

Sermon: A House Divided
Scripture: Genesis
Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans
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Last week with the encouragement of the Apostle Paul I spoke to you about the reality of our divided selves; the fact that we do things that our higher selves, you might say, know we shouldn't do and then we don't do that which our higher selves know is the very best thing for ourselves to do. In effect, it is Paul's way of naming the very real experience we all have of a division or rift within ourselves.

But if this is true for every one of us individually then it only follows that when we come together into families, tribes, communities and nations this dividedness will manifest itself in our corporate/group beings as well. It's just the nature of the way things are. And yet what is interesting about our religious tradition is that it doesn't claim that such division is the problem but actually it's planted in reality by God, Godself, such that we could almost say that division itself is good, not as an end in itself but as a necessary reality blessed by God.

As we go back to the very beginning of our sacred scriptures we recognize this in full tilt. In the beginning was Eden, a place of perfect unity and peace and at-home-ness. And this lasts all of a few verses before (wham!) the human being is separated from this perfect place of union with God and with one another. And then we have a thousand some odd pages that follow which could be described as one long account - in writings of history, poetry, song, legal documents, prayers, letters and devotionals - of increasing human division but in an overarching effort to get back home to the unity and perfection of Eden, which we really do know the reality of in the deepest parts of souls, and which we know we have not reached.

But let us try and get our minds around this notion that while our ultimate home might be there in that profound place of unity that we can sense is there somewhere, there is also a necessity and GOODNESS, in the meantime, of being divided, separated, distinct. What I mean by "the goodness of division" is expressed beautifully in the quote of G.K. Chesterton's that I put at the beginning of the bulletin this morning: *"If souls are separate love is possible. If souls are united love is impossible. A man may be said loosely to love himself, but he can hardly fall in love with himself.... Love desires personality; therefore love desires*

division. It is the instinct of Christianity to be glad that God has broken the universe into little pieces, because they are living pieces.” Love is what is suddenly and miraculously allowed or enabled in a world that is no longer in perfect union. Of course rivalry and hatred is then possible too – note Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, Moses and Pharaoh, Jesus and Herod – but such rivalry and hatred, we can only assume, is a small price to pay for the enormity of Love Enabled.

In the face of the division within ourselves and our communities and the great desire we all have for there to be unity within us and among us, the temptation, (“Lord, lead us not into temptation”) is to insist upon it and force it to be, it’s to take Eden you might say by violently storming it! Within ourselves this can look like a denial of any of the darker aspects of ourselves and a blind self-righteousness that does damage to others or it looks like a maddening effort to be perfect and perfectly whole in our selves which leads to shame because it’s not possible and judgment and intolerance of others’ imperfections because they remind us too painfully of our own and, simply put, perfection is not possible this side of heaven.

Within our communities and nations this forced unity, this trying to take Eden by storm, the dark side of our quest for wholeness often leads to those in power denying that there are any dissenting, differing voices or outright suppressing them – a forced and enforced unity of mind at the expense of those who make evident the truer reality of our dividedness of mind as humans, communities, nations. Global history and the global present day is littered with examples of exactly this dynamic of enforced unity. And if we look honestly we can find the dynamic operating at the interpersonal level as well.

So then what is the right thing to do about this divide among us and our honest desire for wholeness? If our temptation in our lower selves is to suppress the divisions and distinctions and force a unity, then what might our higher selves (the image or the voice of God within us) require of us?

It requires us not to deny the division or suppress the distinctions but to step right into the middle of it with LOVE. And what does that look like? Well, I think the 20th century French philosopher and theologian Simone Weil says it most aptly and poignantly when she says: “to love is simply to put yourself in the shoes of the other.” This is how we love our family members, our spouses, our friends, and even potentially our enemies. We do everything we can - not to be understood in our viewpoint and

persuasive of our perspective - but rather we do all we can to understand the other. This is the practical way to love. Simple? yes. Easy? No way! For everything in us screams out to be understood and to persuade the other of our point of view even to the point of violence at times. But the rigorous demand of love, which is not for the faint of heart, is to seek to understand the other. Remember the second half of St. Frances' "make me an instrument" prayer – "O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love." That's it.

And of course, the physical, symbolic representation of this kind of love that steps not away from the division but right into the middle of it is none other than Jesus on the cross who cries out from that cross not "God destroy mine enemies" or "annihilate the infidel" but rather "Lord, forgive them for they know not what they do!" And how could he possibly ask that for the sake of his very executioners? Only because - despite the fact that he has not been understood, even by his best friends, much less his enemies - he has understood them. Only does this fruit of Love that is "understanding-the-other", enable forgiveness to be.

In a small but no less critical way, we, as a church community, have been, trying to approach the issue of our steeple-less church by stepping into the divisions and distinctions among us and working carefully towards a decision and solution for a way forward believing that it requires of us the work of understanding each other. Practically, this looked like a meeting last month where we put out on the table over 20 quotes from different perspectives around the church community and we each tried to hear them and understand them. This would be what we might call inner-steeple work or the necessary spiritual work that is the underpinning to support what then comes today which is a meeting about the nuts and bolts, the options and considerations for the outer steeple. And, I would say, that as we seek to accomplish this physical task, it is essential that we attend to the spiritual task of who we are as a community and what our future will be as a house of God with a steeple on top. I believe we have been doing this all along to some extent but with our book discussion we will be thinking even more deeply about our future so that as we raise the steeple – assuming that's what most everyone wants in some form or another – it is representative of a rising sense of community, love, understanding and inspiration for being God's people in the world. It must be accompanied by that or we should not have a steeple at all.

Pastoral Prayer:

Divine Master help us seek not so much to be understood as to understand in the midst of the very blessing of the differences and distinctions among us. Help us to remember that we seek the best way forward for a church that is not ours first but yours, that we seek not the majority opinion among for what we should do, but rather *your* desire and direction for what we should do. And even as we place our minds upon the physical structure of our building, help us not to forget that the reason we have a building at all is to enable us to more fully be the hands and feet of Christ in the world beyond...