Sunday June 30, 1996

SACRED AND/OR FAMILIAR Colossians 3:16-17

All pastors of congregations know that there are two issues which can cause 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 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 the farm families time to get the morning chores done and themselves

cleaned up and ready for church.

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

In a congregation like this one, the choice of a hymnal and the hymns which are selected for worship from whatever hymnal can be a problem because our membership and those who come as visitors are people from at least 20 or more different denominational backgrounds which means that the people who come here on a Saturday evening or Sunday morning have learned hymns from more than 20 different hymnbooks. Although there are some hymns which are com-

mon to most hymnals, there are a wide variety of others which 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 Church traditions. I think it's a wonderful mix which adds excitement to our worship.

Hymn tunes are another issue. There are hymn tunes which today are familiar and are considered sacred but many years ago were tunes to secular songs sung in taverns and road houses. 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 text to many of our hymns have also changed over the years. Did you know, for example, that there are at least 8 different versions of one of the most beloved Christmas Carols, "Silent Night," and none of them are new ones. The original text for this carol was written by Joseph Mohr in 1818 and was in German. So there have been many different translations of the German into English and so which one is most familiar to you depends on which hymnal you used in the church where you grew up.

The same is true of many of our most familiar hymns. There have been many different texts over the years. It's like those different versions of the Lord's Prayer. Some grew up in a tradition

which said, "Forgive us our debts," while others come from a tradition which said, "Forgive us our trespasses." A better English translation today from the original Greek, the language in which the New Testament was written, is, "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us." But we naturally prefer what is most familiar to us. However because something is familiar does not make it sacred.

What we have to remember is 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," "Mother," "Lord," "Creator," "Holy One," we are using metaphors. There is no one metaphor which totally describes God. Furthermore, simply because some metaphors are familiar to us, does

not make them more sacred than those which are unfamiliar. In fact, hearing and using some unfamiliar metaphors can help us grow in our understanding of God. Maybe that's why we are afraid of 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 talked about in a very remote and distant language. The Hebrew custom of leaving out the vowels when writing the names for God--Yahweh and Elohim--revealed this trembling respect, the holiness, this aversion to familiarity with the Divine.

Imagine the reaction when Jesus began to talk about God in terms of seed and soil and patches,

wine skins, fish nets, and young women who run out of oil when the bridegroom is late, lost lambs, prodigal sons, sweaty workers, and frightened servants. So intimate and concrete were these terms that listeners were amazed and shocked. The New Testament says, "Not all spoke well of him." Some no doubt when away muttering, "Is nothing sacred?"

I still remember many years ago the first time 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 man." I could have gone on to say, "Sometimes God is like a friend to me, sometimes like a brother or sister, sometimes like a judge who admonishes me or calls my activity into question. There are times when God is the

Holy One, almost unapproachable and at other times God is the Holy Light and Energy that burns within me."

The 23rd Psalm describes God as being like a shepherd. That's a metaphor that probably does not mean as much to people who live in a city and have never seen a shepherd or a sheep whereas to the people in Jesus' time and before this metaphor carried deep meaning.

That's what I appreciate most about our new hymnal. It has new metaphors as well as old and familiar ones. It has new tunes as well as old and familiar ones. It has many beautiful new hymns and includes many old beautiful hymns which were not 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. Notice too the various translations at the bottom of the page and on the facing page, ten in all. We're going to sing it now as you remain seated.

(CONGREGATION SINGS "JESUS LOVES ME.")

By contrast, a new hymn, both text and tune is No. 11, "BRING MANY NAMES." Listen as our choir or soloist sings the first verse and then we'll sing verse 2, 3, & 4. Notice the metaphors for God.

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

Hymns don't necessarily 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 is perfect. There is no perfect hymnal and given so many different Christian traditions and so many different tastes in music such a hymnal will never exist.

Incidentally by a wonderful coincidence, two of the new hymns in "THE NEW CENTURY HYMNAL" are 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 written by her husband, William Gay.

Now turn to page 320. The hymn title is "Deep in the Shadows of the Past." The music again was composed by Annabeth McClelland Gay and the words by Brian Wren. Note how the words tell the story of the origin of the Bible.

Join with me now in the Litany as printed on your Order of Worship for the dedication of the new 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 per-

plexed, 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 new 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.