

THE TIE THAT BINDS - ANNOINTED Epiphany

Psalm 133

Sermon Preached by Pastor Catherine Foote
University Congregational United Church of Christ
Seattle, Washington 98125
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Scripture:

Psalm 133¹

How very good and pleasant it is
when kindred live together in unity!
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.
It is like the dew of Hermon,
which falls on the mountains of Zion.
For there the Lord ordained blessing,
life evermore

Musical Prayer:²

What a goodly thing
If the children of the world
Could dwell together in peace.

Prayer:

God,
May the words we share together,
May what we bring from our hearts
Find grace in your sight
For you are our Rock and our Redeemer. — Amen.

"How good and pleasant it is when kindred well together in unity."

It is a beautiful thought. We could feel how that energy carried us through the song into this amazing place of prayer. "How good and pleasant it is when kindred dwell together in unity."

Well, let me tell you something of the background of that song. It is said to be a Psalm of David. Now if you happen to be sitting next to somebody who's part of the Tuesday morning Bible study, you might have felt that person wince, because we have just spent months and months reading through First and Second Samuel, which is the story of the beginning of the nation of Israel and the story of David the king. And in that story there is more bloodshed and division and brother-against sister-

¹ The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). © 1989

² "What a Goodly Thing" by Jean Ritchie © 1971 Geordie Music Publishing Co. All rights reserved. Note: This was sung by the choir and congregation as a round.

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assault and brother-against-brother violence and nation-against-stranger war there is enough of that to either make you stay away from Bible study – or long to come here next week John Dominic Crosson tell us how to read the Bible still be a Christian. This Psalm of David, "How good and pleasant it is when kindred well together in unity", is actually a Psalm of broken-heartedness because in David's family there was so much strife that by the end of two generations the man who was the great unifier had sown the seeds for a country to be divided in a way it would never unite again.

David wanted things to look unified and that was perhaps his downfall.

"How good and how pleasant it is for kindred to dwell together in unity". And yet in today's world don't we know what it is like to be divided! We live in a time when you cannot read a paper or read your social media feed without recognizing how divided we are. It's a time when we wonder when we encounter friends – or maybe when we encounter family – if we can have any kind of conversation that reflects a connectedness instead of this division. Now in almost more than any time in the last 30 or 40 or 70 years, people say they would rather have their children marry someone of a different religion than they would have their children in a relationship with someone of a different political party. . . . Yeah! Yeah. We live in a broken time.

And for those of us who have lived long enough – and I ask the tolerance of those who are under the age of 40 in this congregation. There is one other time when I remember feeling this kind of division. It was when I was a teenager. It was in the 60s. And at that time we struggled with what it meant to look so starkly at the divisions in our country. So for those of us who remember the 60s, we might remember as well that struggle to find some ground of unity, right? Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could just dwell together in unity? You know, we longed for it so much that at one point *eight* denominational leaders got together and wrote a letter that they called "A Call for Unity." They published it in April 1964 in a Birmingham newspaper. And they published it while men and women of the civil rights movement sat in a Birmingham Jail.

Four days later Martin Luther King Jr. wrote a letter from that jail. And it was a letter that explained why that call for unity from *white* religious leaders was a call that could not stand. If you have never read, or haven't read in a while, Martin Luther King's letter from a Birmingham Jail today is the day to read it.

In that letter brilliant things he said but probably most relevant to today's text, *he* calls out his disappointment in the white moderate who in the name of unity ignored the injustice he was working to do. "Who," he said, "prefers a negative peace, which is the absence of tension, to a positive piece which is the presence of justice?"

How good and how pleasant it is for kindred to dwell together in *justice*, to dwell together in that place of justice. '

And so we sit here this morning hearing that longing of David's heart, hearing that longing of our own hearts: how do we find this place of unity? How do we find that good and pleasant place where oil is poured on our heads in such an abundance that it runs down into our beards and our collars? Don't you just want that! – Oil all over your collar, all in your beard. ... Oh my goodness.

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Well, what that text is referring to actually might say something about that path to unity. Oil on our heads anointing us, running down in abundance. Dew falling from the mountain down into the valleys, in a dry land, falling in abundance. Because that little Psalm of David became a Psalm of assent. It was the song that the people sang as they walked up to the temple to worship God. It was the song of longing they sang on their pilgrimages. It was the song they sang together that hoped that they would meet, indeed, a kindred spirit and walk together that path of peace.

Which puts me in mind of another 1960s prophet.

Malcolm Little, born in the first quarter of the last century, to a Baptist preacher who so believed in racial equality that his family had to move twice before Malcolm was four years old in order to escape threats of violence. And Malcolm's father spoke out so strongly for justice that eventually his body was found on the railroad tracks of that town. His black body lying on the tracks – and the white sheriff saying it appeared to be an accident. Malcolm went to live with relatives, moved from home to home, eventually got into trouble himself with the law, right, and was taken away prison. There he converted to Islam and changed his name to Malcolm X, rejecting what he called "the slave name" and calling for a justice that he thought could only be found in separation. When Malcolm X got out of prison he became a voice for a particular type of Islam that called African-Americans in *this* country to dignity, to power, and to separation. "Justice by any means," Malcolm X said.

And then he himself went on a pilgrimage. He himself sang a song of assent as he went on his hajj to Mecca. He did not know what he would find there, but somewhere something in that song of assent reached out to him. And I would suggest it was the same thing as the oil on our heads, seeping down into our collars. Because here's what oil on the head meant: it meant "you're welcome here"; it meant "hospitality"; it meant "I understand that my resources are our resources and that what benefits me benefits you."

Malcolm X said he found on that pilgrimage Muslims of *every* color, of every race, of every country, reaching out to one another in their common humanity. And he returned from that hajj with the new message: "We are all bound one to another."— We are *all* bound one to another: black and white and brown; Palestinian and Israeli; Republican and Democrat; Southerner and Northerner; United Church of Christ and Baptist preacher; Presbyterians right next door. We are all bound to one another.

So the question is not our unity; the question is can we really understand what that unity means. Can we take our vision off that *forced* unity long enough to catch the distant vision of a deeper connection that indeed is a good and pleasant unity. Malcolm X said, "Truth is on the side of the oppressed." Wow. Truth is on the side of the oppressed.

Good and pleasant is it when kindred dwell together in truth, when we are willing to suspend unity long enough to hear one another's stories.

You know, even neuropsychological research these days tells us that when we listen to stories together, our brains start to fire together. We *need* to hear the stories we have not heard. We need to tell the stories we have been unwilling to tell one another *because* were too scared of the truth, too scared of seeing some division that might make us imagine that we are not unified.

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I am deeply grateful that this congregation has in its covenant that we worship God in unity *and* diversity because that's the dance. It is not a unity based on everybody being the same; it is a unity based on a deep honoring of diversity. And did you hear it when you said the covenant this morning? *First: "We seek and respond to God's will made known and to be made known." That's the pilgrimage. And then there we find oil running down, dew – water for a parched land, unity and diversity that indeed welcomes everyone.*

How good and how pleasant it is when kindred dwell together in courage.
How good and how pleasant it is when kindred dwell together in justice.
How good and how pleasant it is when kindred dwell together in compassion.
How good and how pleasant it is when kindred dwell together in truth.
How good and how pleasant it is, *then*, when kindred dwell together in unity.

Amen.

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Transcribed by Beth Bartholomew from www.universityucc.org/Sermons/2017/03/23/2017