

“When Kindred Live Together in Unity”

Psalm 133 (NRSV)

Last Thursday we celebrated **Canada Day**, the observance of Canada’s birthday. Today, our American neighbours celebrate **Independence Day**, the birthday of their nation. We’ve lived side by side, in relative peace and harmony, for many years. We’ve shared what’s been called “the longest undefended border.” The Canada-US trade relationship is the largest ever to exist between two nations. Even in the post 9/11 world, access to each other’s country is remarkable. So, while we’re still bathed in the glow of each of country’s national pride, I thought it might be appropriate for us to think for a few moments of what a grace and gift such **friendship** can be.

In Psalm 133, the Bible speaks of “**How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!**” (133:1). I suspect this psalm was written because it wasn’t always that way. The ancient Israelite knew from experience that **the twelve tribes fought among each other**, jostling for their own particular, individual place in the sun. Later, the kingdom split into north and south. So also, today’s **children have found that sibling rivalry can sometimes overtake family harmony and solidarity**. Brothers and sisters do not always treat each other with dignity or respect. There’s often a competitive spirit that takes control. Some family feuds go back a long way and last for a long time.

So, too, it is with nations, even with us. Almost 200 years ago now, **the newly formed United States of America and the British Empire**, including its territories in North America, Upper and Lower Canada, **were at war**. On June 18th 1812, at the height of the Napoleonic conflict in Europe, the US declared war on Great Britain and struck at the only British possession on the continent: Canada. Most of the battles took place along the international border. Although there were some significant forays into each other’s domain and tragic loss of life, the war ended in stalemate. The Treaty of Ghent, signed on December 24th 1814, solved nothing, since the reasons for the war – British high-handedness on the seas, including searching American ships during the Napoleonic blockade and impressments – had been rendered academic by France’s defeat. Yet Canada owes its present shape to the negotiations that grew out of that peace, while the war itself – or the myths that grew out of that war (aided by Pierre Berton’s books on various events of the two years of war) – gave Canadians their first sense of community.

Over 100 years later, that peace was celebrated in British Columbia by the building and dedication of **the Peace Arch** on September 1921, right on the 49th parallel which marks the international border between Canada and the United States. Many of you will have seen it, situated as it is between the communities of Blaine, Washington and Surrey, BC. Although officially named the Douglas border crossing, in honour of Sir James Douglas, the first governor of the Colony of British Columbia, the crossing between Surrey and Blaine is popularly known as the “Peace Arch Border Crossing,” one of the busiest border crossings between Canada and the United States. It is, in fact, the busiest such crossing west of Windsor/Detroit.

If you take the time to get out of your car and walk to the monument, you will see that there are **two inscriptions**, one on each side of its frieze. The inscription on the United States side of the Peace Arch reads, “**Children of a common mother.**” And the words on the Canadian side, taken from the KJV of Psalm 133, verse one, read, “**Brethren dwelling together in unity.**” Within the arch itself, each side has an opened iron gate, hinged on either side of the border, with a superscription that reads, “**May these gates never be closed.**” The monument is flanked by two parks, Peace Arch Provincial Park on the Canadian side, and Peace Arch State Park on the American side of the border. It is a beautiful place to visit and to ponder the gift and grace of friendship.

1. **A psalm of orientation.**

Commentator **Walter Bruggeman** tells us Psalm 133 is one of a number of **psalms of orientation**, that is, it is **a psalm that is meant to orient us to what the world should be like**. Psalms such as these were “created, transmitted, valued and relied upon by a community of faithful people.” These psalms “express a confident, serene settlement of faith issues. Some things are settled and beyond doubt, so that one doesn’t have to live and believe in the midst of overwhelming anxiety. Such a happy settlement of life’s issues occurs because **God is known to be reliable and trustworthy**. This community has decided to trust in this particular God.” Of course there are variations among these psalms, but generally the mood is one of a “well-ordered world [as] intended by God. They approximate a ‘no-surprise world,’ ... a ‘world of no fear.’ They do not report on an event, a happening, or an intrusion. Rather, they describe how things are [or should be] and indeed always are [or will be]” (*The Message of the Psalms*, 1984, p. 25).

These psalms in various ways are **expressions of creation faith**. They affirm that the world is a well-ordered, reliable and life-giving system, because God has ordered it that way and [God] continues to preside effectively over the process. At the same time there is profound trust in the daily working of that system and profound gratitude to God for making it so. Creation here is not a theory of how the world came to be. That is not how the Bible thinks of creation. It is rather an affirmation that God's faithfulness and goodness are experienced in generosity, continuity and regularity. Life is experienced as protected space (p. 26).

Now, almost certainly, it was **those who were socially well-off** who would've experienced this well-being most profoundly (p. 26-27). **Likely, the poor of the land did not yet experience what this wellness meant.** Nevertheless, the idea throughout such a psalm as Psalm 133 was that everyone in the family should ultimately come to experience this blessed state. Thus, if the sentiment expressed in the psalm wasn't true yet, it should soon be. Such psalms look to **a future of well-being for everyone.**

Certainly, as I've already mentioned, **it isn't always or everywhere evident that people live together with mutual respect and in harmony.** There are still lots of "we-they" lines of battle drawn up and fought all over the world. For years, people in Europe and North America spoke fervently of the differences between Christians and Jews or, say in our own case, after the Reformation, between Protestants and Roman Catholics. Since 9/11, many people today speak of the great gulf that seems to exist between Christians and Muslims. Now we realize that the real gap is between those who believe and those who don't believe. Protestants and Catholics, Christians and Jews, and even Muslims have a lot more in common than they think. Yet, sadly, there are still many places in the world where religious, racial and gender differences are inappropriately affirmed.

The bottom line of this psalm is this: the psalmist simply wants people to **"get along."** This isn't so unusual is it? All most people want is **"a happy, harmonious family"** or that people "get along." We don't always have to agree with each other. We may have different backgrounds, cultures or beliefs but, it is the hope and prayer of the psalmist **that "kindred" -- people from the same family, at least -- should "get along with each other."**

Here is how **Eugene Peterson** translates the first verse of this psalm:

How wonderful, how beautiful,
when brothers and sisters get along!”
(The Message, 1993-2002, p. 1068).

2. A psalm of unity.

The unity of the people of God has always been both God’s will and the object of their desire. If this psalm is post-exilic as some believe it may be, it may express the joy and solidarity of pilgrims gathered for worship in Jerusalem, with **the breach of the divided monarchy healed.** It’s “an eloquent affirmation of family or tribal solidarity” (Bruggemann, p. 47).

The covenant people of God are already brothers and sisters; but it is both good and pleasant if, in addition to their fraternal relationship, **they live together in unity** (Ps.133:1). The pleasantness of that unity is vividly illustrated in terms familiar to ancient Israelites. Such unity is **“like the precious [consecrating] oil running down upon the beard”** of Israel’s first priest, Aaron (flowing down from his head where it had been poured), **and “running down over the collar of his robes”** (Ps. 133:2). It’s meant to be a sign of gracious abundance, of extravagance and well-being. Think only of the contents of the jar of costly ointment poured over Jesus’ head (Mk. 14:3-9). And such unity is also described to be **“like the dew of [Mount] Hermon, which falls on the mountains [or hills, actually] of Zion,”** one of the highest points of Jerusalem (Ps. 133:3). In a dried and parched land, this was known as heavy, abundant, life-giving dew.

We’re not told why the unity of the people of God is like Aaron’s consecrating oil and Mount Hermon’s heavy dew. Some writers have emphasized that since both are said to descend, their significance is **the all-embracing influence of true brotherly and sisterly concord,** sanctifying the whole body, the entire community. At the same time, since aromatic oil would have been used, and that dew was essential to the fertility of arid Palestine, these similes are surely meant also to teach us that **unity is “as fragrant as oil and as refreshing as dew”** (John Stott, Favourite Psalms, 1988, 2003, p. 102).

Certainly, it ought to be clear that, by the conclusion of the psalm’s three short verses, the psalmist believes **it is “there** [in that unity, wherever it is

found, that] **the LORD, [has] ordained his blessing, life for evermore**” (Ps. 133:3). It’s worth noting that it is only in the last statement that the personal name of God appears in this psalm. “God [seems to be doing] nothing”; nevertheless, “God is acknowledged as the hidden source of such well-being” (Bruggemann, p. 48).

Psalm 133 reflects Israel’s capacity to appreciate the common joys of life and to attribute them to the well-ordered generosity of [God]. One can only hypothesize about the time such a poem was formed or used. It may be reflective of “family reunion,” of the gathering of the tribe, of any social occasion of “brothers’ -- clan leaders -- being together without conflict. The voice may be that of a relieved elder, anxious that the younger generation do not destroy itself in conflict. [One can easily imagine the yearning of the father in the parable of the prodigal son. The father is not only concerned that his elder son relate to him, but that the sons relate to each other (Lk. 15:28-33). The psalm also lends itself to an ecumenical vision for the church, which comes to fuller expression in Jesus’ high priestly prayer (Jn. 17:11). John Calvin makes the ecumenical point, but cannot resist one more assault on the Papists.] The poem anticipates the solidarity and harmony of all humanity as it lives without defensiveness in a creation benevolent enough to care for all (Bruggemann, p. 48).

3. A poetic psalm.

J. Barrie Shepherd, an American pastor-poet, translates the fervent prayer of Psalm 133 for unity among kindred people into this **contemporary poem**:

From time to timer I run across an image
 in this book that seems completely alien,
 an expression that simply fails to come across.
 One example is right here in this psalm,
 where the writer speaks with satisfaction and delight
 of precious oil poured over someone’s head,
 running down the hair and beard,
 dripping down onto the collar of his robes.
 Such an experience holds little attraction for me, Lord –
 for most of us in this squeaky-clean culture we call “home.”

But the message that this image celebrates, the blessedness of brothers and sisters when they dwell in unity together, this is a universal concept, a universal dream.

Yet does this psalm itself not point up a major problem? For as long as peoples are so radically different, as long as some count oil on their clothes a sign of blessing, while others see it only as a mess, what hope is there for any kind of unity among such diverse creatures?

This world of yours, of ours, Lord God, is filled with different customs, divergent value systems, ways of life. If unity was your original idea, Father, then things surely went wrong somewhere along the way. Yet unity need not mean uniformity. People with all kinds of different backgrounds, customs, preferences, can come together, work together, when they share a common purpose. I see this not only in the church but in politics, in business, in the United Nations. It seems that folk when facing a common threat, or attracted by a common goal, can submerge differences, ignore those things on which they disagree, and find at least a temporary unity.

Make this blessed unity a goal within my days, Lord God. Help make to discover the great things that bind us all together, all your children; then let me appreciate and learn from all the lesser things, the local things, those habits and traditions that lend colour to the human race. Let me taste the joy of all our rich diversity, yet also recognize and work towards that unity that sparkles up ahead like the dew upon Mount Hermon.

(Praying the Psalms, 1987, p. 115-116)

Amen

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