Christian Unity  
Psalm 133  
Kalamazoo Mennonite Fellowship, August 14, 2011  
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133:1 How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!  
133:2 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.  
133:3 It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion. For there the LORD ordained his blessing, life forevermore.

Today’s lectionary psalm is a short one. It is a short psalm in praise of unity. It’s one of the “psalms of ascents;” recall that we looked at another one of these earlier, and it is thought these were psalms sung or chanted as pilgrims went up to Jerusalem to worship at the Temple.

It’s structure is very simple: just three verses. First, the psalmist makes the main point. Then, he compares living in unity to two different things. Then, he describes a blessing. Since the things he compares them to are strange to our ears, I want you to think about comparisons of your own, and stories of how unity came about in your experiences in other places—or even this church!

So, the psalmist’s theme is easy enough: it’s good when kindred live together in unity. What does he mean by “kindred?” I think he meant pretty much how we mean it, when we talk about our brothers and sisters in Christ. Of course, it’s just as true for immediate and extended families, which, after all, is the basis for this image of calling one another brother and sister.

Notice that the psalmist is focused on *unity*, though, and not on pleasantness. We all know situations in which there is a kind of a sham unity, a false front of agreement, where everyone keeps to the surface, and no one says what they really mean. You talk about the weather, or sports, or whatever isn’t controversial, because you don’t want to rock the boat. But the psalmist doesn’t say “How good it is to be pleasant with your brothers and sisters.” He says, “How good and pleasant it is to live in unity.” We can be together in pleasantries, but that isn’t much good.

In my experience, true unity is the result of a lot of hard work. And it is a rare thing. When it is achieved, it truly is enjoyable and good. We don’t want to sacrifice the good for the pleasant, though, so we must work at it. Just maybe, if you’re not working at it, it is not a lot more than pleasantries.

The psalmist compares it to two things. First unity 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.” I suspect those singing this psalm of ascent were thinking about what they would soon see and hear, and, more importantly for this psalm, *smell* at the Temple. This precious oil would smell good, and it would, along with everything else that was happening, remind the pilgrims year after year of what they shared, both in their family ties as well as their religious bonds. In fact, I believe that the year-to-year observance was really important in bringing about this shared memory of unity. It is a positive feedback loop: we do things together, which create shared memories which the smallest thing can trigger, which leads us to do things together.

When I was a kid, we used to travel every summer “up north” from Roseville, a suburb of Detroit, to Wellston, Michigan. We’d travel the last thirty miles from Cadillac to Wellston in high anticipation. First, we’d look for the caged bear at Thirsty's gas station, just outside Cadillac. (I understand people still give directions by referring to that bear, though it hasn’t been there for years). Then, we would reach “the seven mile light,” a blinking light almost exactly seven miles away from Wellston. Then, we would look for the Smokey the Bear sign and the turn-off to Tippy Dam Road, where we lived as kids. And then we’d look for the M55 Market where we’d turn into Wellston, and look for our grandparents’ gas station (even, of course, after it burned down). And then we’d be at grandma and grandpa’s house. Every time we did these things, we strengthened our family memories together, and all we have to say is “the seven mile light” or “the bear outside Cadillac,” and we remember.

So, too, our life as a church family needs things we do together to strengthen our common life. So, I hope our ice cream social is an annual affair. Are there things you look forward to as a church yet?

But I also think this is true for us as part of the larger Mennonite church. When we have opportunities to sing, or work, or convene together, remember that this can be precious time to create pleasant and good memories together.

Which brings us to our second comparison: Living together in unity is “like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion.” For us, perhaps, this isn’t a very useful comparison! But here’s some useful background knowledge: remember that Israel was eventually divided into two parts: the northern kingdom (called Israel) and the southern kingdom (called Judah). What do you think the highest mountain in the northern kingdom was? If you said, “Hermon,” good for you! What do you think the highest mountain in the southern kingdom was? This is easier: it’s Zion, of course.

So, the psalmist is singing,

This land is your land,   
This land is my land,  
From the dew in Hermon,  
That falls on Zion;  
From Zion’s mountains  
To the mounts of Is-ray-el:  
This land was made for you and me!

(Everybody now!)

As the pilgrims ascend, they can remember, and desire, the unity of an undivided Israel that goes up to Jerusalem at Zion to worship together. And, again, they are taking their place in the water cycle of a common life: they rise as dew and descend like rain at Jerusalem.

Finally, the psalmist describes a blessing, “For there the LORD ordained his blessing, life forevermore.” *There* is Jerusalem, as we’ve just discussed, where God meets the people during the high holy days. From Jerusalem, the blessing goes out. And what is this blessing? Our version says, “life forevermore.” Maybe it means that, but it probably would be better to translate the description of the blessing as “the Lord has commanded, for evermore, the blessing of life.’”[[1]](#footnote-1) God will always and forever provide the blessing of life to the people of God. God doesn’t forget promises. And, importantly, that life is a life of unity.

1. How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity. It is like … how would you fill in this blank?
2. Tell a story about when a sense of unity came over a group in which you were a part. What happened? What was it like? How did it happen?

Let’s hear this short psalm again:

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1. Carson, D. A. (1994). *New Bible commentary : 21st century edition* (4th ed.) (Ps 133). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill., USA: Inter-Varsity Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)