

The Church Together in Unity
Psalm 133
Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco Texas
June 27, 2021

Psalm 133 is called a hymn of ascent. It likely was sung by pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem, which was located on a hill (Mt. Zion) – hence the image of going up to the temple, singing as you ascended.

The hymn is known for its first line – *“How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity”* -- but something should be said in passing about the comparison that is made between opening line and the next line: *“It is like the precious oil on the head, running down upon the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down over the collar of his robes.”*

Anointing with oil was a custom dating back to when Aaron, Moses’ brother, was anointed Israel’s first high priest. Subsequently, kings of Israel were anointed with oil and called the Anointed One.

I have to confess that is not one of my favorite biblical images. I can’t think of anything I would like less than having oil poured on my head, running down my neck, under my collar and on to my beard.

We repeat the 23rd psalm with deep reverence, as we should – *“Thou anointest my head with oil, my cup runneth over”* – without giving a thought to what a mess that would be.

Nikki tells me that in thinking of the oil I should have in mind essential oils and not 10W40 motor oil. Perhaps. The Hebrew Bible does say that the oil was scented with cinnamon and other spices. Still

The psalmist said that *“kindred living together in unity”* is like having oil poured on your head. In what way is it like that? The psalmist doesn’t say, and I haven’t the faintest idea. Clearly, the psalmist meant it in a good way.

Scholars think this was originally a hymn in praise of the clan or tribe. *“How very good and pleasant it is when kindred (kinfolk) live together in unity.”* After the invading Hebrews crossed the Jordan River from the east and conquered the land of Canaan, the land was not divided into states or provinces; it was divided among the twelve tribes – clans or families – of Israel. This was a hymn celebrating the unity of the various clans or tribes, which often did not dwell together in unity.

At some point, the hymn in praise of the tribe or family was adapted as a hymn to the worshipping community. *“How very good and pleasant it is when the community of faith lives – and worships – in unity.”*

That is how pilgrims came to sing this psalm on their way to the temple. The psalm was a celebration of the community of faith.

And that is how we can turn to this psalm as a celebration of “The Church Together in Unity.”

In order to do that I am going to take a rather unorthodox, autobiographical route. I beg your patience, and if not patience then your tolerance. Once you have heard what I have to say, you will understand why I waited ten months to tell you.

2008 was a year of tremendous change for me. In May, Nikki and I were married. Under any circumstance, that would be life-altering. But when you go from

being the father of three to being the father of three and the stepfather of nine, the tectonic plates of the earth shift.

Plus, I sold the house I had lived in for 23 years and moved out of my old, familiar neighborhood to a part of town in which I knew almost no one.

Then in November I retired and began teaching at a nearby college. I broke all ties with the congregation I had served for more than two decades – no weddings, no funerals, no counseling. I vowed not to maintain decades-old friendships, thinking – rightly so, I believe – that church members needed to make the transition to the new pastor. I did that because I followed a pastor who did just the opposite of all those things and was a source of dissension and division in the congregation for years into my pastorate.

In a matter of months, every facet of my life changed: new family, new home, new neighborhood, new job.

I didn't find that depressing. To the contrary, I found it energizing. It was as if a whole new life was opening for me. I embraced it. I loved it.

But where did the church fit into that new life? Where a retired minister goes to church, especially when s/he stays in town as I did, is always an issue. When you are one of a handful of progressive/liberal pastors in town, there aren't a lot of options for you on Sunday morning. I visited around a bit. I liked an Episcopal church, but there were some issues there. A nearby Methodist church was really attractive. It is the most ethnically, racially, economically integrated church I have ever encountered. A local leader in all the issues I am interested in. But the worship service -- when you walked in on Sunday morning the music was blaring, the drums and electric guitar, everything was up-beat from the get-go. The theme seemed to be: "Act happy even if you aren't." I called it "compulsory happiness." It wasn't for me.

So, for weeks we didn't go to church.

To tell you the truth, I kinda liked being a layman. For one thing, I had weekends. I hadn't had weekends for forty years.

The weeks turned into months, the months into -- well, I'm not going to tell you how long.

I wasn't mad about anything. It wasn't a crisis of faith. I would not have said that I had left the church. I continued to teach biblical courses at a Methodist university. In a strange way, not having a tradition to uphold or defend or be attached to allowed me the freedom to study and think in ways I had not done in a long time. It was during that time that I revived a deep interest in, passion for, devotion to -- Jesus.

You may recall that when I preached my first sermon last September, I said that we were going to focus on the teachings of Jesus exclusively for a while. We did that for several months. That was where that was coming from.

Then one day, Lynn Rhoades invited us to visit the church she had just joined, First Baptist Church. A few words of explanation as why that was such a shocking invitation. Lynn was associate pastor at Wake Forest Baptist Church for eleven of the twenty-three years I was pastor.

She was a staff member during the turbulent period when the church dealt with issues related to homosexuality, a period that culminated in a same-sex ceremony on September 9, 2000. On that issue, and most others, Lynn was always to my left. She out-liberaled me by a lot. Now, she was a member of staid, old, downtown, old money, stodgy, snooty First Baptist Church?

I don't know why we went – probably because we felt trapped – but the next Sunday Nikki and I walked to First Baptist Church, which is a block and a half from our house.

I don't know what it was about the experience; probably it was the cumulative effect of the excellence and depth of the worship service, the beauty of the almost one hundred-year-old sanctuary, and above all the genuinely warm welcome of church members. Whatever it was, on the walk home each of us said, to our surprise, that it “felt like home.” For me, it felt like coming home to a place I didn't know I had left.

All my preconceived notions about the church were wrong. For one thing, it is a CBF church not an SBC church.

Then there was the concept of missions.

There's a group of retired men in the church who meet early every Tuesday morning at the home of some person who needs a wheelchair ramp. By lunch, the ramp is finished and the guys go out to eat.

I asked one of the men how many ramps they had built. He said, “I can get the exact number. It's around twelve hundred.”

I was shocked. “You old guys have built 1,200 ramps?”

“Give or take. If you see a ramp on a house, especially in the lower income part of town, chances are, we built it.”

“Do people pay?”

“Some can pay for materials, but most can't. There's an anonymous church member who pays for everything.”

It isn't even in the church budget.

The church had voted a couple of years earlier to spend all its mission money on programs related to children and poverty.

Then there is what happened a few months ago: a staff member came out in a Zoom meeting that was open to all church members. Under the pastor's guidance she had already come out to the deacons and to the committees and groups she worked with. Still, I knew it was going to happen and I was a nervous wreck. So far as I know, no one had stroke. No one left the church or threatened to withhold their contributions.

We also found a warmth, a receptivity, a spiritual unity that I wasn't expecting.

I am thinking of one member. Old money. Conservative. I am quite sure that if he and I sat down and talked we would discover that – we don't agree on anything. An exaggeration, of course. But here's the thing – hardly a Sunday went by in those early days when he didn't give me a firm handshake and a thump on the back and tell me how glad he was that we had joined old First Baptist Church.

I rediscovered something that I am surprised I had forgotten: that people who may not always be of like minds but who are of like spirit and who have Jesus in common can create a community that, in his name, has the potential – potential, there's nothing magical or necessary about it – to make a small piece of God's righteous kingdom a reality here on earth.

“How very good and pleasant it is,” the psalmist wrote, “when the community of believers lives – and worships and celebrates and parties and grieves and suffers and grapples with hard issues and goes through life together, working out the problems – together in unity.”

How good and pleasant indeed.

Covid separated us, kept us apart for over a year, reduced us to an image on a screen. Churches across the country are fretting, preparing for what congregational life is going to be like when life gets back to whatever it gets back to. No doubt some people will have discovered that they got along just fine without the church. Getting them back will likely be something churches have to deal with. But others are going to return with a renewed appreciation for congregational life.

The message for us all is that the life of the community of faith is, in the modest words of the psalmist, "*very good and pleasant.*" It should never, ever be taken for granted.

The day is coming soon when Lake Shore will celebrate the passing of the peace in person. After having witnessed the Zoom version of that phenomenon for the better part of a year, I wouldn't miss that for the world.