

Here is a random fact that I learned from the marquee at Bethel Baptist Church in Haywood County probably 15-20 years ago. The phrase “fear not”, or some version of that sentiment, appears in the Bible 365 times. I have cross checked this with priests and also the internet, not at all a scientific means of corroboration, but I like the idea that scripture gives us a “fear not” for every day of the year, so I will continue to run with it.

Years ago I worked for a non-profit crisis organization up in the Asheville area. One day I was filling in for my boss at the downtown location. I usually worked at one of the rural crisis sites, but I was in Asheville this one day and I happened to run into a friend I had known since childhood. Our lives have taken different paths since high school and yet, as paths often do, they intersect down the way. Here I was coordinating dozens of volunteers, working together to provide food, clothing, shelter, and other services to try and mitigate the various needs and crises that people in our area often encounter. Here also was an old friend of mine, a person I grew up playing Legos and soccer with, we have had sleepovers at each other’s houses. Here I was in a clean professional outfit, comfortably housed and fed, and here he was in dirty clothing, hungry, tired, and afraid. When I got called in to a counseling room to speak with my old friend, we recognized each other immediately.

After a quick hug, and probably some misplaced words of sympathy, I told him that I would find another counselor to speak with so that our past wouldn't interfere with the services that agency provides. Before I left the room, he told me that he was afraid.

“You are safe here friend, I promise” I said. He said, “that's not what I am afraid of. My greatest fear is that I will be found out. That you will tell our old friends that I am down and out and living on the streets of Asheville. I am afraid that my parents and old friends will find out what has happened to me and that they will know I'm not who I say I am; that I'm not who I want them to think I am; that I'm not who I want to be, I wish I hadn't seen you today.” I was heartbroken because a person I cared for was more afraid of being “found out” than he was of all the dangers of living unhoused. I made sure that another counselor took care of my old friend, he was fed and given the resources necessary to make it through another day. Although I never saw him again, our encounter that day has always stuck with me.

Given the constant perils of living unhoused, how could his greatest fear be being “found out.” Now I can't know his full story, but I can guess that he came from a divided house that I never perceived in our childhood. I can guess that mental health and or addiction issues had led him down his path but I can't really know.

I can guess that he knew and experienced the metaphorical “cracks” in the foundation of his house, his life. I reckon that he was trying to keep alive on a day-to-day basis and the prospect of being “found out” by people from our past would be for him that last tremor or aftershock that would crumble everything around him. From a theological perspective, I think he knew that that a divided house cannot stand, and a divided kingdom will crumble. I pray that he made it out ok.

From the beginning of his ministry, as told by St. Mark, Jesus has been dealing with divided houses and kingdoms. He has cast out demons, healed Peter’s mother-in-law, cleansed a leper, and caused a paralytic to walk. The houses and kingdoms of these people are divided. The strong man has invaded their homes. Their lives are not their own. They live with inner conflict and turmoil. They have been separated from their community and all that gave them security and identity. Their outer conditions of illness, paralysis, and possession point to the inner conflict, the battle between health and disease, not just physically but more importantly, spiritually.

That battle and interior conflict has been around since Adam and Eve separated themselves from God and hid amongst the trees of the garden. It is seen in God’s chosen people, Israel wanting a king so it can be like all the other nations; forgetting that it has a unique calling, that it is to be different from other nations, that it is through Israel, the people of God, that God will act for the benefit of all people.

This division and inner conflict is a reality of today's world and our lives. A marriage divided may end in divorce. A nation divided often results in vitriolic politics and in the extreme, war. An economy divided yields poverty and injustice. A community divided becomes a place where individualism and tribalism thrive, often leading to prejudice and violence. Humanity divided is all these things on a global level. Faith divided is sin.

We all know what it is like to live divided lives. You know those times when your outsides and your insides don't match up? That's what it means to be a house divided. You're one person at work another at home. You act one way with certain people and a different way with other people. Life gets divided into pieces. Behavior, beliefs, and ethics become situational. There is the work life, the family life, the prayer life, the personal life, the social life. Pretty soon we're left with a life that is really... just a bunch of pieces.

Sometimes it seems that we are forever trying to put the pieces of our lives together. That's why the crowd has gathered around Jesus. That's why the religious authorities oppose him. That's why his family tries to restrain him. In their own way each is trying to put the pieces of their life together but it's not working. They won't fit. They have been found out. Their life and their world are neither what they thought they were nor what Jesus knows they could be. One reality has fallen, and a new one is ready to rise.

Jesus always stands before us as the image of unity, wholeness, and integration. He is the stronger one. He does for us that we cannot do for ourselves. He puts our lives and houses back in order. Jesus offers a different image of what life might look like. He does so by revealing the division in our lives, showing us the houses that cannot stand, and the inevitable crumbling of our kingdoms.

Even when it is for our own good, with the offer of new life and intended for wholeness, that can be a very hard place to be. It means that one way or another change of some sort is coming. Change is hard, most of us don't like that. It can be frightening.

“He has gone out of his mind,” the people say. The religious authorities accuse him of allegiance to Beelzebul, the ruler of demons. They project onto Jesus their own interior conflict and division. They have declared that which is holy, sacred, and beautiful to be unclean, dirty, and bereft of God. Yet, their accusations say more about themselves than Jesus. Their accusations reveal the depth of the conflict and division within. Their accusations are a way of avoiding themselves, who they truly are and who they are truly called to be.

It's hard to look at the division and inner conflict within our lives. The beginning of wholeness, however, is acknowledging our brokenness. Where is our own house divided? How and to what extent have we created conflict and division within our relationships. In what ways do we live fragmented lives, parceling out pieces here and there? What is it that shatters your life? Anger and resentment, greed, insecurity, perfectionism, sorrow and loss. Fear. Envy. Guilt. Loneliness.

There are all sorts of forces, things, events, sometimes even people by which our lives are broken and through which we are separated from God, others, and our self. AND, Christ is stronger than anything that fragments our lives. He binds the forces that divide, heals the wounds that separate, and refashions pieces into a new whole. There is no house, there is no foundation, there is nothing about your life or my life that cannot be put back together by the love God in Christ. Trust in that and thou shalt not live in fear.