

“When Kindred Live Together in Unity”

Psalm 133

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At South Church we actually have a music vision statement. It calls for varieties of music styles, varieties of instruments, and varieties of traditions and voices. So, this morning I want to lift up an ancient song with a relevant theme, an ancient song whose original tune may be lost to the ages, an ancient song we know as Psalm 133. When I think about World Communion Sunday and the thought of unity among faith communities, I think of the power of music to bring people together and to inspire people to imagine peace.

“How good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity.” I’ve been imagining what that sounds like on the tenor sax, how drums might amplify that message, how an organ might dramatize its truth, how an electric guitar or even a banjo might draw everyone into singing the refrain. “How good and pleasant it is with kindred live together in unity.”

King David was only the second king of Israel. He had an enormous task ahead of him: to unite the twelve tribes under one banner. Psalm 133 was composed at about that same time. Some have attributed this psalm to David, himself. He had been a shepherd and knew something about keeping the flock together. He had been an adolescent boy and knew something about maintaining friendships. He had been a warrior and knew something about rallying troops to a common cause. This ancient song lifts up an image of the joyful flavor of unity, of that sacred feeling that comes over us whenever sisters and brothers come together in unity.

In the back of our hymnal, we have several statements of faith. One is from New Zealand; one is from Canada; one is from our own United Church of Christ. The words and phraseology differ from stanza to stanza, but the theology is the same.

God is our maker. Christ is our Redeemer. The Holy Spirit is the one who equips us for ministry and mission. Though we all have our intensely personal encounters with God, we see common threads weaving through them all.

I was baptized in the Congregational Church in East Longmeadow, Massachusetts. I attended a non-denominational boarding school in Easthampton. I went to a Presbyterian college in Texas where my roommate was a Mormon. I attended a seminary supported equally by American Baptists and the United Church of Christ. I did my field work in a United Methodist Church. I married a Lutheran! And I did my Clinical Pastoral Education in a group of nine, me and 8 Roman Catholics! So, my own personal faith formation has been an ecumenical venture. I have seen first-hand the beauty of unity within the Christian fellowship.

In Psalm 133, this beauty is compared to oil running down over the beard of Aaron, oil running down over the collar of his robes. This image doesn't fly too well in the 21st Century. What's beautiful about an oily beard?, oil running down a robe? But you see, Aaron was the priest who traveled with Moses to tell old Pharaoh to "let my people go." And the oil would have been the oil of gladness, the oil used for anointing, for healing, for blessing. Thus unity is described in this song as the feeling that comes when everyone is truly free and when everyone is truly healed.

In mid-March of 1994, I got the call that you hope to never receive. My dad had developed a brain tumor and would be having surgery the next day at Bay State Hospital in Springfield. I dropped everything and drove up there to be with him.

Now, my dad had been married three times and had twelve children in three families. So, when the time came for the surgery, we were all there, together, for the very first time, in the surgical lounge. Grown children from three families never having said more than a few words to each other, holding not such wonderful feelings about each other either, as you might well imagine. My father's brother, our Uncle Perry, was there, too.

Gradually, little conversations began to cross family lines. My brother Tommy was talking with Brenda and my brother David was talking with Shaun and Meghan was talking with Robyn. You get the idea? Eventually, Uncle Perry got everyone's attention and suggested we should all be praying for a miracle in the operating room. I looked around at the twelve children, now talking with some animation, appearing to have come together in unity, and I thought: wait a minute; the miracle is happening right here in the family lounge! If I had thought of it at the time, I would have had us all sing, "How good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity."

That scene in the surgical lounge is always with me. I have it with me when I watch the evening news and I see Israelites and Palestinians living in the same space but not talking to each other, not coming together in unity, not overcoming their historical animosities, not finding common ground. The Tree of Life conference that we are hosting at the end of the month is a baby step toward unity, toward a day when the singing of Psalm 133 will echo once again through the entire Holy Land.

Today is World Communion Sunday. It's a day for holding hands across borders, across the Rio Grande River, across the Ural Mountains, across the Jordan River, across the Sea of Japan, across the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, a day to hold the hands of people just like us who yearn every day for peace and for the abundance that we know in the love of Jesus Christ.

My wildest vision is that the many breads on the many communion tables throughout the world this very day will somehow, in some mysterious way, allow for the melting of hearts, the healing of divisions, and the reality of peace with justice. I'm sure John Lennon would call me a dreamer. But the world needs dreamers. I do imagine the day when in all languages and in all continents and in all sanctuaries the words of the psalm might ring out: "How good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity." In the greatest of hope, I say, Amen!