

September 11, 2016  
Philippians 2:1-4  
At the Root of It

September 11, 2001 fell on a Tuesday and the country was still in total shock on the following Sunday, September 16th. Most of us have no trouble remembering where we were and what we were doing when we heard the news of those devastating attacks. But, do you remember any of the hymns you sang on September 16? You'd expect I would since I had to pick them out for the service we held at the North Prairie United Methodist Church.

I recall trying to find a hymn which would offer comfort and hope in those dark and terrifying times. So, I went to the "Strength in Tribulation" section of the hymnal and was drawn to number 523 - "Saranam, Saranam". The words were just what the situation seemed to call for and the melody was one I really liked. What I did not think about was the pedigree of the hymn. The words are "Traditional Pakistani" and the melody is "Traditional Punjabi".

If I were faced with the same situation today, I still would pick that hymn even though, at that time, I was challenged by a member of the congregation who threatened to leave the church, which he and his wife eventually did. He was looking for something patriotic like "America" or "America the Beautiful" not something "foreign". I get it. There can be value in rallying around the flag. But, it is equally important to cast a broader vision of whom we are rallying with.

Last Sunday, we considered Jesus' statement: "if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand". And, I think, we agreed that many houses currently are facing divisions including our country, our denomination and the world at large. I think Jesus' vision of the "house" was more far reaching than we usually think.

Looking back over the years following 9/11/01, it is clear that the forces of terror will not be defeated through military means alone. And they certainly cannot be overcome through the efforts of one country alone. The divisions created by that event must be healed from the ground up - beginning with each of us, and how we respond to one another. At the root of it all, is God and "saranam" - taking refuge in God.

So, this Sunday, as we begin our investigation of the roots of division, we'll be using Francis Asbury's, *The Causes, Evils and Cures of Heart and Church Divisions* as our guide. In the first 2 sections, Asbury proposes seventeen elements which lie at the root of division. I have grouped them into 4: 1) It's about Me - looking in, 2) It's about Me - acting out, 3) Speech that Divides and 4) Tactics to Win at any cost?

It's about me - either looking in or acting out. Here we find words like pride, self-love, envy, jealousy and passion, rigidness, rashness, willfulness, contention (quarrelsomeness). These all reflect a self-centered relationship to the world. Paul, in Philippians, is clear. He tells them not to "do anything out of selfish desire" (Phil 2:3a).

These words, however, are about placing oneself first or pushing others away. Each creates divisions by putting up walls to separate and divide. how

The power of the tongue and tactics to win demonstrate how we express our self-centeredness. Asbury lists whispering, slander, meddling in the affairs of others and needless disputes, evil allies (making deals with the "devil" to get your way), revenge. James is clear about how speech creates divisions. He says the tongue "is a small part of the body", it boasts wildly." (James 3:5) And, Paul warns the Philippians not to do anything from a cheap desire to boast. (Phil 2:3b) How many times have you wished you could take your words back or said something differently? Yet, it was too late, the damage was done, the relationship was strained.

The alternate is found in John Wesley's challenge: Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without all doubt, we may. Herein all God's children may unite, notwithstanding these smaller differences. Dare we come together with others who are different? Dare we consider the ways we throw up walls to hide behind? Can we all take refuge in the God who created all? Must we rush to hide behind what is "ours" rather than open ourselves to sharing experience with others?

Grace & peace,  
Pastor Ron