

Dwelling in Unity

Psalm 133

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Randy Lovelace

This morning, we turn to the final sermon in the series on the Psalms of ascent with Psalm 133. It is a short psalm which means a short sermon. So I'm flipping that with long sermon, short psalm. Just kidding. We do come to a psalm that seemingly is short, and I will tell you in case you haven't read it before that it is full of imagery that may seem very distant to us. Elder Koch has certainly led us in that this morning, and I hope to take what he's built on and then also take us deeper. This psalm is rich in imagery, but it is not meant to be distant at all. It is actually meant for us to even apply it and understand it today.

Psalm 133, a psalm of ascent, what does it mean for the people of God to dwell in unity together. Psalm 133. Hear now the word of God.

Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity! It is like the precious oil on the head, running down on the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down on the collar of his robes! It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion. For there the Lord has commanded the blessing, life forevermore. [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Again, will you pray with me briefly?

Now, Father, we ask that you would fill our minds and our hearts with the glory of Christ, the love of God the Father, and the power of your Spirit, that you would make the church of Jesus Christ as it is expressed here at Columbia Presbyterian to be a place where we dwell in unity in the name of Jesus but that we also see your calling to us to be in mission together in that same unity for the sake of Christ in His kingdom. Help the teacher. In Jesus's name. Amen.

Now, I recognize this morning that some of you will understand my opening illustration, and I apologize to those of you who won't understand it because perhaps you have not seen the film. It's called *The Odd Couple*. Or maybe you've seen the famous Neil Simon play turned into a famous film by Walter Matthau and Jack Lemmon.

Jack Lemmon and Walter Matthau represent two men whose wives found it near impossible to live with them and told them to get out, but for different reasons for each of them. Walter Matthau was the resident messy curmudgeon who's just going with the flow of things and would likely end up in jail for the way he was treating others, but back then he was free to do so and didn't get in trouble. But he was a mess, an absolute mess. Then you have Jack Lemmon's character who, instead of being messy, is a person who's very much in control of his entire environment so much so that his wife couldn't stand it anymore because he would critique her cooking. After she would cook, he would go back into the kitchen and re-cook the meal because he thought he could do it better. He was constantly cleaning around her and picking up after her. She just couldn't take it anymore.

Jack Lemmon and Walter Matthau's characters are friends who got together weekly with other friends for a poker game. And on this night when Jack Lemmon announces that he is getting a divorce and that his wife can't stand him anymore, Walter Matthau, in a moment of generosity and friendship, says, I want you to live with me. I can't stand to live alone. Jack Lemmon says, well, I can't stand to live alone either. But they're soon to find out that they can't stand each other because Walter Matthau sees his job and calling in life is to help Jack Lemmon to simply relax, and Jack Lemmon's goal in life is to clean up the mess that is Walter Matthau. They are the quintessential mirror opposites of one another. They are the odd couple.

The realities are that if we recognized and knew the different stories and backgrounds of all the people who are just sitting here this morning and all those who are joining us on livestream, the church of Jesus Christ is the oddest couple of all couples. We get on each other's nerves. One person wants more cleanliness. The other person just says to relax. The one person wants to say, amen! The other person says, mhm. The one person says, I think we should be all about this thing. And the other person says, no, I don't agree with that color on the wall.

Bringing it into the modern day, we are the ultimate odd couples in the midst of a country that is in upheaval because of the pandemic. Oh, you should wear a mask. Oh, you shouldn't wear a mask. It's a pandemic. No, it's not a pandemic. The problem with this country is the conservatives. The problem with this country is the liberals. We have all of that represented in this one room right now. Let's talk.

The realities are that we are the odd couple. But what in the world could this final psalm of ascent have to teach us of what it means to be the church of Jesus Christ in this moment and day? What we're going to look at is that it calls us to live and to learn to dwell, but to do so in unity. But my guess is we have a very shallow understanding of what dwell is and what unity is. This psalm helps us correct that.

But then what is required to live and to learn to dwell in unity? Three points as we understand this are that it requires patience, forgiveness, and dependence. Learning to dwell in unity requires patience, forgiveness, and dependence.

So what is this dwelling in unity? What is it pointing us towards? When it says here, "Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity," the whole idea here is that the people of God to whom this psalm would have been written for the purpose of gathered worship is that the relationships we have with each other should be as close as that between siblings, same blood, same background. And if we understand what it is like in the best of moments because I realize that being around your relatives can be extremely annoying. But imagine the best moments. They know who you are. They know your weak points and they know your strengths, but they let you be you. And you know it's the safe place to be. You don't always agree, but they love you. They may not like you, but they love you. And there is a sense of peace there, a sense of dwelling.

What is in vision here is that to dwell, which is the verb there, is to dwell in such a way that we know one another's stories, that we see each other for who we are, and yet we love. We have listened to the stories. Although the stories of your lives might be painful to hear, might be hard to agree with, or even might be hard to accept, yet we listen. Dwelling is loving and being in relationship even when we know the dirt and the grime, the good and the bad.

But oftentimes in today's world, as the recipients, as the spiritual children of Israel, as the church of Jesus Christ, what we call community pales in comparison to what is being described here. If we think about it, a vast majority of our lives are spent outside the relationships within the body of Christ. We spend very little time with each other even before COVID and whenever this thing leaves us. Lord, help us, please. But even when it does leave, the whole idea of community oftentimes doesn't go beyond how are you doing today? Or how is the weather? What's going on with your children's lives? Do you realize how possible it is to be in a small church or in a large church, in a confessing Christian church to go for years, if not decades, and yet be completely isolated relationally from one another?

What we call community pales in comparison to what is meant here as dwell. To dwell means you're getting to know, uncomfortably know, each other which requires us knowing ourselves and knowing who we are in Jesus Christ. And if I know who I am in Jesus Christ, I don't mind letting you in. But instead of dwelling with each other, we often just show the glittering images of what we hope people will see about ourselves, about our children, about our lives.

As a pastor, let me say I have the honor, I have the absolute honor of actually knowing a whole lot about a whole lot of people. And I will tell you it is a burden too great for me to bear if I'm the only one who knows all of your stuff. And I'm not saying you need to advertise it to everybody. But if you have

nobody outside of me that doesn't know your stuff, the ugly stuff, then we're not really dwelling. We're just playing spiritual bumper cars. Dwelling here means dwelling like a family. Do we know each other's stories? And are we listening? And when we tell the stories, are we really listening without dismissiveness or judgmentalism?

Do you know that's why many Christians are afraid of sharing their stories with each other? It's because they're afraid another Christian will judge them and will not listen. And I think fundamentally they're probably right. Honestly, another thing I cannot bear as a pastor alone is how much you judge yourself and forget who you are in Jesus Christ. But a people who understand the grace and mercy of Christ, who dwell with Him in union that we have with Jesus and all that He is and all that He says we are in Him actually frees us to begin to really dwell with each other and not just play at community.

But it's not just dwell. It's dwell in unity. But by unity here, it's not that we think the same, we do the same, we vote the same, we enjoy the same music. That's not what unity means. It's not an echo chamber. It's that we have a common unity, a foundation which cannot be overturned or dismissed by culture or time or generation. It has to be, according to the scriptures, revealed to us. It doesn't come from us. It comes from the Lord. The unity which is being spoken about here is the unity of who the Lord is in His glory, in His kingdom, in His grace, in His mercy, in His word.

What is a foundation that we say we are unified on? Consider the brief words of the apostle Paul as he opens his letter to the Ephesians when he says,

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ." [ESV]

What unifies us is that which has been given to us, not achieved by us, not cooked up by us, not created by us, but that which can never be taken away, that which is from God the Father through His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing from on high and has given us a grace, a forgiveness, a mercy, and a love which can never be overthrown. It will never be voted out of office. It can never be denied. It is unstoppable and will reshape us. This is what unifies us. It's not the other things that we'd like to think we're unified on, but this is the unity. All that other stuff we can disagree on, but if this has our hearts, and this shapes our gathering, then it fuels our dwelling.

How is this symbolized in this psalm? It's symbolized in two metaphors. The one metaphor is the picture of oil being poured over the head of Aaron, and the other is a geographic thing of dew. So let's look at these briefly.

On the one hand, Aaron, who is the high priest, would have received the consecration, the pouring on of the oil before the people of God as they gather together for the high feast, for the Levitical calling of the day of atonement. And Aaron would have been before the people of God, and he would receive this oil being poured over him. Now, what's different is if you were a Levitical priest, you simply would have been anointed. But Aaron, the high priest who was before the people of God, would have had this oil which was never for common use but was expensive oil that contained fragrant spices. So it would have been beautiful in its aroma and rich in its sight. And what the passage tells us is that it was poured over his head. And as it was poured over his head, it would have dripped through his beard which would not have been cut, and it would have dripped all the way down over his robe.

What symbol does that point to? It's that when the people of God dwell in unity, it is obvious to all others as if Aaron were standing before the people of God and the oil was poured over Aaron's head in such a way that it was all over the front of his robe which was to symbolize God's blessing and His mercy over the people. It was obvious to all that the Lord God almighty had blessed His people. This is a picture of what it means to dwell in unity, that we are so in the grasp of the Lord that we are gripped by His grace. And that impacts the relationships that we have with each other. And it's obvious to the world outside similar to what Jesus prayed for the church in the world that by our love, the world might know that He exists. John 17. This is the picture.

But then there's this other metaphor, one of dew. What's interesting is the dew of Hermon. Now, Hermon is the tallest mountain in the nation of Israel. It's in the northern part and is uninhabited, very remote. It stands nearly 10,000 feet tall. Today, it is still the highest point in the nation of Israel. It borders on one side with Lebanon and the other with Syria. Yet, even in today's modern Israel, it has the nation's only ski resort. And you can see that most of the time during the year that it's so high in elevation that it is rimmed with snow.

What this passage tells us might not make any sense at first glance. We might wonder why is it so special? It is this. It is suggesting and states that brothers who dwell in unity are so beautiful it is like the oil pouring down over Aaron's head, obvious to all, but it's also like the dew on Hermon, a rich place of trees and of water. So here, you have this place, but the dew which rises from this rich place would fall way far south in the arid region of Mount Zion. Here's the thing. That would be impossible. That would be impossible to have happen. And yet what God is telling us is that when He does this in His people, it is so miraculous and so beautiful that it would be like the dew of Hermon raining down hundreds of miles away, if you will, in Columbia, Maryland. This is the powerful picture of what it means to be blessed, that an arid region receives the dew from a beautiful mountain.

What is intended to be shown to us is it is a blessing and a delight to see when the people of God dwell together in unity. But how hard it would've been for the nation of Israel. We've heard before that the nation of Israel and the 12 tribes warred against each other. They killed one another. They stole from one another. And yet they gathered together for the worship of God, and He would continually restore them by His grace and His mercy. And for the church of Jesus Christ, which has received the great covenant promises of the scriptures, the same is the case now. For the church of Jesus Christ to be the odd couple of the rich and poor, of the black, white, and brown, of the liberal and the conservative, of the immigrant and those born here, it is to be that kind of unity which requires the impossible beautiful grace of God to work in us, that allows us to dwell with such richness to the praise of His glorious grace.

So how does this happen then? It requires these three quick things. It requires patience with each other. How are you doing in the department of being patient with others around you, even those with whom you disagree?

I was reminded this week from colleague and friend Dr. Chuck DeGroat when he says this.

"What chance is there of loving and respecting others if I refuse to meet and listen to the many sides of myself? How can I be a reconciler if I shut my ears to the unreconciled conflicts within myself? Now, I begin to see that the spiritual life is based on a basic honesty which enables me to recognize that everything I find difficult to accept and bless and forgive and appreciate in you is actually present within myself."

He's saying if we are honest with ourselves, we are incredibly eternally patient with the conundrum, the ironies, and inconsistencies of what we hold within ourselves, our beliefs, our practices, our desires, the things we hate. We're patient with ourselves. But when we see that inconsistency in others, we are so impatient particularly if they conflict with our own. And that is not only a demonstration of our lack of patience with others, but it's frankly a lack of patience with ourselves. We haven't really come to terms with honestly admitting that.

As a pastor, I have things that I love that do not agree with each other. And I have things that I hate that I should love. And I have beliefs and ideas and theories over here which I'm absolutely convinced are right, but I know that most of the time they're upheld more by my emotion than by belief or pride in my logic. And if I'm honest with that, then that enables me and enables you and us to walk in humility with each other. If we can be patient with ourselves, we learn to be patient with others. And if it's fueled by the unity of the glory of Christ who is patient with us, it is His kindness that leads us to repentance. It is His patience and His long-suffering love that enables us and fuels us. That becomes the strength.

But it's not just patience. It's also forgiveness. It requires that we learn how to move into relationship with each other. And when we dwell, and as we begin to dwell, what's going to happen is we're going to step on each other's toes. We're going to make each other mad. We're going to annoy each other. We're going to frustrate each other. And that happens. But do we also have the ability to forgive as we have been forgiven?

If we are unable to forgive the other who offends us, the question is do we really understand how we have been forgiven? And let me ask it further. Do you know you have ever been forgiven? For as the power of the grace of Christ has forgiven us of our sin to the body and blood of Jesus Christ as that dawns on the soul, that then enables us to be free and radical with our forgiveness with others.

And as we dwell together, as my friend said this week, there is a lot of hurt out here right now. There's a lot of hurt in the world. So there are two important responses when we're greeted with hurt. One, we critique gently. So as we go to another who has hurt us, we do so gently. And as you hear someone whether they mean it gently, you recognize there might be truth here that I need to hear. But I am forgiven in Christ. Critique gently.

Number two, encourage fiercely. We might get to critique gently right, but if we forget to encourage fiercely, then we're leaving half of it off. Critique gently. Encourage fiercely. Instead of looking at how easily offended we become, how can we become so easily ready to encourage? Not to be fake. I don't mean to be shallow. But what would it look like for us to begin with one another, how can I find someone to bless and encourage today? It could be just a small word, a word of prayer, an email, a text, a call. Whatever way you want to do it, we can learn to encourage.

But finally, it requires dependence. What do I mean? Later on in the book of Ephesians, Paul prays for the church of Ephesus. And he says,

For this reason, I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory, he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, that you being rooted and grounded in love may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge that you may be filled with the fullness of God. [ESV]

What he is praying for the church is he's now praying for them to have the power and strength to live out what he's already taught them. The same is the case from this psalm. To dwell in unity requires not just patience and not just forgiveness, but it requires that we recognize its dependence on the Lord. The only way we can do this is to ask the Lord by His Spirit, tame my tongue, correct my speech that I might dwell with others in the unity that is Jesus Christ, not in unity of my opinion or my views or ideas, but in unity of Jesus.

This is an impossible task. Here's what's interesting. Aaron was absolutely unable to do that which he was called by God to do. Even with all the beautiful blessing of the pouring of the oil down over his robe and leading the people of God as they were to worship, what did they do? They divided north

and south. They were a people at war with each other and ultimately disobeying God. Aaron was not able to pull the people of God together as the high priest.

Interestingly, during the day of atonement and leading in this worship, Aaron as the high priest would have been the central figure in whom was invested offering the sacrifice on behalf of the people of God. Aaron could not do it. But Jesus Christ, who is the great high priest, has done this.

Here's what's interesting. Remember the oil being poured over Aaron as I described it? As they poured it over his head and it dripped down over his face and along his beard, that oil was to then flow over a breastplate. And on that breastplate were 12 jewels which represented the 12 tribes of Israel. And as God's blessing was poured out over Aaron's head and dripped off of his beard, it was meant to be a blessing to the tribes of Israel. But ultimately, Aaron could not.

We sit here today worshipping a God who has given us the great high priest who is Jesus Christ. He died on our behalf. His side was pierced. He bled for us, and His blood has been poured over His church. And the great high priest has brought together that which was once separate, Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female, rich and poor, black and white and brown, all of this brought together. We cannot do it. Aaron could not do it. But Christ can do it.

And so not only are we called to dwell in unity in relationship with each other, but we are called to dwell in unity of mission. We are called now to turn with this great blessing that is the kingdom, glory, cross, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And together as a people who have been blessed from the heavenly realms through the work of Christ as our great high priest, we are to turn to the world to be ambassadors of reconciliation because we have been brought close to Christ even though we were sinners. So we now announce to the world that it doesn't matter your background. It doesn't matter your political views. It doesn't matter your race. It doesn't matter your socioeconomic level. We are all brought into Christ once and for all for He is our king. He is our high priest.

This is what unites us. This is what invigorates us. And so together, although we are different, we dwell in unity of mission because we've been brought together and dwell in unity in Christ.

And so today at the finish of this sermon, we now are going to partake in the supper. No longer do we have the day of atonement. Christ has died once and forever. But He left us with a meal that we dwell, and we eat together. And when we eat of this bread and drink of this cup, do you know that the Lord is pouring out His blessing on you today? Not in oil but in the symbols of what Christ has done for us. And when we take of this bread and drink of this cup, we proclaim Christ who has reconciled us who were once His enemies and now have been called His children. And we are equipped and strengthened and filled that we might turn to the world with that announcement.

As we come to the table today, let us celebrate that the Lord is blessing His people. He is feeding you and blessing you with the strength that is His grace. Let's pray together.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for this meal. We thank you, Father, that we can celebrate this together. We thank you for this psalm that calls us to dwell in unity, and what a blessing and delight it is. But, Lord, we need your Spirit to help us to be united not on opinion or views or ideas, but to be united on the person of Christ, that you would help us to dwell in relationship with each other and then as a people to turn to the world to be reconcilers, ambassadors of reconciliation for the sake of Christ and His kingdom, that your name would be glorified and your kingdom extended. Help us, O Lord, as we partake together to rejoice that we do so through Jesus. In His name we pray. Amen.