

“United We Divide”

Psalm 133; Acts 4; I John 1; John 20

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Introduction to the Psalm – Psalm 133

Before we sing this Psalm, I want to say something about the interesting/odd image in Psalm 133. In order to illustrate the goodness of unity, it says it is like pouring oil on your head and having it run down your beard. That may not sound so great to us, so we need to understand the idea of anointing that was practiced and valued in that culture. But it also helps to know about the oil – at a recent Holland Classis meeting this Psalm was commented on, and it was pointed out that this was no ordinary oil – not even just really good olive oil. In Exodus 30, we are given the special recipe for anointing oil:

²²The LORD spoke to Moses:²³Take the finest spices: of liquid myrrh five hundred shekels, and of sweet-smelling cinnamon half as much, that is, two hundred fifty, and two hundred fifty of aromatic cane,²⁴ and five hundred of cassia—measured by the sanctuary shekel—and a hin of olive oil;²⁵ and you shall make of these a sacred anointing oil blended as by the perfumer; it shall be a holy anointing oil.

So as we sing about the anointing, imagine this fragrant, perfumed, precious oil – that is the goodness of unity that is being expressed.

“Perceptual vigilance” – for those of you who were here last Sunday for a glorious Easter celebration including an insightful and inspirational sermon from Reverend Russell, you may remember Jill bringing up that term: “perceptual vigilance”. It’s the phenomenon that if there is some thing important to you at a particular time, then you suddenly notice that thing all around you. And what I’ve been noticing is the frequency of ‘perceptual vigilance’! For me around this time of year, my perceptual vigilance has to do with noticing blossoming tulips everywhere and being stressed over the prospect of a stem-festival for Tulip Time (I feel compelled to carry the stress of the entire community

on my shoulders) – but this week, my perceptual vigilance was instead, for purposes of this sermon, attuned to unity. And I’ll share my vigilant perceptions with you...

As soon as I read Psalm 133 in the lectionary – that brief Psalm with the odd-to-us image of oil on the head that I so love – and heard ‘how good and pleasant it is when kindred dwell in unity’ – I started to see in the rest of the lectionary passages that unity was everywhere:

- In the Acts 4 passage, in the days soon after Jesus’ resurrection, the early church in Jerusalem is described: ‘the whole group who believed were of one heart and soul’ – united; AND ‘all possessions were held in common...and there was not a needy person among them’ – unity; ‘great grace was upon them all’ – united in every way.
- In the I John passage – the author shares the witness to the resurrection that has been passed on now through some generations (this was likely written 60 some years after the life of Jesus), and he does this ‘so that you may have fellowship with us’ – unity; we read that ‘to walk together in the light of God is to have fellowship with one another’ – unity.
- In the Gospel: the appearance of Jesus to the disciples unites them in joy; we’re told that together they receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, and together they are given authority about sin and forgiveness. Jesus unites his followers as witnesses to the resurrection.

How good and pleasant unity is – and we start to see that everywhere.

But, when you start to notice unity everywhere, you also start to notice that unity can also have a shadow side. One of the things I noticed was how in the Gospel story, we’re first told that the disciples are gathered together in a locked room – they are united by fear – that is the tie that binds initially. Fear has a great power to unite people in many ways and contexts – is that good and pleasant too? No. In the epistle, there is the call to fellowship, but also a reference to walking in darkness and deceiving ourselves about the truth – there can be powerful unity in people gathering

around ways of being and doing that are not light but darkness, not life-giving but destructive – is that good and pleasant unity too? Certainly not.

Unity, yes – but of a certain sort...a good kind of unity, right? But once I started looking for unity, I noticed how difficult it can be to find **good** unity – particularly if we start with the church. Listening to the radio this week, NPR had an extensive story on the divisions within the Anglican communion, the Episcopal church here in the United States. Much of the dissension is around issues of sexual identity and the differing theology and practice of congregations and the denomination. So the issue is one thing, but as I listened to the story, the deep divisions were what were so striking to me: congregations leaving dioceses; the diocese suing congregations over property; congregations dividing and splitting into two; people leaving the church. And I thought, if I was listening to this as someone who's not a part of the church, what would I think? I would find the church to be just another place of infighting and division – no integrity to have something compelling to say to me. Hmph - those Episcopalians, right?! But I'm afraid we in the glass house of the RCA should throw no stones... I was directed to an article this week about a West Michigan congregation leaving the RCA, again citing theological issues, saying it was better off on its own. How does this feel to us, at Hope Church? Is there loss for us in this disunity? Do we grieve this division in the body, even as some would blame us for it? Does it matter to us that this has happened? And how DOES it look to those around us – what kind of witness does this disunity give? – 'good and pleasant' does not come first to mind.

To stay on the 'perceptual vigilance' bandwagon, I guess what I've noticed more and more in the last decade of my spiritual life is the stunning depth of division within the church, and as I have realized the depth of it, the scandal of it has increased for me as well – what an undermining of witness to the world for the church to be so divided. It took me awhile to notice this – a good Reformed boy, a good Christian Reformed boy! It all seemed good to me – but slowly it has sunk in how our roots truly are grounded in division. You can say we were right, I could agree – but the reality of a

body divided remains – the scandal of it. Perhaps I didn't notice it because I was too busy being right – knowing my theology is right; I like being right – do you? – that seemed most important to me. Maybe I still think I'm right, but perhaps what's important has changed – perhaps what seems important is to somehow, some way, be faithful to the unity that the Word, and the Risen Christ, and the church professes to be so good and beautiful – to really desire it, long for it – even more than my being right (hard for me to do!).

What I long for is a unity that is not divisive – a unity that is not divisive – THAT is hard to find. Because in the divisions that I talked about, there is a lot of unity. The Episcopalians that are leaving are united; the Episcopalians that are staying and suing are united; the formerly RCA church that is leaving is united; the Classis that is opposing them is united. And it is all unity that is divisive – unity that depends on being against someone else. There is incredible unity in our world, as long as it is focused on division. The Republicans are uniting around Mitt Romney; to square off against the Democrats united against Barack Obama – it will not be a good and pleasant campaign. Nations find great energy in uniting against other nations – such is the nature of war and conflict; ideologies and factions unite in opposition to one another – businesses, gangs, terrorists, schools – how's that for a grouping?! Religions draw people together, then make their divisions from others clear.

I long for a unity that does not divide – but that seems incredibly difficult – seems hard to even conceive of. But here is the hope for unity that I have to offer us, if you are interested in trying too – three things: the resurrection; the Belhar Confession; and Wendell Berry (he's a poet); those 3 things could have something to say about a unity that does not divide.

For the followers of Jesus there was always both unity and division. After the resurrection the disciples were united, but also soon divided; the church was united, then divided – sooner and later. But the resurrection of Jesus speaks a reality that is greater than the disciples or the church, or a particular group, or situation or time. The

resurrection of Christ declares that all things are united in the truth of life over death – that the final word is life. And life over death isn't just one more division – in the resurrection, death is swallowed up in life – life is the true reality God intends for us and for this creation. The resurrection isn't just a 'was', the resurrection 'is' – it is the Risen Christ speaking this unity into our world: life; peace; the breath of the Spirit; forgiveness; community. Do we believe in that...or do we believe in our divisions? To believe in the resurrection is to witness to life; peace; the breath of the Spirit; forgiveness; community – and those things are the substance of a unity that does not divide.

As I've been increasingly aware of the scandal of disunity, I've also become increasingly familiar with the Belhar confession – a gift received by the RCA from the South African church. The Belhar speaks of Unity, Reconciliation, and Justice as foundations of the faithful church. It does so powerfully – but what I'm aware of is that it does so in a context that at its writing in the 80s and still today is deeply divided and unjust. So the profound power of the Belhar is that it teaches how to practice unity in the midst of disunity – it says, seek unity in this way: *Love one another; pursue community; bless one another; seek the Spirit's gifts; baptize and gather at table; seek the depth of God's love and grow up in Christ; bear each other's burdens; comfort, admonish, suffer, pray together; serve God's world.* That could just work...! Those are realities that reflect the resurrection. In the midst of disunity, the Belhar starts from the reality of the resurrection; and speaks of pursuing a unity that does not divide.

I have no illusion that to follow these themes of resurrection and Belhar will suddenly lead to unity in the church or world – but our job is not to fix it all, but simply to be faithful to this different way. That's why my final hope is Wendell Berry – he has a poem – and I think the poem says something like this: just because something isn't going to come to fruition sooner, or later, or in your life time, that's no excuse for not working for it, living for it anyway. It is what he calls 'practicing resurrection', and it could be, I think, the theme song for practicing unity:

*So, friends, every day do something
that won't compute. Love the Lord.
Love the world. Work for nothing.
Take all that you have and be poor.
Love someone who does not deserve it.*

*Denounce the government and embrace
the flag. Hope to live in that free
republic for which it stands.
Give your approval to all you cannot
understand. Praise ignorance, for what man
has not encountered he has not destroyed.*

*Ask the questions that have no answers.
Invest in the millenium. Plant sequoias.
Say that your main crop is the forest
that you did not plant,
that you will not live to harvest...
practice resurrection.*

Practice resurrection; seek a unity that does not divide – we might just start to see it everywhere. AMEN.