

Good and Pleasant

Psalm 133

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Sunday, August 30, 2009

Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

How good...how pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together. That's how the Hebrew text ends. How pleasant for brothers to live together. Period. The English translations sort of double up on the word "together" by adding "in unity." That would make sense to us. It is indeed good if brothers and sisters can live in unity, but....we know too often what it is like for families to try to live together and it's frequently not good. In fact, one of my seminary professors once asked, "Did the person who wrote the psalm ever read the Bible? What about these brothers? Cain and Abel? Isaac and Ishmael? Jacob and Esau? Joseph and his brothers?" What happened when those brothers lived together? It was not good and it was far from pleasant. All those stories and this psalm are together God's Word to us. What are we to make of it? Let us pray.

We pray, O Lord, that your Holy Spirit would speak to each of us, as each of us needs to hear you. May the words of my mouth and meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

It's logical to take this psalm and try to put it against the backdrop of all the divisions in biblical families. But I don't think all those family feuds contradict this psalm. I do think the psalmist knew all those stories and that's why this psalm expresses such a deep, deep joy in contemplating what it would be like for kindred to live together...in unity. The writer knew what family life was really like. If the psalmist was David, he knew the bitterness of marital strife and the rebellion of his son. Family life is difficult and estrangement in those relationships is sometimes more than we can bear.

But this psalm is not just about families. Remember, this is one of the Songs of Ascent...one of the songs the people of God sang as they together went up to Jerusalem, to the Temple to worship at times of the great festivals. As they went, they remembered that as a people, as a nation, they had been divided and then scattered. Now, they could come together as they worshipped the Lord with one heart and mind. So this psalm causes us to ask: What divides us? What brings us together? And why is it good and pleasant?

The early Rabbinic interpretations of this psalm focused on biblical customs mentioned in Deuteronomy. According to these customs, sons would continue to live in the father's household, even after they were grown and married. The rabbis said that this psalm was extolling the joys of living together in an extended family.

That interpretation has fallen out of favor in more recent times. Some scholars think that the realities of such arrangements...the realities we've just talked about...don't fit the life-giving descriptions in this brief psalm. But, I think the rabbis were right about one thing – I think they were right about the reference to brothers living on the same ancestral property.

I'm going to tell you a story that will help us think about this. It's a true story. I am not making this up. When I was a child, we used to spend part of almost every summer vacation at the ancestral home in Houston County, Georgia. It was a pre-civil war wood frame house with a huge front porch with a swing.

The one thing about the house that fascinated me was one bedroom on the east side of the house. No matter which way you placed the bed, it went wall-to-wall, so that in order to go from one side of the room to the other, you had to crawl over the bed. I mentioned this to my mother and she told me The Story. It turns out that at one time, the house had been twice as big. Two adult brothers lived in the house, but one was a Northern sympathizer. They did not dwell in unity. In fact, they had a sword duel in which one brother cut off the ear of the other. They could not dwell together...at all.

So, they cut the house in half and boarded up the exposed sides of each half. That's why the east bedroom was so small. The brother who sided with the north got a huge team of oxen and took his half of the house to another location. It's lost to the ravages of time. The half in which I spent my summers is now in some Georgia town square, a national historic landmark to the fact that those brothers could not dwell together. They could not dwell together because they had competing loyalties – one to the Confederacy and one to the Union.

This little bit of family history is instructive, don't you think? Those brothers had differing authorities in their lives and those authorities were bitter enemies...governments fighting over moral and economic matters of great importance. I think this tells us that if we are to be able to live together in unity, we must share the same loyalties, the same allegiances. And that comes in our worship of the one Lord, Jesus Christ. In his commentary on this Psalm, John Calvin says that if we are to be united among ourselves in mutual affection, then we must all be under the government of God.

When Calvin speaks of the government of God, he's not talking about a theocracy. He is talking about a community of believers in which each one understands that he or she lives under the Lordship of Jesus Christ – that there are to be no other gods before or amongst us. Competing gods will – and do – tear us apart. We know those gods well: financial security, political certainty, moral autonomy or self – anything we hope in or trust more than we do God. Trying to live under one roof with all those gods will just give us, as Calvin so aptly said, animosities and heartburnings. Those are the things that divide. So, what brings us together?

As we have said, it is living under the common Lordship of Christ, but just saying this and even striving for it doesn't make it so. It actually a gift from God and comes from the fact God brings us into union with himself through Jesus Christ. We will celebrate/We just celebrated the sacrament of baptism (at the next service). One of the things that baptism demonstrates is that we have been joined to Christ as we are joined to his church. That is what God does for us.

We are never told to create the unity. It is a gift. But it is a gift and we are to receive it, to live into it and to take care of it. St. Paul reminds us that we are to “maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” In other words, we are to be vigilant about living peaceably with one another. But why bother? Why not just saw the house in two and go your separate ways? That at least, would keep the peace.

Well, no, it would not. You would just be so far apart that you couldn't fight. When you take your half of the house and leave, you are also taking the animosities and heartburnings with you and they eat at you. But you are not the only one affected by the hostilities. It affects everyone in range. You know how you feel when you're at the Thanksgiving table and suddenly all anyone can hear is Uncle George raising his voice at Aunt Maude. It's just between them, but they have made it impossible for us to think about anything else and they've made us uncomfortable to boot. This is not good and pleasant. And no one wants to be around this table. And that's the point of this psalm.

The people of God are to live in such a way that others will want to come to their table and share in the blessings of God. That's what the good and pleasant is all about. Our life together is meant to be lived in such a way that, even though it's not perfect (and never can be this side of heaven), people will see it and say, “Sweet.”

I don't think Eugene Peterson is far off the mark when he says that when people look in on us church folk, they should see a rousing good fellowship. Many years ago, I went to lunch with a bunch of friends. We had just come from a leadership Bible study, in which we had prepared for Bible studies we would lead in our own neighborhoods. Over the years we had become very good friends and had shared many joys and sorrows.

On this particular day, were having such a good time laughing and telling stories – we weren't being rowdy, but we were having a rousing good fellowship. The manager came over to me and said, “Would you ladies mind telling me where you were before you came here?” I told him that he wouldn't believe me, but he insisted. So I said, “We just finished a Bible study.” He said, “You're kidding, right?” I wish I could report that he had said, “Where can I get some of that?” But he didn't and I was saddened that joy and delight weren't expected to be a part of the life of Christians.

Now, this psalm describes what that “rousing good fellowship” is like. It uses metaphors that are somewhat difficult for us to understand...metaphors of oil and water. I was talking about this psalm with my husband earlier this week and he said that this is one place where oil and water do mix. And that's ironic, given the fact that disharmony in relationships is often described as being like oil and water.

In this psalm, oil is important because it is the symbol of God's presence, it is a sign of hospitality and it is what is used to anoint those who have been set apart by God to serve God's people. And dew, the water that comes from Mt. Hermon gives life to parched lands, washes dirt away and refreshes parched throats. Oil and water each have unique qualities that make them good and pleasant. But they both have something in common – they flow down from above and they flow in abundance. The psalm makes it clear that the blessings of oil and water come not from ourselves, but from God and they reach far beyond their origins and flow far beyond us. Oil and water – two things that make life possible and make it also delightful.

That's what our life together is supposed to convey to those who observe us. The NRSV translation that we heard today doesn't have the first word of this psalm. That word is “Behold!” “Look at it...pay attention to it.” Our lives as Christians are not meant to be solitary lives of a private and unseen faith. We are meant to be in relationship, in community and the question is not “Will I be a part of this community of faith?” Rather, it is “How will I be a part of this community?” 1

You remember what C.S. Lewis said about this in Letter 2 in The Screwtape Letters. Screwtape is upset that Wormwoods 'patient' has become a Christian and has started going to church. But he tells Wormwood, his junior demon, not to worry. The church can be just the place to get the man's mind off of God:

When he goes inside, he sees the local grocer with rather an oily expression on his face bustling up to offer him one shiny little book containing a liturgy which neither of them understands, and one shabby little book containing corrupt texts of a number of religious lyrics, mostly bad and in very small print. When he gets to his pew and looks around him he sees just that selection of his neighbors whom he has hitherto avoided...Make his mind flit to and fro between an expression like 'the body of Christ' and the actual faces in the next pew....Work hard on the disappointment that is certain to come [in his life at church].

Lewis is right...if all we see in each other is all of the flawed and failing human condition, then certainly our life in this place will be a disappointment and we will soon see little reason to gather. But what if we were to see what God is pouring out among us and gathered in expecting to see Christ in each other?

If oil is used to set apart those who will serve God's people, then in this family, in this church, we must see ourselves as those who serve one another, who share with one another what we know of God and who lift each other up to the Lord in prayer – much like the priests of old conveyed the will of God to the people and went to God on behalf of the people. We are, it is not too strong to say, priests for one another.

And if water gives growth, refreshes and washes us, then in our life together we should be living in great anticipation of the new things that God is doing in and among us. All the blessings of God flow from him onto us and then through us and past us into a world that needs life and delight in life. Here. Now. Among us in worship, God's eternal life takes shape...and that's the kind of life that people will stand on tiptoe to see and then want to join. May it be so with us. Amen.

1. Eugene Peterson, A Long Obedience in the Same Direction, page 170

