

## HOUSE DIVIDED

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Mark 3:20-35

One hundred years ago this week, one of the most horrific incidents in American history took place in Tulsa, Oklahoma. It was Tulsa Race Massacre.

In the period following World War One, in segregated Tulsa, there was a prosperous section of town known as the Greenwood District. This predominantly African American neighborhood was an entrepreneurial center of retail and service businesses, schools, and entertainment. The residents of the Greenwood District had created a vibrant, vital, self-contained economy that was heralded across this nation as the Black Wall Street.

On the morning of Monday, May 30, 1921, a young African American man named Dick Roland was riding in an elevator in a downtown Tulsa building. In the elevator was a young white woman named Sarah Page. She was the elevator operator. He was 19; she was 17. There was some incident between the two. He may have bumped against her or stepped on her foot. Whatever it was was insignificant. But, in no time, increasingly exaggerated accounts of what took place spread throughout the white population of the city.

The next morning, Roland was arrested, and the newspaper, the Tulsa Tribune, ran an especially inflammatory report of the incident. Because of the rumors circulating around town, African American men gathered at the courthouse in order to protect Roland, fearful that he would be lynched. They were confronted by a crowd of whites. The sheriff and his men had Roland barricaded on the top floor of the courthouse to protect him. But outside, as tensions escalated, shots were fired, and the African Americans were forced to retreat towards the Greenwood District.

Then, in the early hours of June 1, Greenwood was looted and burned by white rioters. The governor declared martial law and the National Guard was brought in. The guardsman assisted firefighters in tackling the fires and took African Americans out of the hands of the vigilantes. They also rounded up and detained all Black Tulsans. Over 6000 were interned at the fairgrounds, some for as long as eight days.

The Greenwood violence lasted about twenty-four hours. However, in its wake, 35 blocks lay in charred ruins. Hundreds of people were injured. The official death toll was just 36, but historians place that number at closer to 300. The root causes of this event are numerous and complex—white supremacy, Jim Crow, jealousy, history. All contributed to the inferno sparked in Tulsa.

The charges against Dick Roland were dropped. From the start, they were highly suspect—the all too typical accusations against a Black man about a white woman. No testimony was ever taken from Sarah Page.

In those 35 blocks of the Greenwood District were over 1200 homes as well as churches, schools, businesses, two newspapers, a hospital, a library, and more. In just twenty-four hours, an entire community was turned to ash.

The Tulsa Massacre was the manifestation of this nation's deep racism. This was not the soft racism of one person judging another about the color of their skin. It was the racism baked into the system itself. It was the system that sought to hold down the aspiring residents of the Greenwood District.

It all began with that rabble-rousing article in the newspaper. As the violence escalated, local officials deputized and armed white men to enter the Greenwood community. These people looted and destroyed. One survivor tells of men coming into her home and demolishing their piano. What excuse is there to destroy someone's piano? The National Guard was used to detain and intern only the Black residents. There were even reports of whites using airplanes to drop incendiary devices and shoot at people in Greenwood.

Systemic racism occurs where the system itself permits and encourages the persecution of a certain class of people. In Tulsa, for the hundreds murdered, the 10,000 people displaced from their homes, and the millions in property damage, not a single person was ever indicted. There was no investigation. The system worked. Because the massacre was classified as a riot, insurance refused to compensate for the damage. Generations of wealth and financial gain were erased forever. A community that had lifted itself up from slavery was pushed back into the mire of poverty never to fully return.

Our scripture reading for this day is from the third chapter of the Gospel of Mark. It is an odd and disquieting passage that talks about insanity, demons, and home invasions. It's important to note that this passage takes place near the beginning of Mark's gospel. And part of its purpose is to establish Jesus' identity in this world.

So far, in this gospel, Jesus has been baptized. He successfully faced the temptations of Satan. He returned to Galilee *proclaiming the good news of God* and announcing that *the Kingdom of God has come near*. He begins calling his disciples and preaches in the synagogues. He heals people and cast out spirits. He socializes with sinners and tax collectors.

And then we come to this reading. It is a messy, complex passage that if I were teaching in a Sunday school class would require a large whiteboard to diagram its structure and relationships.

The passage has three parts. We will look at each of them. In the first part, we read that a large crowd has gathered to hear Jesus. This was not uncommon. People were drawn to Jesus wherever he went. There are so many people to care for that the disciples are overwhelmed and don't even have time to sit down and eat.

And then we are introduced to Jesus' family. They have come to find him because they are concerned. They have heard the tales of his activities around Galilee—the healing and the miracles. These stories certainly can't be true, and they are worried that Jesus has lost his mind. They have come to take him home. But he is not leaving.

In the second part of our reading, the scribes appear. This would have been a big deal. These are the suits coming down from corporate. The scribes carried great power and influence. No doubt, the religious leadership in Jerusalem had heard reports of this miracle worker in Galilee who was attracting large crowds. The scribes are dispatched to investigate because this person could potentially pose a threat to the religious order in their country, a threat to the system.

The scribes determine that Jesus is, in fact, Satan, and that he represents the demonic forces. The scribes don't label Jesus as a fake or a charlatan. They throw the book at him and denounce him as demonic. Jesus responds and points out the absurd illogic of their accusation. If, indeed, he is Satan as they say, then how is it possible that he can cast out Satan? Doesn't that contradict who they say he is? Then Jesus offers the crowd three brief parables. He says, *A kingdom divided against itself cannot stand. A house divided against itself cannot stand. And Satan, divided against himself, clearly cannot stand.*

And then, there is the very strange parable about a home invasion. The parable says that if you want to rob the home of a person who can defend themselves—a strongman—then you've first got to tie that person up. That is the only way to plunder their property. If you want to defeat Satan, you've got to overpower him.

And then, in the third and final part of this reading, we return to Jesus' family. As Jesus speaks to the crowd, they inform him that his family is outside calling for him. Jesus poses the question, *Who is my family?* He motions to the crowd and tells them, *Here is my family. Whoever does the will of God, that is my family.* Jesus is not rejecting his family; he is redefining what family can be.

As I said, this is a jarring passage. It appears early in this gospel with the intention of establishing Jesus' identity and purpose. We already know he is the son of God, he can forgive sins, he can heal, he can cast out demons. What we find here is that he doesn't promise to be polite about it. He will do what he has to do knowing full well that the system will conspire to stop him. He is here to usher in God's kingdom to supplant the existing kingdom. But we know that the system will

win. The system will execute him beneath a sign that mockingly calls him, “King of the Jews.”

Even today, we recognize that we are still living in the old kingdom. The Tulsa Massacre is proof of that. God's kingdom is marked by justice, and there was no justice in Tulsa.

Tulsa was not the only event of its kind. There been many, many others. For example, in 1919, in Elaine, Arkansas, 200 Black farmers and their families were slaughtered because they had recently unionized in order to bypass the unjust sharecropping system. In Ocoee, Florida, in 1920, 60 African Americans were killed, and a Black church burned to prevent Blacks from voting. In Wilmington, North Carolina, in 1898, white supremacists overthrew the results of a local election. In the process, they killed dozens of Black people and burned down much of Wilmington's prosperous Black community.

Last summer, we witnessed protests in every state of our country calling for an end to systemic racism. Today is the first Sunday following Memorial Day. Summer has begun. My prayer is that this summer may be the start of meaningful change, that we actually do something, that we tie up the strong man and replace his rule with God's kingdom.

In the end, Jesus was tried and executed. It would seem that the system prevailed. But the story continues, and God raised him from death. That is the source of our hope, that God's power is greater than death, greater than the system, greater than evil. God's kingdom will prevail.

Let us take up the fight against racism in all its forms; let us change the system; let us redefine what it means to be God's family, let us no longer accept being a house divided.