

Dwelling in Unity – Psalm 133

Why in the world did so many people make a trek all the way out to San Antonio for a Presbytery meeting this week? Alec Flynt, Pastor of Covenant Church, came all the way from Mobile, Alabama, for cryin' out loud. Yes, we worshipped together, but it's not like that's the only place one can gather for preaching, prayers and praise – most of the teaching elders lead worship quite often, and one would hope that all the ruling elders attend on a regular basis in their various congregations. We saw a video about the work of the General Assembly, but that's available on YouTube. We learned about our presbytery's work in Hurricane relief and global mission, but we can get similar information over the internet or through e-mail. We conducted some important business, but lots of the presbytery's work already gets handled by teleconference. And sure, we had a great special speaker, Dr. Ligon Duncan, but he's got too many sermons and podcasts recorded online to count. So why did we all go to the trouble to travel all the way out to Texas to do what we can all do with much greater comfort in all the different places where we live?

We gathered for Presbytery for the same reason that we gather as a congregation to worship on every Lord's Day. As individual Christians we can read scripture and pray on our own any time we want to, but we gather to worship in no small part because we enjoy being together. We come together to enjoy the way in which God reveals Himself to His people in the communion of the saints, the fellowship of the church.

It is that unity that Psalm 133 celebrates. But at first glance, this piece of poetry is a little bit confusing. The first verse is clear enough: How good and how pleasant it is for brothers to dwell in unity. We understand the blessing of fellowship and we have often enjoyed it. But what do ointment and dew have to do with unity? Let's look at each one in turn.

The first illustration David chooses is that of precious ointment, anointing oil upon the head. In those days, people loved to put olive oil containing aromatic herbs on their skin to soften and smooth it. Some of these herbs were so rare and expensive that this kind of oil was included in the list of treasures King Hezekiah showed to the ambassadors who came to visit him from Babylon.

Anointing with oil is something that is still considered pleasant: you know how good it feels to rub lotion onto dry skin. But how could this be similar to the pleasantness of unity and fellowship? Well, isn't the pleasant feeling we get from being in harmony with one another almost tangible? Don't we literally feel better when we are around the people we love?

The different spices and herbs contained in the oil also produced a delightful aroma: The Song of Solomon says that such oil has a pleasing fragrance. Just so, unity among brothers and sisters exhibits the love of Christ, which should naturally radiate out to those outside the church.

Well, how are we doing? Sure we like one another, but how obvious, how aromatic is our love? If a tourist came in to see the building during or after worship, would he be able to detect the aroma of our affection for each other? And is our love just as obvious outside these walls during the rest of the week? Would non-Christians find our love just as attractive as those ancient Hebrews enjoyed the feel and smell of anointing oil?

But that wasn't all that anointing oil was good for. In fact, the text literally calls it "good oil," using the same word that describes unity in verse one. We are invited, then, to think of how the goodness of anointing oil is similar to the goodness of unity.

Well, how does David describe it? For one thing, he points out that the oil doesn't stay in one place. Instead, it runs down the beard, and down onto the clothing. Christian unity is like that, too. It doesn't just stay in one place. The very fact that so many members of different congregations could meet in San Antonio proves that. Wherever God's people are, no matter whether in a Promise Keepers meeting of hundreds of thousands, or a Presbytery meeting of fifty or simply two or three in a prayer group, there is an expression of the unity of the church.

But we can also imagine the effects of unity as spreading out. Just as the oil runs down the head and onto the beard, so the fruits of Christian unity and harmony are not limited to the church. Think for example of all the hurricane victims who have been helped by the offerings raised throughout the EPC. Think of the work groups coming from all sorts of denominations to help folks in Houston and Katy and Lake Jackson muck out their houses and get them ready for renovation. All of them, both helpers and storm victims alike, have experienced the fruits of the unity of the Church, haven't they?

Or think about all the refugees who are able to meet Christians and to learn about Jesus through the work of the Engage 2025 project – all that is possible because of the work of dedicated missionaries as well as gifts from congregations like ours. Or think about the unchurched or dechurched people who are encountering genuine Christian community in Austin or New Orleans or New Braunfels because of our Presbytery's church planting efforts. None of those things could happen without the gifts and prayers of God's people, a tangible expression of the unity of the Church.

And this holds true even closer to home – think about the Grace Christian Counseling Center. It was organized through the cooperation of three different congregations in Vicksburg:

Methodist, Episcopal, and Presbyterian. And because of the branch office next to the Methodist Church in Port Gibson, many of the people of our own community have been nourished by the fruit of the unity of the Church.

Or think about Christian Volunteer Service. Last year, over 750 families were helped with home repairs, food packages, utilities, and medications, and those funds didn't just come from one congregation, did they? Our congregation hosts work teams from two different states and three different denominations who come to help every year. And many other work groups stay at Joel's place, owned by New Christian Fellowship. In short, no one congregation could support any of these ministries, but because so many of us cooperate, the fruit of the unity of the Church can demonstrate the love of Jesus Christ to many people, just as that sweet-smelling, good-feeling oil ran down Aaron's head and beard and clothes.

Well, what about the second of David's two illustrations? How is Christian unity similar to dew? Again, we must look at how both are pleasant and good.

Dew can be pleasant in Mississippi, so cool to the touch in the morning after a hot summer night. But in the place where David lived, dew is much more important. For many months out of the year, no rain falls, and the only moisture that the plants receive is that of dew. But God is gracious to provide such dew in abundance, especially on the tops of mountains, like Mount Hermon.

For David, then, dew was a symbol of needed refreshment. And don't we feel the same sort of thing when we come together for worship? We preachers get an occasional taste of this at presbytery meetings, when we get a chance to step back from leadership and just sing along with everyone else. But all of us can experience such refreshment every week, especially when we see and worship with good friends from whom we have been absent for a long time.

But if dew is a symbol of refreshment, it also contains an idea of extent. Just as the dew in the morning covers everything in sight, so good fellowship permeates everything.

Perhaps this can be seen most easily in contrast. After all, when you are upset with someone close to you, everything takes on a measure of misery, doesn't it? Nothing is pleasant. Discord spoils your whole outlook. Well, love for one another is just as pervasive. Just as the heavy dews of Mount Hermon saturate plants with life-giving dew, so good relations with our friends and neighbors bring joy to all parts of life.

Okay, so the refreshing, far-reaching pleasantness of dew is easily seen – but what about its goodness? Just as David shifts focus from oil in general to the holy anointing oil of Aaron, now

he moves our attention from the heavy dews of Mount Hermon to those of Mount Zion, God's holy mountain on which the city of Jerusalem was built.

But why was Mount Zion so special? After all, during David's time, the temple hadn't been built yet. God was worshipped in the tabernacle, a tent which could be moved around from place to place. So, why does David tell us that Zion is special? Why does he say, "there the Lord commanded the blessing – life forever?" What blessing is he talking about?

There are actually two good possibilities. The first is drawn from David's own experience. After he had conquered the city of Jerusalem and had built his own palace there, he made up his mind to build a house for God as well. But God had a better idea. God promised instead to build David a house, or a dynasty, which would last forever. God told David, "And your house and your kingdom shall endure before Me forever; your throne shall be established forever." The blessing David mentions in verse 3 could thus refer to the promise of an enduring dynasty, an everlasting kingdom.

The other possibility comes from a much earlier incident, one that happened during the life of Abraham. For it was on Mount Moriah, which was later called Mount Zion, that Abraham was willing to offer up his only son Isaac. But God stopped him, and provided a ram for the offering instead of Isaac. At that time, God told Abraham, "And in your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice."

So, when David says that on Mount Zion God promised life forever, does he mean the promise that his dynasty would never end? Or is he referring to the promise of blessing that God gave to Abraham? The beautiful thing is that we really don't have to choose between these possibilities, because both promises are fulfilled in the same person – Jesus.

For Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the descendant of David whose kingdom will never come to an end. Jesus is also the descendant of Abraham, the Lamb of God offered up for sinners like us, the One in whom all the nations of the earth will be blessed. And here's the connection between Jesus and David's poem: Jesus Christ, the Son of David would die on Mount Zion, and in his death, God commanded the blessing of eternal life to all who would believe in Him. The last line of the poem, then, points out that Mount Zion is good because of what had happened there and also because of what would happen there.

But what does Jesus Christ have to do with the goodness and the pleasantness of dwelling in unity? Precisely everything. For it is the fact that we are connected to Christ that makes us connected to one another as well. It is our faith in Christ that joins us together as the body of Christ. Without Christ, the church doesn't hold together. Without Christ, the church doesn't exist.

Likewise, it is the spirit of Christ which fills the church, bringing the goodness and pleasantness to the unity which David describes, especially when we come together for fellowship and worship.

So let us rejoice that God's spirit pervades His church just as the refreshing dew saturates Mount Hermon and just as sweet-smelling, good-feeling anointing oil covers everything it touches. Let us rejoice today as we share fellowship with one another that we have an opportunity to see God's Holy Spirit in one another. In Jesus Christ, God is not only with us. God is not only among us – God is within us. And He has given all who trust in Him His greatest blessing: life for evermore.