

Text: Psalm 133
Title: Oily Beards and Fertile Soil
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Roger Allen Nelson

There is an unforgettable scene in a forgettable little Christmas movie.

Nothing Like the Holidays is the story of a Puerto Rican family coming home to Humboldt Park. There's food, good humor, dysfunction, and drama. Just like when my family gets together. It's a hokey Christmas movie. But, toward the end of the movie this family leaves their house carrying guitars and rhythm-makers and they begin to sing as they walk down the street. You expect them to be Christmas caroling, polite performances on the doorsteps of neighbors, but at each house people come out and join in. They join in the singing. They join in the parade. Eventually every household comes out into the street to sing-along as they make their way to a great banquet at the community center ~ where joy and laughter and dancing ensues.

Psalm 133 is a parade song.

Psalm 133 is sung as a community laughs and dances and marches together.

Psalm 133 is a "song of ascents."

There are 15 psalms labeled "song of ascents." They were most likely sung as Hebrews made their way up to Jerusalem to celebrate annual festivals like Passover or the Feast of Tabernacles. As brothers and sisters of different tribes joined together they (or the priests) would sing as they traveled up toward the temple ~ the dwelling place of God.

That's a wonderful image.

When we gather at Hope we come from Chicago neighborhoods to the north, Lansing and the edges of Indiana to the east, Bourbonnais to the south, and out past Frankfort and New Lennox to the west. That's a big plot of land. There's a lot of fossil fuel being burned to get to and from Hope....

But, what if we came by foot, donkey, and wagon? And as we traveled together we would pick up friend and family along the way. As we moved toward Hope we would start to sing, with Clay banging on his drum, Marjie strumming her guitar, kids running together "to jump up and shout it," Lynn marching with her flute, Jeremy on mandolin and Ted on banjo, a little army of violins and cellos, Dora pushing the pipe organ....

All of us singing a song of ascents.

This song of ascents is about unity.

And the opening line is probably best translated as:

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

The word “good” is the Hebrew word *tov*. As in, “And God saw all that he had made, and it was good.” It hearkens back to the original created order. Unity is emblematic of the *shalom* that God intends.

And, that unity is like the

precious oil...running down on Aaron’s beard, down upon the collar of his robe.

The image points to the anointing of Aaron and his descendants to serve as priests. But, the image pictures the oil slopping off his head, saturating his beard, and spilling over onto his clothing. What the image suggests is that he is soaked, covered in, dripping with oil. This is not a little slap of aftershave; this is lavish-overwhelming-abundance.

And similarly, the reference to “the dew of Hermon” falling on Mount Zion is colorful....

There’s a cluster of mountains straddling the border of Syria, Lebanon, and Israel. And from there, the southern slopes of Mount Hermon reach into the occupied Golan Heights. At about 7500 feet it’s the highest point in Israel ~ a snow-capped mountain, with a ski resort. The waters off that mountain feed the headwaters of the Jordan River. In the middle of a harsh landscape the “dew” from Mount Hermon serves to make Galilee green.

Mount Zion is biblical shorthand for Jerusalem and it’s in the middle of bone dry Palestine. Mount Zion, where the temple is situated, is about 125 miles from Mount Herman.

So, the image suggests that either the waters of Hermon will water Zion; or from Hermon to Zion the land will be saturated with water

and the soil will be fertile,
and the crops will be fruitful,
and life will be abundant,
and it will be *tov*. It will be good.

And, all of that abundance is an image of brothers and sisters living in unity.

Unity is not just a pleasant idea, but consecrated of God and essential for the earth.

Unity is not just an ethereal ideal, but earthy reality and part of God’s original intention.

Unity is not just a lyrical dream, but unity is the delight of God’s heart.

For there the Lord bestows his blessing, even life forevermore.

David Brooks, moderate, conservative columnist for the New York Times, wrote this recently:

We’re living in an age of anxiety. The country is being transformed by complex forces like changing demographics and technological disruption. Many people live within a bewildering freedom, without institutions to trust, unattached to compelling religions and sources of meaning, uncertain about their own lives. Anxiety is not so much a fear of a

specific thing but a fear of everything, an unnamable dread about the future. People will do anything to escape it.

I think he's right. For many middle-Americans things feel unmoored, chaotic, and somehow foreboding. I suppose life always feels uncertain, and any student of American history will tell you that this is nothing compared to World Wars or the Depression, but there is still something about contemporary life and culture that is unsettled. And into this age of anxiety the issues and questions of race have again bubbled to the surface.

Race has always been complicated in the United States.

We live on a land taken from indigenous peoples and built on the back of slaves. We codified access to ballot, land, education, and opportunity on the basis of race. We engage in mass incarceration of African American men. We are all in some way linked by lineage to immigrants. We gerrymander voting districts and continue to subtly keep schools and neighborhoods segregated. Race has always been complicated in America. Charlottesville is but one more chapter in a long, ugly book.

And, I guess as Americans we can have differing opinions about things like immigration reform, school funding, how to commemorate history, affirmative action, policing practices, taxes, and access to affordable health care. I guess Americans can have differing opinions about the politics and policies of race, but as followers of Jesus Christ there can be no equivocation.

Every nation, tribe, and color is created, loved and redeemed by God.

Every person bears the image of God.

Diversity is part of the created order.

There is no race or ethnicity that is superior to any other.

Hatred has no place in God's will.

We rightly denounce and stand against any expression of discrimination, bigotry, and racism. We rightly name it sin. Evil. An abhorrent affront to God.

That's the easy part.

I talked with Pastor Joe Huizenga, who serves a black church, earlier this week. In response to that conversation this is part of what he wrote:

It struck me again this morning that the lasting violence of racism is that folks of color are cut off every single day from life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness and most of us avoid, ignore, or just keep watching the ballgame or do whatever we do.

*I don't know anybody that wears white robes or carries confederate flags.
But just below the surface, well, you know....*

Long after this hate parade packs up and goes away-the lasting violence of racism is that folks of color will have less opportunity, less access to education, less access to healthcare, and live in poverty because of middle class apathy and the racism that is just under the surface of our hearts. Liberal, moderate, conservative-all of us.

Dear friends, we all have complicated histories with race.

There are none of us with oily beards and fertile soil. We are all tainted and troubled in some way. We all have prejudiced and bigoted instincts. And, if racism is defined as “prejudice plus power,” then as white Americans we are all racist to some degree. We may not be filled with hateful and twisted ideas but we make decisions every day about schools, housing values, neighborhoods, safety, and employment through some race filter. We all fall short of the unity of which the psalmist sings.

May God have mercy.

Now, look. You might think I’m unfairly conflating the journey of Jews toward Jerusalem with ideas about race in America....

But, the unity of God’s people (Who does that leave out?) is the delight of God’s heart in Psalm 133. And, one of the last things that Jesus prayed about his followers was that they “may be brought to complete unity to let the world know you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” Paul writes in multiple places that the purpose of God is to pull all things together in Christ. And, the Revelation of John envisions “a great multitude that no one can count, from every nation, tribe, people and language standing before the throne and in front of the lamb...wearing white robes...holding palm branches.... and crying out in a loud voice, ‘Salvation belongs to God....’”

Unity is the delight of God’s heart.

Unity is the purpose of God in Christ.

Unity is the culmination of God’s activity in human history.

How then can we respond?

Repent.

The Belhar Confession, of which you just used a partial paraphrase, is a good place to begin the work of repentance.

Listen.

All voices are flawed and only part of the dialogue; but lately I’ve been helped by the documentaries, *13th* and *I’m Not Your Negro*. And the book, *The End of White Christian America* is worth your attention.

Engage and resist.

Engage in those relationships, activities, and partnerships that pursue unity and reconciliation. Resist anything that breaks down, tears apart, and emboldens one over the other. I don’t know how things change without some change in practice. And I think it is rightly the call of the church to lead and aid in that pursuit.

Because, dear friends, for God unity is like oil dripping off a beard or water drenching a desert.

For there the Lord bestows his blessing, even life forevermore.

Amen.