Sunday, June 30, 1996
SACRED AND/OR FAMILIAR
Colossians 3:16-17

All pastors of congregations know that there are two issues that can stir up a lot of discussion in a church — changing the Sunday worship schedule is one, and the other is getting a new hymnal. Related to the hymnal issue is the question of which hymns are sung, no matter what hymn book is used.

For many years, the standard time of worship in Protestant congregations was 11:00 on Sunday morning. Do you know how that came to be? Is there something especially sacred about 11:00 a.m.? That time for worship became standard in this country when we were mostly a rural, agricultural society. It gave farm families time to finish their morning chores, clean up, and get ready for church.

We are no longer primarily a rural, agricultural society, so times of worship have necessarily changed. We've had to learn that just because something is familiar, it doesn't necessarily make it sacred.

In a congregation like this one, the choice of a hymnal and the hymns selected for worship can be a challenge because our members and visitors come from at least 20 different denominational backgrounds. This means that the people who attend on a Saturday evening or Sunday morning have learned hymns from more than 20 different hymnbooks. While some hymns are common to most hymnals, there is a wide variety of others that are not.

We have individuals from various Lutheran denominations, Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Presbyterian, Methodist, all kinds of Baptists, Disciples of Christ, Episcopalian, the Reformed Church, Unitarian, and many more traditions. I think it's a wonderful mix that adds excitement to our worship.

Hymn tunes are another issue. There are hymn tunes that today are familiar and considered sacred but, many years ago, were secular songs sung in taverns and roadhouses. New words were written for them, and through usage, their past history has been forgotten — although when they were first introduced, they were quite controversial.

The texts of many of our hymns have also changed over the years. Did you know, for example, that there are at least three different versions of one of the most beloved Christmas carols, "Silent Night," and none of them are new? The original text was written by Joseph Mohr in 1818 in German. There have been many translations into English, so which version is most familiar to you depends on the hymnal used in the church where you grew up.

The same is true of many of our most familiar hymns. They've undergone many textual changes over the years. It's like the different versions of the Lord's Prayer. Some grew up with "forgive us our debts," while others learned "forgive us our trespasses." A better English translation from the original Greek, the language of the New Testament, is "forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us." But we naturally prefer what is most familiar. However, just because something is familiar does not make it sacred.

We have to remember that all religious language is metaphorical, and as one writer said, "All metaphors are imperfect, and that is the beauty of them." When we call God "Father" or

“Mother,” these are metaphors. No one metaphor can fully describe God. Furthermore, simply because some metaphors are familiar doesn’t make them more sacred than unfamiliar ones. In fact, hearing and using unfamiliar metaphors can help us grow in our understanding of God. Perhaps that’s why we fear the new and unfamiliar — we don’t want our cozy concept of God challenged or changed in any way.

In the time of Jesus, people were used to hearing God spoken of in very remote and distant terms. The Hebrew custom of leaving out the vowels when writing the names for God — Yahweh and Elohim — revealed a deep respect for the holiness of God, an aversion to familiarity with the Divine.

Imagine the reaction when Jesus began to talk about God in terms of seeds and soil, patches, wineskins, fishnets, young women who run out of oil when the bridegroom is late, lost lambs, prodigal sons, sweaty workers, and frightened servants. These terms were so intimate and concrete that listeners were amazed and shocked. The New Testament says, “Not all spoke well of him.” Some likely walked away muttering, “Is nothing sacred?”

I still remember the first time, many years ago, that I used the metaphor of God as a mother in a sermon. Someone asked me if I really believed God was a woman. “Of course not,” I said. “No more than I think God is a man.” I could have added, “Sometimes God is like a friend to me, sometimes like a brother or sister, sometimes like a judge who admonishes me. At other times, God is the Holy Light and Energy that burns within me.”

The 23rd Psalm describes God as a shepherd. That metaphor may not mean as much to people who live in a city and have never seen a shepherd or sheep. But to people in Jesus’ time, it carried deep meaning.

That’s what I appreciate most about our new hymnal. It has both new metaphors and old, familiar ones. It has new tunes and old, familiar ones. It contains many beautiful new hymns and includes old hymns that weren’t in the Pilgrim Hymnal. Here are a few examples.

Turn to page 327. Here’s a hymn many of us learned in Sunday School. Notice the footnote, and also the various translations at the bottom of the page and the facing page — ten in all. We’ll sing it now as you remain seated.

(CONGREGATION SINGS “JESUS LOVES ME”)

By contrast, let’s look at a new hymn, both text and tune. Turn to No. 11, “Bring Many Names.” Listen as our choir or soloist sings the first verse, and then we’ll all sing verses 2, 3, and 4. Notice the metaphors for God.

(SOLOIST OR CHOIR SINGS, THEN CONGREGATION, No. 11)

Hymns don’t have to be well-worn or familiar to be appreciated. They just have to be beautiful, and this new hymnal is filled with beautiful hymns.

That doesn’t mean I think it’s perfect. There is no perfect hymnal, and given the diversity of Christian traditions and musical tastes, there likely never will be.

Incidentally, by a wonderful coincidence, two of the new hymns in The New Century Hymnal were written by members of our congregation. Turn to page 435, “Each Winter as the Year

Grows Older.” The music was composed by Annabeth McClelland Gay, and the text was written by her husband, William Gay.

Now turn to page 320. The hymn is titled “Deep in the Shadows of the Past.” Again, the music was composed by Annabeth McClelland Gay, and the words were written by Brian Wren. Notice how the words tell the story of the origin of the Bible.

Let’s now join in the Litany printed in your Order of Worship for the dedication of the new hymnals.

(LITANY FOR DEDICATION OF THE HYMNALS):

Leader: For the worship of God in prayer and praise, for the preaching of the Word, for the celebration of the holy sacraments,

People: We dedicate these hymnals.

Leader: For the comfort of those who mourn, for the help of those who are perplexed, for the guidance of those who seek strength,

People: We dedicate these hymnals.

Leader: For the support and nurture of individuals and families, for the guidance of children and youth,

People: We dedicate these hymnals.

Leader: For the opening of minds to new truths about God, for expressing our joy in song, and for glorifying God through music,

People: We dedicate these hymnals.

Leader: In honor and in memory of the people we love, and in whose names many of these hymnals have been given,

People: We dedicate these hymnals.

All: We are thankful for the many hymnals and songbooks of the past which have nurtured our faith. Amen.