

Oculi, the Third Sunday in Lent
March 15, 2009

Rev. David A. Kind
University Lutheran Chapel
Minneapolis, Minnesota

✧ Jesu juva ✧

THE UNDIVIDED HEART

Exodus 8:16-24; Ephesians 5:1-9; Luke 11:14-28

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation, and a house divided against a house falls. If Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand?" One thing is certainly true about both sides in the cosmic spiritual battle that is being waged over your soul and the souls of all people. The devil and his minions are united in their assaults against God's people. And God and His angels are united in their defense of you and in their victory over the devil. There is no middle ground with either the angels or the demons. They are either wholly good and righteous on the one hand, or wholly evil and doomed to condemnation on the other!"

When Jesus comes on the scene the question was which side is He on? By the time of the confrontation with the Pharisees in today's Gospel lesson, that question has already been clearly answered by Jesus preaching and works. He was no longer an unknown entity. Multitudes followed Him because He did good to them. He preached the Kingdom of God and healed their sick. This was clearly not the work of the devil. Moreover, no one could find anything scandalous of which to accuse Him. He was, simply, above reproach, having no sin, either inherited or actual. His every thought, word and deed was pure and holy.

And yet His presence and work was creating havoc for those who thought themselves righteous already and who were concerned about preserving both the status quo in terms of religious life in Israel and their own status in Israel as leaders of the people. You get a strong sense of their desperation when Jesus casts out this demon who had caused a man to be mute and they cry out "He casts out demons by Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons."

Now think about that accusation for a moment. Jesus has already shown Himself a righteous man, a faithful rabbi, and a powerful prophet of God (to say the least!). And what kind of spirit is behind such a person? Even if Jesus weren't the Son of God (but, of course, He is!) He would at the very least be a person endowed with the Holy Spirit and empowered by Him. No prophet performs signs of himself, but only by the power of God. So when they accuse Jesus of casting out demons by the power of Satan, think of what they are saying! They are calling the Holy Spirit Beelzebub! The devil's kingdom is not divided, Jesus says; and here, in their desperation to discredit Jesus, they show themselves to be firmly in the devil's camp! This is why in both Matthew and Mark's accounts of this event, Jesus goes on to warn about blaspheming the Holy Spirit. But first He says: "And if I cast out demons by Beelzebub by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges. But if I cast out demons with the finger of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you." And then: "He who is not with Me is against Me, and he who does not gather with Me scatters." One is either with Christ and part of his kingdom, or with the devil. And these Pharisees had just revealed which side they were on in the matter.

The Kingdom of God is united against the devil. And in the person of Jesus the kingdom of God has been found on earth. And the devil and his demons know it and tremble. The God who defeated Satan's power in Egypt, where even the unbelieving magicians of the Pharaoh recognized the finger of God at work, was now walking Palestine in the flesh. And His house, His kingdom, cannot be defeated; for He is far stronger than the devil and all his minions.

So, as I've pointed out several times over these past few weeks, the devil in rage attacks those whom he can. He can't beat Christ, so he attacks the followers of Christ. He can cause no division between Father, Son and Spirit, or even among the holy angels any longer. So he seeks to destroy the Church by dividing it. And look at how much damage he has wrought over the centuries. Think of how many heresies the Church has had to face, of how many false teachers she has had to endure, and of the almost countless divisions that these things have caused; divisions which exist and multiply still in our time. And how did the devil accomplish such a feat? By encouraging people to depart from the Word of God as the only rule and norm of the Faith. He does it by seducing them into following a slightly different philosophy, or into choosing for themselves what appears to be a more reasonable approach to certain doctrines. And he does it by encouraging the pride of man which exults in high position and in wielding authority, even over God if possible, or at least over His Word.

This is why when the woman from crowd cries out her blessing upon Jesus, He rejects it and replaces it with another: "More than that, blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it!" You see, for the Church to withstand the devil's assaults and the attacks of heretics and false Christians, she must constantly be hearing and keeping the Word of God faithfully. Jesus, when praying to the Father before His passion, said concerning the apostles and the Church: "I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us..." Do you see how the unity of the Church is rooted in the Word of the Scriptures? Christians, believing the Word of Christ, delivered by the preaching and writing of the Apostles, are made one through that Word by faith in the One Lord, Jesus Christ; who is Himself one with the Father and the Holy Spirit. And against this Word of Christ the devil cannot stand. It is only when there is a departure from the Word that the devil can gain a foothold in and against Christ's Church. And tragically that has happened all too often over the course of history; and is still happening today.

And what the devil attempts to do to the Church as a whole, he also tries to do to you. Yes, he wants for you to be divided against yourself and to split your loyalties between Christ and something else, anything else, really! The devil is a pretty decent theologian; and he recognizes that you have a battle raging within you already between the new man Christ has created in Holy Baptism, and the old man that was condemned and put to death in that Sacrament. He knows that you are *simil Justus et peccator*, saint and sinner at the same time. He doesn't like it, mind you; he'd much rather have you lose that saint part and just be a plain old sinner again. But that not being the case, by the grace of Christ, he will simply work against you to strengthen the old sinner in his ways and hopefully to cause the new man to stumble and fall. If he can keep you as divided as possible, then he has a much better chance of defeating you.

This is why St. Paul admonishes us to live in imitation of Christ. He does this not to imply that by doing so you somehow climb up closer to God, or contribute to your salvation; but because our lives should be confessions of what God has called us to be; and because the devil is always looking for ways to pull you from Christ; and because the world is always looking for ways to

discredit Christ and the Christian Faith with the evidence of your actions. And so Paul paints a very clear contrast between what we should be and what we should not: “Therefore be imitators of God as dear children. And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma. But fornication and all uncleanness or covetousness, let it not even be named among you, as is fitting for saints; neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving thanks...” And if we are forgiven, why is our way of life important again? “For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord.” Paul is simply calling for you to let your way of life be united to your faith; or rather to flow from your faith by the grace of Christ. And this means putting aside the things that are incongruent with the faith.

The problem is that the things that he says should not even be named among Christians are named among us so often. Our lives don't look all that saintly, or if they do appear somewhat saintly, they don't appear that way consistently. So long as we carry around the old Adam in our flesh, we will have sinful thoughts, say sinful things, and sometimes do sinful acts. This being the case, how do we live in unity with Christ in our own hearts? How do we get an undivided heart?

Well, as I just said, so long as you carry about sin in your mortal bodies, your heart will never be completely unified. Having said that, though, you should still strive to be undivided in heart. This is why the Psalmist, King David, prays to God in Psalm 86: “Unite my heart to fear Your name.” But those words are not uttered in isolation. Listen to the words that come before and after: “Teach me Your way, O Lord; I will walk in Your truth; Unite my heart to fear Your name. I will praise You, O Lord my God, with all my heart, and I will glorify Your name forevermore. For great is Your mercy toward me, and You have delivered my soul from the depths of Sheol.” See how this works! Teach me Your way – let me hear Your Word and be strengthened in faith and understanding by Your Holy Spirit. And then out of that grace I will walk in Your truth. Unite my heart, again by conforming it to the Word of Christ through the grace of the Gospel, grace that by Christ's death and resurrection has delivered my soul from the depths of Hell. It's all rooted in the mercy of Christ toward us delivered by means of His Holy Word.

So you see, this prayer that we should pray, to have hearts united to fear the Lord, is rooted in God's will for us to have just such a heart. It is the very thing Christ prays for when He prays for us to be one with each other in faith as He and the Father are One. And God will and does answer such prayers. You see, His heart is actually undivided. His heart is united in this purpose: your salvation. And because God is so single mindedly willful about this, He will keep His Word and promises to you. And He has promised: “I love those who love me, And those who seek me diligently will find me.” And concerning His Word and grace He says: “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened.” He answers the prayer for unity of heart every time He sends His Gospel into your ears and into your mouths. And there the creation of the new heart is accomplished and furthered. And we are blessed if we continue to hear His Word and keep it. For not only is the devil powerless against the Word of Christ; but that same Word will sustain us until the day that we finally can put off our sinful flesh and be brought to the end of our faith, when we shall have at last the undivided heart and shall dwell with Him whose heart, mind, will, and actions have never been divided, our Lord Jesus Christ; to whom belongs all honor and glory now and forever. Amen

✧ Soli Deo gloria ✧