

Sermon – St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church, Florissant  
The Rev. Rebecca Ragland  
August 20, 2017

Psalm 133 is a traveling song.  
Much like Willie Nelson's "On the road again",  
Psalm 133 was for traveling.  
But it wasn't just for traveling just anywhere.  
Pilgrims sang it on their way up to the temple in Jerusalem.

It's among the Song of Ascents – sung as the people  
Ascended mount Zion on their way to the Temple.

Oh.....

How good and pleasant it is when brethren  
live together in unity.

It is like fine oil upon the head,  
that runs down upon the beard,  
upon the beard of Aaron.

Who is Aaron?

The first high priest of the people of Israel.

It is like the dew of Hermon

Where is Hermon?

It's a mountain in the Galilea – northern Palestine)  
the dew of Hermon that falls upon the hills of Zion  
(Zion – the city of the great king – the place of the Temple)

For there the Lord has ordained the blessing: life forevermore.  
Yes. This is a traveling song.  
It was not an easy journey.  
For all those thousands of pilgrims,  
from the twelve tribes of Israel,  
coming from the north and East,  
heading south and west towards Jerusalem,  
The land was often rocky and arid.  
There were enemies. Bandits that robbed and raped.  
Water and food could be scarce.

As these thousands traveled,  
they shared food and water,  
the midwives delivered babies,  
the children made new playmates,  
new songs were learned, stories  
and jokes exchanged. "So a rabbi walks into a bar..  
and bruised his head."

But all was not ideal.

There was as much distrust among them as there is among us.  
As much anxiety about the kids getting lost,  
or the teenagers running off and misbehaving,  
as much competition to get to the watering hole first,

to buy the freshest loaf of bread.  
You know the story.

The psalm is a holy reminder.

Perhaps that's why it was sung and is still sung  
all these thousands of years later.

Too often we mistake common cause  
for transformative togetherness.

For those on pilgrimage, they were together on a journey.

Their common cause was to get to Jerusalem for the holy season.

In the midst of the journey,

they were willing to overlook differences --to a degree,

but Psalm 133 is about more than that ~ more than just being polite  
and making nice...it's about God's blessing of unity.

This song prayed not for common cause,  
but for transformative togetherness.

How good it is when we dwell together in unity.

There's a difference between union and unity.

You know Unions

an organized association formed to protect and further  
shared rights and interests;

like the teamsters or the European Union.

The essence of a union is people or nations  
being joined together by their common interest.

By their nature, they are oppositional to anyone or nation  
NOT sharing that common interest.

Unity is a very different thing.

For one, Unity doesn't require an opponent.

Unity neither requires nor desires to keep anyone outside.

Unity is about sharing deeply,  
about being willing to bring all our differences  
and put them into the shared pool of meaning,  
it's about bringing our special recipe to the smorgasboard of life.  
It's about letting that hodge podge of difference  
widen and enrich all of us.

It may take arguing and struggling to work it out,  
but the struggle is worth it.

Because we all come out on the other side

With unity's by-products  
goodness and pleasantness.

If we stay in the mode of common cause only,  
if we just stay on the ship in our own little cabins,

things go haywire even as we float to our destination.  
It's much better if we dine together and dance together.  
Stand out on the deck at night together  
Teasing that we might see Jesus walking across the water.  
It's good and pleasant.

There is a story from the Talmud that goes like this:  
A cruise ship was going across the ocean.  
(no it wasn't the love boat  
- I am not going to refer to anymore old TV shows - wink!)

So the cruise ship was going along  
and this one guy on the lowest level of the ship  
decided to dig a hole in the floor of his cabin.  
Everyone else was up at the dining room  
sharing a wonderful feast  
and they didn't hear him banging and scraping.  
He worked and worked, and sure enough,  
he punctured the bottom of the ship.  
It began to sink.  
As water poured in, he worked his way up to the deck.  
By now the other passengers had left the dining room  
and were on deck too.  
The water was rapidly encroaching.  
Someone asked him, why did you dig a hole in the floor?  
He answered, "Hey it was my cabin.

I paid for it and I can do what I want with it.”

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I paid for it and I can do what I want...

It's pretty much the story of life in America.

Perhaps that's how our president rationalizes some of his decisions.

I know there are times when that's how I rationalize mine.

Common cause is murky.

And it can still sink the boat.

It's a the weakness in the Democratic Process.

When we just vote our self interest,

vote according to our issue du jour,

somebody is always digging a hole in the floor.

We the people, in order to build a more perfect union

Must do more than stick with our tribe.

We have to move past our personal values

To God's values.

If someone is traveling to Jerusalem

Selling dirty water for profit,

common cause becomes common misery.

God's call to us, to our country, is unity.

And unity is about transformative togetherness.

Not yelling across a barricade at each other,

not wrestling for power at the vestry meeting,

but cultivating sibling love

– even for brother who has been down in his cabin sinking the boat.

How good and pleasant it is when siblings dwell in unity.

It is like oil on the head.

Oil that feels so soothing on dry, sunburned skin  
after a long day of travel.

Oil that is given when you find shelter in a home  
and you know a good meal is soon to follow.

It is like the dew of Hermon –

dew that comes off the sea of Galilea

and settles in the stillness

– all over the quiet countryside in the dark of night,  
in the peace of sleep. Good and pleasant.

We've had those times of unity haven't we?

We know how good and pleasant it feels to belong,  
to share life with each other,

to sit around the table in the parish hall and share coffee and sweets,  
or to know that all our loved ones are peacefully sleeping  
under one roof. Good and pleasant.

Beloved, God wants us to live this way as fully as possible.

Not to stop at the point where we are walking along  
with just our tribe,

our people, and making nice to those others superficially.

God wants us to let the oil soak down and soak in.

The oil of chrism.

The oil that told you, you are sealed as Christ's own forever.

You and I, we are not only pilgrims, we are priests..

we are a part of God's holy priesthood.

We are invited to unity with each other,

to make offering and sacrifices of ourselves, our souls and bodies,

on each other's behalf. What does that look like?

Perhaps it looks like picking up that phone

and ending the feud we've carried on for years.

Perhaps it looks like saying yes, when we want to say no.

Or no when we want to say yes.

Think for a moment, what does your priesthood

call you to in this time of your life?

In the name of unity?

LONG PAUSE

We are called to be pilgrims and priests.

And when we practice our priesthood,  
the journey changes.  
Suddenly the temple is not just in one place,  
on one day of the week,  
The temple is everywhere.  
The whole world.  
The dew falls from Galilea to Jerusalem,  
from Florissant to South City,  
from Illinois to Kansas and indeed all over the world.  
How good and pleasant it is.

We have a call to unity  
because we have the capacity for unity.  
God knows it. Let us claim it.

One hundred and thirty years after the resurrection,  
Tertullian wrote this:  
It is mainly the deeds of a love so noble  
that lead many to put a brand upon us.  
They say, see how they love one another, ...  
how they are ready even to die for one another.

PAUSE

Friends, It is this love that calls us to Unity.  
It is by this love that others know who we are.

We are one in the spirit, we are one in the Lord  
We are one in the spirit we are one in the Lord  
And we pray that all unity will one day be restored.  
And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love,  
Yes they'll know we are Christians by our love.

Together.

Amen.