesus.

And you will survive. His disciples survived, didn't they? They survived the storm. They were frightened, terrified by the storm, but Jesus asked them: "Why are you frightened? Do you still have no faith?"

This story is about fear. Should we fear the storm? Should we fear the turmoil? Should we tremble before the might of wind and wave and political power? "Why are you frightened? Do you have no faith?" We should tremble before God and God alone! We should fear going it on our own, instead of going with Jesus.

Jesus' disciples were still terrified after the storm was stilled. They stood there in the boat, in the sudden quiet, in the presence of ... "Who is this man?" The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom: fear, awe, reverence, wonder, honor, worship, praise. This is where wisdom is found.