

Belhar 133

Tenth Sunday After Pentecost

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Text: Psalm 133

Introduction to Psalm 133

Psalm 133 starts with a timeless statement about the goodness of unity, but then the Psalmist uses some illustrations of unity that are very specific to that time and place. Do you know how good unity is?- it's like having oil poured all over your head until it drips all the way down your beard! Now to us that may not sound so good - but then anointing with oil was a sign of blessing, of abundance, of joy- it was what was done for priests (such as Aaron whose name we'll hear)- for leaders – mostly to men, which explains the reference to beards. Unity is like this oil of anointing, abundance.

And then the Psalmist uses an image that is very tied to his geography. We'll hear of 2 important holy places - Hermon and Zion. Mount Zion was the holiest place of all- the place of revelation from God to Moses. And from what can be gathered from this Psalm, the area of Hermon was known for heavy dew - so the Psalmist says, take the abundant dew of Hermon, and put that on the holy mountain of Zion- and that would be the best- and that's what unity is like- the best and most abundant.

Psalm 133

This sermon is focusing on Psalm 133, and if you're around here fairly often on Sundays, I know what you're thinking: 'Gordon's preaching on Psalm 133 AGAIN?! – good grief, he just preached on Psalm 133 in April of 2012! – I think it was the Sunday after Easter...yes...April 15...I remember it well.' Well, I know that's not what any of you are thinking – but it is actually of some interest to me that I preached on Psalm 133 so relatively recently in preaching time – while as far as I can tell in the 23 years before 2012 I had only preached on it once. That suggests to me that in recent years the idea of unity has been on my mind and heart:

How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!

I hear that, and it catches my attention – unity catches my attention with a mixture of curiosity and cynicism and yearning and perplexity as to what it is and whether it is possible at all. Unity catches my attention at this time in the midst of a summer of intense world turmoil and suffering. I've heard and felt the awareness of that painful turmoil touched upon here in worship; reflected on in conversations with you, people feeling the need to lament, to advocate, to pray. I've read and heard theologians and politicians and leaders wrestling with the depth and breadth of the turmoil. And clearly at the core of so much of the violence and suffering are the blatantly un-unified divisions of religions and races and genders and classes and clans and politicians and neighbors and nations. So I'm aware that hearing UNITY catches my attention more so in current circumstances as both a deep yearning and as what I fear would be a delusion to even think possible – 'unity' catches me with a suspicion about saying it in worship, preaching on it, with any conviction or integrity.

But here it is, and I am, preaching – and the conviction I want to get to today has to do with unity not primarily as something out there to pursue, but rather as a gift, a reality that God creates within us. I'll need to say more about that, but to get there I want to first say some things about unity that seem to me to be dead-ends – and then see if there is a way through to unity by a different route. Now I want to look for both the dead-ends and the new route in Psalm 133 and also in something familiar to some of you, the Belhar Confession – it's a Belhar 133 route to unity.

How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!

Well, yes – should we just say ‘Amen’? – how true that is! But a couple of things to notice. There are no details here on how to achieve this unity – it simply says how very good it is – easy enough to say, but... And also, the Psalm speaks of ‘kindred’ living together in unity. Well, yes, too – but isn’t that precisely the problem when it comes to unity? – which is to say, when kin are unified, they most often seem to do so in opposition to another group of unified kin – it may be pleasant within the kin, but often not between – and in fact the tension between makes the unity within even stronger. That’s what you encounter all the time, day to day: there’s a reason that the Hatfields and McCoys are an enduring American story – the unity of each thrives on the tension between; there’s a reason for a Hope/Calvin rivalry, each united in opposition to the other (and the converts are sometimes the most fervent!). And the examples become much less winsome, as kindred united turn against the other: nation vs nation; religion vs religion; race vs race – united against another. Christian vs. Muslim; but then Shia Muslim vs Sunni Muslim (what’s the difference again?), Protestant vs. Catholic (what’s the difference again?), Republican vs Democrat, black vs white, Hispanic vs white, Hispanic vs black, Serbs/Croats, Hutus/Tutsis, Israelis/Palestinians – with vitriol the leading edge and too often shocking violence the reality. Perhaps this is all too easy to recite - too tired to rehash – but I think it’s important to have soak in that the beautiful opening words of Psalm 133 could well describe the ugly world of conflict we live in: kindred united can make for intractable conflict – that seems to be the conundrum of unity as we find it in our world.

I’d like to turn to the Belhar - the Belhar Confession is a Christian statement of faith from South Africa in the early 1980s, birthed during the struggle against apartheid with the white minority oppressing the black majority; and the confession speaks to Unity, Reconciliation and Justice as touchstones of the Church’s identity. The multiracial Uniting Reformed Church birthed this confession as part of the struggle not only against political apartheid but also against the religious promotion of apartheid by the white Reformed Church. In the midst of such racial and religious division, for the Belhar to highlight unity was a profoundly courageous thing to do, as it seeks not simply to condemn

the other group of kin in the conflict but strives for reconciliation, a united Christian family. So the Belhar speaks to Christian Unity, and that is a huge challenge – but I want to ask, is that enough? If we seek Christian Unity, what is that unity for? – does such unity simply set us up to be against something else? united against other religions? other people? I love the Belhar Confession – I’m deeply grateful that it is now a Confession of our Reformed Church in America - but in this time I need to ask of the Belhar new questions: it speaks of Christian Unity, but what does that have to say to a world where religious unity is used for division? There is a conundrum of unity that I find present in the Belhar too.

So, with those conundrums wound up in the Psalm and the Belhar, I want to use the Belhar and the Psalm to unravel them too, looking for a different path than what the patterns of our history and circumstance would typically find. In recent years at Hope Church we have often used pieces of the Belhar Confession as our Confession of Faith – and in doing so one of the phrases that has come to have great meaning for me is this:

separation, enmity and hatred between people and groups is sin which Christ has
already conquered

What could that mean? what does that mean? look around – separation, enmity and hatred are doing just fine...they don’t look conquered to me! But I believe the Belhar is making a remarkable statement of truth that requires of us a remarkable act of faith. I believe that the enduring, intractable power of separation and conflict in this world is the deep-seated human belief that it is inevitable, even natural – for one group to be united is to be in enmity with others who are united. But the Christian witness in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is: NO! – no, God says, good news: you’re wrong! – unity does not have to be about division. Christ is the revelation that humanity is not created to live in enmity with God and others but in community (and you can do a quick review of the Gospel reading to see Jesus getting a reminder about that from a Canaanite woman when he was a bit weary!). Christ has conquered the lie that traps humanity in destructive cycles, revealing a unity that is not about division but rather a life of community that is about freedom and blessing. And what you can then indeed start to see in the Belhar is a description of the Church in which its unity is to serve humanity. The Belhar

says: to confess Jesus is Lord is to be the ‘salt of the earth’, ‘the light of the world’, ‘peacemaker’; it is ‘to open new possibilities for life for society and world.’ In the Belhar is a confession of Christian unity that does not divide us from the world, but rather a Christian identity that calls us as servants, witnesses – to witness that:

*separation, enmity and hatred between people and groups is sin which Christ has
already conquered*

Which brings us back to Psalm 133 –

How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!

I am going to make a blatant interpretive leap: today, in our context, our world, kindred has to mean everyone. I don’t know if that’s what the Psalmist thought – probably not – but I know it is the word God has for us today. And I know that whatever the intention in that time, that in this time the Psalm offers a word that demands that we hear kindred as everyone. Look at the language of the Psalm: ‘how very good’ – do you recognize that? - that is the language of creation in Genesis – on the sixth day after all has been created, God looks and says: ‘very good’ – the Psalm echoes the wholeness of human community at creation. And then we can see that those odd-to-us Psalm 133 images of oil and dew are creation language too: the stuff of blessing and sustaining life. And then that the Psalm’s closing benediction of God’s blessing grounds all things in the God of life, of creation, ever and always. Psalm 133 is an image of how God created people to live – with all as our kindred - such unity is the fabric of creation, God’s design; and when we proclaim all as our kin, there is a path of blessing, healing, life in which God is ever and always present and sustaining.

I read a blog * this past week from Rev. Steve Mathonnet-VanderWell, an RCA Pastor and admired colleague. He reflected on this summer of turmoil in terms of the powerlessness it exposes in us, much to our chagrin. Typically in these United States we think of the power we have – but in so many of these current situations there is no clear action to take, or actions taken have turned sour; I think of myself as someone who should and can do things – that I can advocate, influence – but much

of what I see I feel powerless to impact. This world in turmoil confronts us with our limits. What can we do?

What if we start with a different question - What has God done? - created a world for blessing, a place for all to share in goodness; given of God's own self in Christ to reveal and reclaim the paths of blessing and life. That is what we are called to witness to together – in Belhar-like words: 'that unity is a gift God has already given; unity is a reality Christ has already achieved.'

Do not believe the lie of inevitable division, enmity, and hatred among peoples. Instead, agree with God: live from the persistent, creatively subversive, conviction and deep joy that to be a Christian is to be united in reconciliation and justice as God's gracious gifts for all.

How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!

In this divided world, what can we do to achieve this?!

What is God doing? The Holy Spirit renews us this day with the grace to believe again, the courage to persist in, the call to witness to the unity God has already achieved. Even so, come Lord Jesus. AMEN.

* The Twelve <http://the12.squarespace.com/> "The Grace of Doing Nothing" – Steve Mathonnet-Vanderwell - August 12, 2014