

Psalm 133

“The Blessing of Dwelling Together”

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Ordinary Time

As I return from Sabbatical, before we jump back into our ongoing series in the Epistle to the Hebrews, I’m taking a few weeks to preach some thematic sermons on themes that I believe are crucial for who we are as a church, especially in terms of our culture as we live together with one another.

Last week we discussed what the Scriptures teach regarding gentleness as a fundamental aspect of our life together. And today, we’ll be looking at Psalm 133 and its vision of the blessing of dwelling together as the people of God. Next week, I want to talk about prayer, and I have a few other things which I may cover in the weeks following.

But this morning, let’s turn our attention to Psalm 133 and prepare ourselves for the life-giving wisdom that is found in this short psalm.

Listen now carefully and attentively to God’s holy and inerrant word as it comes to us from Psalm 133. It’s printed for you on the back of your order of worship if you’d like to read along.

A Song of Ascents. Of David.

*1 Behold, how good and pleasant it is
when brothers dwell in unity! [or: when brothers dwell together]*

*2 It is like the precious oil on the head,
running down on the beard,
on the beard of Aaron,
running down on the collar of his robes!*

*3 It is like the dew of Hermon,
which falls on the mountains of Zion!
For there the Lord has commanded the blessing,
life forevermore.*

Thus far the reading of God's word. It is absolutely true, and it is given to you because your Father in Heaven loves you.

Prayer...

Being a pastor isn't really a profession, it's more complicated than that, but like every other profession, pastors have their own lingo and inside jokes that you especially start to hear when a bunch of pastors get together and spend time with one another.

And so when I'm around other pastors at presbytery meetings or at General Assembly, I'm sorry to say that one of the things I hear pastors say (and I have to confess, I've said it few times myself) is something like this: *"Being a pastor would be really easy if it wasn't for all the people!"*

Now, of course, in one sense, that statement is true. The hardest part of being a pastor is unquestionably relating well to the people you pastor.

If being a pastor just meant writing sermons and reading the Bible and praying, it would probably be pretty easy.

But being a pastor is much more complicated than that, and the main way it's complicated is all the *people* you minister to, as you enter into their sin, their anxieties, their rough edges and short tempers, as you try to walk with them as they are growing, just as the pastor himself is, in holiness and grace.

Sometimes people you walk with faithfully for years turn against in you in a second when you challenge them in their sin or call them to repentance and growth in Christ. And sometimes pastors just make a mess of relationships themselves through their own fear and mistakes and sin.

It's painful and complicated, there's no getting around it. Being a pastor would probably be pretty easy if it weren't for all the people.

But I've wondered sometimes how Jesus might respond to pastors when he hears them talking about their vocation in this way.

And I suspect he might say something like this: *"The whole point of being a pastor is the people!"*

And that's exactly right, of course. The mark of a good and faithful pastor who is actually a shepherd is that he doesn't avoid or ignore or pull away when people are hard, but is willing to enter into the messy relationships and the personal offenses and seek to minister to people right where they're at in the midst of their sin and fear and anger.

That's a standard every pastor should rightly be held to - because it is, of course, how Jesus himself pastored his flock.

But I wonder also how church members think about all the people too. I wonder sometimes if, as a layperson, you might also at times be tempted to say: *"Church would be really easy if it weren't for all the other people!"*

And truly, church would be a lot easier without all the other people! All the people with their sin and their anxieties and their rough edges.

Let's just face it, going to church with other people *is* often messy and even painful. Other people offend us and we offend them.

We disagree about different things and then we wonder if other people are secretly judging us regarding the places where we disagree.

It's a vulnerable, tricky, difficult thing to be part of a church with other people.

And this, of course, is why so many Americans today *don't* participate in the life of a local church where they have to actually know people and be in relationship with them, but choose instead to watch some distant, far off church's slickly produced livestream or download a sermon from a famous Christian preacher and call it a day.

And it's also why so many people choose to find a church where they can be functionally anonymous, never really get to know anyone, never have anyone notice when they aren't there on Sunday morning because they'd rather be somewhere else, and never have a pastor who knows their name and will look them in the eye.

This is a bit of an aside, but this decision by millions of American Christians to functionally privatize their Christian faith and try to live Christian lives on their own without the support and presence of other Christians are committed to them in local church membership, at churches small enough where they can actually be pastored and known by others, is one of the biggest religious shifts of the last 50 years or so, and has been absolutely disastrous for our spiritual health as the church in this nation.

Relating to church in this way has become possible largely because of the rise of the mega-church movement and the development of television and the internet in the last 50 years. We have far more options and resources that support "anonymous Christianity" today than we did 50 or 100 years ago.

And, at least on some level, I understand why people fall into those unfortunately unhealthy spiritual patterns.

Being a part of the church *would* be a lot easier if it weren't for all the people.

But our Psalm this morning, Psalm 133, presents a radically different vision of the Christian life than our modern age has adopted - a vision of the Christian life that says actually - it is one life's greatest blessings to dwell together with other Christians in real community, and in fact, it is in that place, that place where Christians dwell together with one another in all their messiness and their sin that God has promised to give them eternal life.

Let's look at it together.

In verse 1, the Psalmist begins:

*1 Behold, how good and pleasant it is
when brothers dwell in unity! [or: when brothers dwell together]*

The psalm begins "Behold!" — in other words - "Look!" "See!" — it wants us to pay attention.

And then it makes this assertion: *"How how good and pleasant it is
when brothers dwell in unity!"*

The Hebrew word for good here is "*Tov*" and it is a deliberate echo of God's response to his original creation — this too, this Psalm reminds us, is part of God's original design for his creation - for human beings to dwell together - after all, it is not good [i.e. not "*Tov*"] for man to be alone, as God says in Genesis 2.

The end of this verse is translated in the ESV as "when brothers dwell in unity," but there's actually a translation issue here.

If you have an ESV bible, you can notice that the translators put a footnote on the end of this verse that says it can also be translated in this way: "Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell together!"

Not, "dwell in unity" but just "dwell together."

And actually, "dwell together" (omitting "unity") is the more literal, and I think, faithful translation.

The Hebrew word "*Yachad*" that is translated here doesn't actually mean unity - it's just a word that means "together."

And in fact, in the dozens of other places "*Yachad*" appears elsewhere in the Old Testament, it is *always* translated in the ESV simply as "together."

For example, in Deuteronomy 25:5, this exact same phrase in the Hebrew is used, and it is just translated: "*When brothers dwell together.*"

I don't usually make a big issue of translation challenges in my sermons, but I'm doing so today because I think this is actually an important point.

"Unity" is pretty abstract concept, and by using that word here, the ESV implies that the Psalmist is saying that it is a good and pleasant thing not only when brothers dwell together, but when brothers dwell together in *unity* - giving the potential impression that somehow the goodness and pleasantness of dwelling together is only found when "unity" is achieved, which is often assumed to mean when everyone agrees with everyone else and gets along perfectly.

But that is NOT what the psalmist is saying. Literally, what he is saying is this: "It is a good and pleasant thing when brothers dwell together." Full stop.

The psalmist simply doesn't say or even imply that brothers always have to get along when they dwell together in order to be blessed. The psalmist doesn't say that brothers have to agree about everything in order to receive the blessedness of dwelling together.

Rather, what the Psalmist is saying is that when brothers tarry with one another, when they live with one another, when they keep participating in each other's lives over months and years and decades - despite the messiness and and hardness that comes with dwelling together - *That* is a good and pleasant thing.

I think this actually makes a huge difference in how we read this psalm.

Because, as it turns out, the blessing of Christian community isn't some ideal we have to aspire to achieve and wonder if we've ever finally accomplished it - the blessing is actually inherent in just simply living in community with one another.

It's also interesting that the Psalmist uses sibling language to describe the community he's describing: "How good and pleasant it is when *brothers* dwell together."

Of course, he's not talking about biological brothers here, but about those who are brothers and sisters through their participation in the life of the people of God and dwell together because of that identity, and that identity alone.

This kind of language, of course, is picked up in the New Testament by Paul and the other apostles, as they constantly address their readers with sibling language, and encourage those to whom they write to consider their fellow Christians as their true brothers and sisters.

This is worth noting because, after all, you might be able to choose your friends, but you can't choose your brothers and sisters.

Your siblings are given to you by someone else. No one asks your opinion when you're a little child whether the baby that came home from the hospital with mom and dad should stick around in your family or not.

And the language of the Psalmist brings home the reality that we don't get to choose our brothers and sisters in the church anymore than we get to choose our actual siblings.

We're related to one another and put in a family together not because of our choice, but because of the choice of God.

The goodness and pleasantness of dwelling together isn't found in a voluntary community of friends whom we select - it's found in a community of brothers and sisters - those who are related to one another by something other than personal preference or apparent compatibility.

In verses 2 and 3, the Psalmist then gives us two remarkable similes, or poetic comparisons, to illustrate the goodness and pleasantness that is experienced when brothers and sisters dwell together with one another.

The first is found in verse 2. It reads:

*2 It is like the precious oil on the head,
running down on the beard,
on the beard of Aaron,
running down on the collar of his robes!*

This image is incredibly tactile. It describes oil being poured on the head of Aaron, the high priest, running down his face and into his beard, and finally dripping, falling onto the collar of his robes.

The image here is drawn directly from Exodus 29, where, the LORD tells Moses how he is to ordain Aaron as the High Priest when, after the Exodus from Egypt, the tabernacle is established as the central place for Israel's worship.

In that chapter, the LORD instructs Moses to dress Aaron in his priestly garb, and then, once he is wearing the robe and the ephod and breast piece and all the rest, in verse 7 he says: "*[Then] you shall take the anointing oil and pour it on Aaron's head and anoint him.*"

The oil, of course, is a symbolic image of the Holy Spirit, and as the oil is poured on Aaron's head, it is a picture of how the Spirit filled him as he was set apart to represent the people of Israel before their holy God.

And Aaron's anointing and ordination, of course, is but a foreshadowing of the greater High Priest who would come after him (though he would be of the order of Melchizedek), who, in his ordination at his baptism by John would also receive the Holy Spirit descending upon him in the form of the dove.

The Psalmist seems to be saying that when we dwell in community with our brothers and sisters in Christ it is good and pleasant because we receive also this blessing: the lavish presence of the Spirit and the service of the Great High Priest, ordained to represent us before our Heavenly Father.

In other words, to put it straightforwardly - we enter into the life of the Triune God in some mysterious way when we dwell together with our brothers and sisters in Jesus.

The second simile is in verse 3. It reads like this:

*3 It is like the dew of Hermon,
which falls on the mountains of Zion!*

Here the goodness of dwelling in community together is compared to the dew of Hermon which falls on the mountains of Zion.

Hermon is the highest mountain cluster in the geographical area of Israel at some 9,000 feet above sea level, far higher than Mount Zion, where Jerusalem is situated.

Because of the height of the mountains of Hermon, they actually capture precipitation as it moves in clouds in the sky, and as the dew falls, it descends down onto the mountains of Zion.

In the agricultural world of ancient Israel, dew and precipitation mean life and flourishing for the crops and vegetation, and the Psalmist is saying that just as the water which falls from Hermon gives life to the mountains of Zion, so also dwelling together with our brothers and sisters will give us life. We will receive the life of God in this place - living with our brothers and sisters.

And indeed, the psalmist concludes his short psalm, writing at the end of verse 3:

*For there the Lord has commanded the blessing,
life forevermore.*

It is here, the psalmist says, that life and blessing are given by the Lord. Not when Christians try to go it alone, but when Christian brothers and sisters dwell together. That is the place of God's blessing. That is the place where God gives life.

Right in the midst of the messiness and awkwardness of community with your flesh and blood brother or sister in Jesus.

That is the place where God has promised to show up - that is the place where his Spirit dwells, that is the good and pleasant place where God's life is shared with you.

To dwell with your brothers and sisters in community, this Psalm argues, is not an optional add-on to your Christian faith.

It is an essential part — so essential, in fact that if you exile yourself from living in community with other Christians, you are missing out on the presence of the Spirit and the life and blessing of God.

So how should we respond to this psalm and the remarkably positive and beautiful picture of Christian community that it gives us?

There are many things we could take about, of course, but I want to focus on two applications.

First, this Psalm teaches us to be *grateful* for the gift of Christian community.

Would church be easier without all the other people? Undoubtedly.

But this psalm calls us to repent of that attitude, and exhorts us to stop seeing the necessity of graciously relating to our siblings in Christ as some tiresome add-on to our faith, and instead, to see it is actually with all these other (and I'll grant you, sometimes annoying) people intruding into our lives that we experience the blessing of God.

Do you know who is grateful for the messiness of Christian community? Those who have been exiled from it - not by choice, but by circumstance.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes in "Life Together," his classic exploration of Christian community:

"It is not simply to be taken for granted that the Christian has the privilege of living among other Christians...The imprisoned, the sick, the scattered lonely, the proclaimers of the gospel in heathen lands, they all stand alone. They know that visible fellowship is a blessing."

It's so important for us in terms of our culture here at Colleyville Presbyterian Church that we actually train our hearts to give thanks for each other.

Not just give thanks generically. But actually give thanks, by name and face, for your brothers and sisters in Christ in this particular church.

Even when we offend one another. Even when we disagree. Even when we don't understand each other. Probably especially in those circumstances.

Because living with all those other people, this Psalm teaches us, is actually a necessary way in which we come to experience fully the presence of the Holy Spirit, and Jesus discloses himself to us right here, right in the midst of our messy, sinful, beautiful community.

And in fact, if we take the Scriptures seriously, we can say that Jesus actually often reveals himself to us *through* our brothers and sisters in Christ - even though we didn't choose them as our siblings in the first place.

The other application I want to make is this:

This Psalm call us to enter in to the community that is right in front of us.

Enter in. That's what I want to encourage you to do, friends, in response to God's word. Enter in to the community here in this church.

I know that these past 18 months have created the opportunity for all of us to develop habits of isolation and disconnection from community. But I want to encourage us to push against that.

When's the last time you invited other church members into your home for a meal? Not just because they're your friends and you like them. But because they are your siblings in Christ.

It's hard to be in community with one another if we're not eating together.

If you're concerned about the health risks of having people over right now, that's fine, but don't give up. Get creative.

Have a picnic together with someone else from the church in a park or invite a family over to grill some burgers in your backyard. It might be awkward, but that's ok. Living in fellowship with our siblings in Christ is worth a little inconvenience.

And don't just invite over those brothers and sisters in Christ who are most like you, whom you find easiest to get along with because you know you agree with them most of the time.

Get to know someone new. Take a risk. Invite a new family over. Break bread together.

Beloved, as the world emerges from isolation in the weeks and months ahead of us, do you know what we as Christians (and we as members of this church) need from one another more than anything else?

Friendship. Hospitality. Face to face presence. A willingness to enter in to community, even when it's hard.

And we do this not just because we like being with people we like.

No, we invite one another into our homes, we find ways to connect over coffee or a meal because we know that whatever else being a Christian means, it means this - dwelling together with other siblings in Christ.

Knowing their names. Learning their stories and their hearts. Sharing the griefs and joys that are constantly running through our lives.

Because it is here, not in some kind of private, individual relationship with God, but in relationship with our brothers and sisters in Jesus that we will receive the blessing and life of God.

So let's enter in. And let's not hold back, because Jesus is with us.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.