

*The Passion of the Psalms: Harmony*

August 17, 2008

Year A: Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

Camp Norwesca; near Chadron, Nebraska  
Chadron United Methodist Church; Chadron, Nebraska

There is a story told about some soldiers serving during the Korean War. They had rented a house and hired a local boy to do their housekeeping and cooking. It was common during that war for soldiers to get that kind of setup for easy-come, easy-go, easy-pay.

This little Korean fellow they hired had an unbelievably positive attitude -- he was always smiling. So they played one trick after another on him.

They nailed his shoes to the floor. He'd get up in the morning, pull those nails out with pliers, slip on the shoes, and maintain his excellent spirit.

They put grease on the stove handles, and he would wipe each one off, smiling and singing his way through the day.

They balanced buckets of water over the door, and he'd get drenched. But he would dry off and never fuss, time after time.

Finally, they became so ashamed of themselves that they called him in one day and said, "We want you to know that we're never going to trick you again. Your attitude has been outstanding."

He asked, "You mean no more nail shoes to floor?"

"No more."

"You mean no more sticky on stove knobs?"

"No more."

"You mean no more water buckets on door?"

"No more."

OK then, no more spit in soup," he responded with a smile and a shrug.<sup>1</sup>

Today I want to talk about harmony for in this short little Psalm its all about unity. Its all about getting along, about togetherness, about what can happen when we all move together in the same direction. We reap the reward of abundance.

<Read Psalm 133 (Norwesca) / Hymn #850 (sanctuary)>

[Psalm 133:1-3 \(NRSV\)](#)

How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity! <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion. For there the LORD ordained his blessing, life forevermore.

This Psalm describes a joyous time when everyone is together again, when everyone is focused on the same goal, on just one mission. That's what we have right here in verse one. Now before we delve into that verse we've got

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Swindoll. "No more spitting in soup." *Seth's Compiled List of Jokes & Illustrations. Part III.* 8.

to address what I'm guessing most of you are thinking. Unity – we can understand that, but what's with these other two verses? Unity is like . . . pouring a bunch of oil on one's head.

Now what you're probably hearing at least in modern day language is unity is like one of those hard days at work. You come home, you've just sat on the couch, and all you want to do is watch a little bit of the Olympics. And your sweet little child comes up behind you and just pours chocolate syrup all over your hair and it runs into your eyes, down your neck, and right on to your – of course – white shirt. Ah, isn't that blessed unity?

Now I don't want you to think that this is an example out of my home – so I only mention it with my kids gone with Children's Church – I don't want to give them any ideas. But, you see, when we hear verse 2, that's what we hear. We don't hear about the Biblical importance of oil, like Exodus 29.7: "You shall take the anointing oil, and pour it on his head and anoint him." Here an example of anointing the successor to the High Priest, Aaron. We don't hear Psalm 23.5: "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows." Oil here is a sign of hospitality. And then there is Matthew 26.6-11: "Now while Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment, and she poured it on his head as he sat at the table. But when the disciples saw it, they were angry and said, 'Why this waste? For this ointment could have been sold for a large sum, and the money given to the poor.' But Jesus, aware of this, said to them, 'Why do you trouble the woman? She has performed a good service for me. For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me.'"

There is a biblical tradition of oil being used as a sign, a symbol, of something incredibly special. It is unique, it is rare, and is only used for the best of occasions. Today it would be the equivalent of how we use our fine china. We only get it out for those special times – dinner parties, holidays. It represents abundance for when you host a dinner you always make sure there is more than enough food. It is a celebration and you want to share it with others. Unity, harmony, moving in mass toward one goal – yea, it's just like that.

The brand new pastor and his wife, newly assigned to their first ministry, to reopen a church in urban Brooklyn, arrived in early October excited about their opportunities. When they saw their church, it was very run down and needed much work. They set a goal to have everything done in time to have their first service on Christmas Eve.

They worked hard, repairing pews, plastering walls, painting, etc., and on December 18 were ahead of schedule and just about finished. On December 19 a terrible tempest -- a driving rainstorm hit the area and lasted for two days. On the 21st, the pastor went over to the church. His heart sunk when he saw that the roof had leaked, causing a large area of plaster about six feet by eight feet to fall off the front wall of the sanctuary just behind the pulpit, beginning about head high. The pastor cleaned up the mess on the floor, and not knowing what else to do but postponed the Christmas Eve service, headed home.

On the way he noticed that a local business was having a flea market type sale for charity so he stopped in. One of the items was a beautiful, handmade, ivory colored crochet table cloth with exquisite work, fine colors and a cross embroidered right in the center. It was just the right size to cover up the hole in the front wall. He bought it and headed back to the church. By this time it had started to snow. An older woman running from the opposite direction was trying to catch the bus. She missed it. The pastor invited her to wait in the warm church for the next bus 45 minutes later. She sat in a pew and paid no attention to the pastor while he got a ladder, hangers etc. to put up the tablecloth as a wall tapestry.

The pastor could hardly believe how beautiful it looked and it covered up the entire problem area. Then he noticed the woman walking down the center aisle. Her face was like a sheet. "Pastor," she asked, "Where did you get that tablecloth?"

The pastor explained. The woman asked him to check the lower right corner to see if the initials, EBG were crochet into it there. They were. These were the initials of the woman, and she had made this tablecloth 35 years before, in Austria. The woman could hardly believe it as the pastor told how he had just gotten the tablecloth.

The woman explained that before the war she and her husband were well-to-do people in Austria. When the Nazis came, she was forced to leave. Her husband was going to follow her the next week. She was captured, sent to prison and never saw her husband or her home again. The pastor wanted to give her the tablecloth but she made the pastor keep it for the church. The pastor insisted on driving her home, that was the least he could do. She lived on the other side of Staten Island and was only in Brooklyn for the day for a housecleaning job.

What a wonderful service they had on Christmas Eve. The church was almost full. The music and the spirit were great. At the end of the service, the pastor and his wife greeted everyone at the door and many said that they would return. One older man, whom the pastor recognized from the neighborhood, continued to sit in one of the pews and stare, and the pastor wondered why he wasn't leaving. The man asked him where he got the tablecloth on the front wall because it was identical to the one that his wife had made years ago when they lived in Austria before the war and how could there be two tablecloths so much alike? He told the pastor how the Nazis came, how he forced his wife to flee for her safety, and he was supposed to follow her, but he was arrested and put in a concentration camp.

He never saw his wife or his home again for all the 35 years in between. The pastor asked him if he would allow him to take him for a little ride. They drove to Staten Island and to the same house where the pastor had taken the woman three days earlier. He helped the man climb the three flights of stairs to the woman's apartment, knocked on the door, and saw the greatest Christmas reunion he could ever imagine.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Rob Reid. "The Christmas reunion." *Ibid.*, 40.

We may not be able to understand a bunch of oil down our neck nor the importance of dew on a mountain but our hearts understand those long awaited reunions. We rejoice when we hear of long lost family members – separated at birth by adoption, foster care, to not fault of their own – when they come together we almost cry with them as we see their tears upon their first embrace. Such unity is the message of this Psalm.

Now folks, we are smart people we know that we can accomplish so much together then when we are divided. We know that this Psalm speaks truth. So why do we need to read, and sing, and pray over these very simple and obvious words? Because such unity – even though we need it – is quite rare.

I still remember my very first funeral. The woman was a long standing member of the congregation and I was a bit scared being brand new to the ministry so I started asking members of the congregation about who she was and what she meant to them. And I still remember one of my parishioners telling me, “Oh, that family doesn’t get along.” I soon learned in my first funeral servicewhat he meant by that. It meant that I couldn’t meet with the family together - one daughter one night, the other son the next day. She wanted me to say one thing about her mom and he wanted me to say something entirely different. My very first funeral and I had to navigate this family’s mine field. I soon learned that at the funeral of this kind woman – this celebration of her life – that this would be the last time this family would ever sit in the same room together.

Too often we know of these stories. Maybe they are in our family, maybe they happen to neighbors and friends. And it’s not just limited to family. We see this lack of unity hinder the progress of government, of businesses, of institutions.

Judy Hoff who wrote *Psalms from the Heartland* also sees this lack of unity in her interpretation of this Psalm she calls “A People in Disharmony.” She writes:

You do not desire your people  
To quarrel and fight among themselves.  
But neighbors allow the fence between them  
To become a wall.  
They are jealous of others’ success  
And take delight when harm comes.  
Lenders don’t believe  
The ranchers’ count of their cattle  
Or the farmers’ report of their crop yields.  
Farmers mistrust  
Those who do their work on paper  
Instead o in the soil.  
Townspople resent  
The programs  
That benefit agriculture.  
So bitterness invades our life,  
Plagues our relationships,  
And eats at our heart.

Loving God, we become enemies in your sight.  
How can we sing of our love for you  
When we do not sing of our love for one another?<sup>3</sup>

Folks, when unity and harmony can be found – oh, it is glorious and wonderful. It is like . . . what the Psalmist says. And that is why when we move toward one goal together, when all of us are moving toward that one experience, that one mission, that one moment of serving God together we have that sense of unity and harmony. When our focus is united in one direction, this Psalm tells us that abundance will be the result.

Don Yocum is a retired pastor who writes in one of his books about his many experiences of serving in the local church. One of his stories is called “A Cup of Coffee And A Piece Of Toast.” He writes how an afternoon snack led to the building of a Senior Retirement Center in a town of 8000 people.

When the pastor called on his parishioner, Martha Kiggins, she was finishing an afternoon snack of a cup of coffee and a piece of toast. It was a Wednesday afternoon in 1961. He asked her when was the last time she had eaten a good full-sized meal.

She thought a bit, then answered, “My nephew brought me a fine dinner on Sunday noon.” Sunday to Wednesday! She said she wasn’t hungry most of that time, so just had a piece of toast now and then. She looked like she needed nourishment.

The pastor wondered how many other shut-ins were like that. He made a study of the town and wrote letters to the editor of the town newspaper who supported the idea. They needed a place for Senior Citizens to receive good care at reasonable rates.

Then came a pleasant surprise. An eccentric retired stock broker, Mr. Arnold Dienstberger, offered a trust account worth over \$82,000 in memory of his wife – if the town would match the gift. The churches and schools began to work on the project. The community supported it and raised over \$90,000. Today there are facilities for 100 people readily available for people like Miss Kiggins who obviously had needed such care.

Then the Rev. Yocum writes: listen to these ecumenical facts: The stock broker was Lutheran. The pastor and parishioner were United Methodist. The editor of the newspaper was Jewish. The co-chair of the developing organization was the Roman Catholic priest. And all the churches in the town of Delphos, Ohio participated in the project to erect Van Crest Care Center.<sup>4</sup>

True unity and harmony – it leads to one goal and all will rejoice abundantly. What does unity look like for us: we are A Church Family that Makes a Difference. When we practice this together we can do some great things abundantly. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Judy E. Hoff. *Psalms from the Heartland*. (Carson, ND: self published. 1999.) 77.

<sup>4</sup> Don R. Yocum. *Windows For Sermons: Stories And Humor For Inspired Preaching*. (Lima, Ohio: CSS Publishing Company, Inc. 2000.) 27.