

Psalm 133
Growing in Faith Together

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We return this morning to the songs of ascent found in Psalms 120-134. Since the fall, we have made our way through these Psalms. These songs accompanied God's people when they left their homes and workplaces to go to Jerusalem to celebrate the annual feasts. These were the songs that carried God's people in everyday faith: as father or mother, child or young person, single or widowed or married. These were the songs that reminded God's people what it means to be God's people in times of celebration and times of sadness, through challenges and successes, when life is going well and when you feel like giving up on life. We've worked our way through the songs that remind us who God is: our help, the one who protects us from evil, merciful, on high, for us and with us and on our side. We learned about the Christian disciple's perspective of peace, joy, family, work and humility.

This morning we'll look at Psalm 133, the Psalm that tells us that Christian discipleship is not only about our relationship with God but also about our relationship with others; it's about growing in faith together, it's about living together in unity. Psalm 133 is that Psalm that every parent wishes their children would obey. Psalm 133 is that Psalm which every spouse, or spouse-to-be, promised in their vows and hope to fulfill. Psalm 133 is that Psalm that every pastor prays for their congregation. Psalm 133 is that Psalm that Jesus deeply longs for in His church.

The Psalm begins with a word that is hopeful: *how good and pleasant!* This captures my attention. What's good and pleasant? I want to be part of that something that's good and pleasant. After many songs of ascent that were full of suffering and trouble and challenge and heartache, I'm finally singing a song about goodness and pleasure.

And then the Psalmist goes on to tell me what's so good and pleasant: *how good and pleasant it is when brothers and sisters live together in unity!* Living together in unity is what's so good and pleasant.

Starting with *how good and pleasant it is to live together in unity* is very different from starting "living together in unity is (fill in the blank)". How would you describe living together in unity? Living together in unity is hard, is challenging, is not always easy, is frustrating, is chaotic, is stressful, is not always desirable, infringes on my introvert nature, means sometimes I need to make sacrifices, means I'm not always right, means I need to ask for forgiveness and extend forgiveness. The Psalmist describes it as good and pleasant. The Psalmist doesn't begin "how frustrating and difficult it is to live together in unity". Or "how challenging and painful it is to live together in unity". The song starts how good and pleasant.

Who is the Psalmist referring to? The Psalmist speaks of 'brothers' or in some translations 'brothers and sisters'. The Psalmist is not simply speaking of family units or households living together in unity, although I am sure that is part of what the Psalmist is thinking about. The Psalmist speaks of Christian fellowship, of Christian believers – male and female, young and old. The Psalmist speaks of the church, the local community of disciples who gather and worship the Triune God. You see, when a person repents of their sin and professes faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, that person immediately and automatically becomes part of the family of God. When someone becomes a Christian, that person at the very same time also becomes part of the body of Christ.

Now we know that although someone is simultaneously a Christian and a member of the body of Christ, that person may not in fact participate in worship at a local church or serve in a church or allow their name to be included in membership. Nevertheless, the Psalmist speaks of any person who is a Christian, any person who has repented and accepted Jesus as Lord and Saviour, someone who loves Jesus and is trying to obey His commands. How good and pleasant it is when Christian believers live together in unity!

So this song was very appropriate and needed as God's people journeyed to Jerusalem. I can imagine the crowds of people making their way to Jerusalem for the annual feasts. You can well imagine the kinds of conversations and decisions that would arise. Where to stop for the night and set up camp? Where to rest for the camels and weary travelers? When to get up and resume the walk? What food and possession to take along? Think of all the decisions you need to make on a family trip, and multiply that by hundreds of families. In all the chaos, business, and decision-making, God's people sing and remind themselves "how good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity".

As a pastor, I often find myself having conversations with strangers that can take any number of turns. A normal question that I'm asked of a stranger is "what do you do?" meaning "what is your job"? I am always curious how people will react – and it is often a reaction – to my response that I'm a pastor. And now that I am engaged and a pastor, people's responses are almost comical. "Oh, I didn't know you're allowed to get married!" At times the reaction I get when I tell people I'm a pastor is: "Well, I love God but I don't like the church".

Yet this Psalm, and the entire Bible, does not comprehend being a Christian disciple and not being part of the church. In creation itself, we see that creation was completed only after Adam and Eve were created. Creation was complete when community existed. In the life of Jesus, we see him living and working with twelve disciples. And make no mistake, those twelve disciples all came from varied backgrounds and perspectives and family life and jobs. Those first twelve disciples were as different from each other as you could find. Yet Jesus called them and taught them, not as individuals but as a group. The church came into existence in Acts when 120 people gathered together. The church did not exist until there was a group of people. The importance of disciples belonging to the church is heard in the writings of the Bible. In the book of Hebrews a pastor wrote to some Christians who were starting to leave the church to follow personal and private matters. The pastor urged them to keep on gathering with the community of believers, to not stop meeting with others. The Christian faith is never an exclusive private, individual, or personal faith. We are commanded to love the Lord our God with all our mind and heart and strength and to love others as well as you love yourself. To be Christian is to be in relationship with the Triune God and to be in relationship with His people.

Yet one major barrier to Christian discipleship seems to be the church. It seems to be that disunity in the church pushes people away. People get hurt, deeply hurt within the church, and the hurt is so great that church is rejected. I know from my own personal life that the church is sometimes a place that can be profoundly hurtful. And yet the Psalmist affirms the goodness of togetherness. And yet the Psalmist affirms the pleasure of Christian unity.

So if being Christian means to be in relationship with Jesus Christ and to be in relationship with the body of Christ – His Church – then what prevents us from experiencing unity within the church? In other words, why are we so quick to love God but hate the church?

Well, I think it begins with the question we ask ourselves. When we ask “am I going to be part of a community of believers – a church” – we approach it as a choice. Yes or no. We may conclude, yes, it is important to be part of a church and then we set out to evaluate which church to be part of. So the next question we ask is “am I going to be part of this community of believers”? Again, we encounter a choice: yes or no. We may come with our list of criteria: does it have a robust nursery and Sunday School ministry for my kids, is there a youth group for my student, is there a choir, is there a pastor who preaches a certain way, is there communion every week, are there small groups, is the church active in community outreach, does the church support missionaries, and on and on the list goes. These are important questions to consider.

But perhaps instead of asking “am I going to be part of this community of believers”, the question should be “How am I going to be part of this community of believers”? When Michael and I started dating, I asked myself “is this relationship going to work?” As we now prepare for marriage, I ask “how will I choose to live with Michael?”. No longer am I wondering if it can work out, now I’m committing to a life together and I need to consider how that life together will look. *How good and pleasant it is when brothers and sisters live together in unity!*

We all approach that question differently – how am I going to live in this community of faith. We engage in our community of faith with different perspectives. Perhaps a few illustrations are helpful. When I was a young teenager, like most teenagers, I thought I knew what was best for everyone and made it clear to my family what I believed to be right and I asserted myself when something was happening that I didn't think was right or fair. I didn't stop and take the time to listen to my family or listen to the wisdom and maturity of my parents. Then as I grew older and went to University, I started reading and hearing a multitude of ideas. I was in a program of study that developed my critical thinking skills. And at the same time, I also developed my ability to complain and criticize. I sat in class and debated with my peers. I criticized the choices of politicians and leaders. I approached ideas and topics from a perspective of 'what's wrong here' rather than 'what's good and right here'. Then I moved to Vancouver and studied theology. I got so immersed in juggling my full-time studies, two part-time jobs, competitive ultimate frisbee 3-4 times a week, and friendships that I would only see my four housemates if I was sick and forced to stay at home. Otherwise, I was away from 6am to 10pm. I ignored my 'family', pretending they didn't exist unless I needed them. I returned to my family only to visit but was not really part of the home or participated in life. These are some of the different ways we approach being part of the church family too: believing we know what's right and everyone else is wrong, complaining and criticizing, ignoring the church unless it's convenient to be part of it or meets my individual or family's needs.

How good and pleasant it is when brothers and sisters live together in unity! Living together in unity is good and pleasant, the Psalmist tells us. But what does it actually mean to live together in unity? How does living together in unity look? Too often we know what it is not. That's why

it is so common to hear “I love God but hate the church” because our own experience has been one of pain and disunity.

Well, let’s consider the following verse in the Psalm. *It is like precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard, running down on Aaron’s beard, down upon the collar of his robes.*

When God’s people live together in unity, the Psalmist likens it to precious oil poured on the head, running down the beard, and down the collar of clothes. What a strange analogy to use! It may seem outdated and irrelevant and useless in our day and age. But if we stop and consider what the Psalmist is describing, it is very relevant for us. We live in a time where loneliness plagues our communities and our nation. We can be more connected to people than ever through instant communication and through the instant acquisition of information and knowledge, yet loneliness persists. In fact, the UK has appointed a ‘minister of loneliness’ whose portfolio includes addressing the social and health concerns caused by social isolation. Loneliness is real yet the song tells us it need not be so. Living together in unity is good and pleasant, it is like oil running down the head and beard and clothes.

What is the Psalmist describing when he speaks of oil running down the head, beard and clothes? This is an Old Testament reference. In Exodus 29, we read about the consecration, or ordination, of Aaron and the other priests. We read that after the sacrifices were prepared, the priests were to be washed and dressed in the priestly attire. Then in verse 7 we read “*Take the anointing oil and anoint him by pouring it on his head. The priesthood is theirs by a lasting ordinance. In this way you shall ordain Aaron and his sons.*”

What is the significance of oil? It is used to anoint someone. Oil is used to identify someone as a priest. The apostle Peter reminds us that we are all priests: *but you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.* We are all priests. We all have that oil running down our heads, our Yukon beards, our clothes. When we look at another and see that oil – not tangible oil of course – when we truly look at each other in our church family and regard them as priests, as ministers, as God’s people, then it changes how we choose to live together. When I see that my sister and my brother are also my priest, it has a profound impact on my relationship with my sister and brother. When I see that you are my brother and my sister because of what Jesus Christ has done for you, for me, for the world, then it changes how I relate to you. I see that you are anointed by God to minister to His people. Priests are called to serve God and one another.

We need each other because we are each priests to one another. What is a priest? Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his book *Life Together* describes it this way: *The Christian needs another Christian who speaks God’s Word to him. He needs him again and again when he becomes uncertain and discouraged, for by himself he cannot help himself without belying the truth. He needs his brother man as a bearer and proclaimer of the divine word of salvation. He needs his brother solely because of Jesus Christ. The Christ in his own heart is weaker than the Christ in the word of his brother; his own heart is uncertain, his brother’s is sure.*” To be a priest is to speak God’s word to each other. It is to reveal the mysteries of the Triune God to each other. To be a priest is to serve one another. But here’s the thing: we cannot be a priest without being in relationship with another. To be a priest requires relationship.

There are ways that we as churches tend to avoid relationships and avoid our priestly role. We avoid community by sending people to offices and professionals, rather than entering into a relationship, rather than getting to know someone – the parts you like and the parts you don't like. Churches are at risk of causing Christians to avoid community by becoming like an institution rather than God's house. It can happen through the goal-setting of churches.

Sometimes when churches set out to attract the most number of people, the only way to meet that goal is to develop strategies and plans and organizations. The risk is that there isn't space for relationships to forms; there isn't space for a relationship with Jesus Christ or a relationship with God's people. Church is less like a family, less like brothers and sisters and more like clusters of people.

But there are also ways we as churches foster relationships and the priesthood. I notice the priesthood happening when we sing praises – my singing is as much for me as it is for you. My singing, off-key as it is, is my speaking God's Word to you. Your singing is speaking God's word to me. I notice the priesthood happening as I've been visiting the small groups. I listen to your conversations, your prayers, your study of God's Word and observe how you are priests one to another. A couple of years ago, we all had opportunity to exercise our priestly roles when we helped to sponsor two refugee families. We were invited into their lives, to minister, to care, to listen, to be in relationship with another.

How good and pleasant it is when brothers and sisters live together in unity! It is like precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard, running down on Aaron's beard, down upon the collar of his robes. It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion.

Living together in unity is good and pleasant when we see and understand and live as though we are all God's priests, one to another. The Psalmist also uses the image of dew to describe the goodness and pleasure of living together in unity. Mount Hermon is situated just north of Israel and is the highest mountain in that range. Living here in the Yukon, we know what happens in mountain ranges. Each morning there is a wet and heavy dew. The Psalmist extends the image describing the wet and heavy dew of Mount Hermon falling across the whole region of Mt Zion. The dew waters, refreshes, and renews the barren and dry landscape.

When dew falls on the mountainside, there is renewal, there is restoration, there is new-ness, there is refreshment, there is cleansing. The mountain hasn't moved or gone anywhere. The plants still grow in the same place, the animals still trek along their same paths. But each morning with the dew there is expectation.

And so it is with the community of believers. Living together in unity means having certain expectations. It is expecting that God is working in you, just as God is working in me. It is expecting that God is forming and shaping you, just as God is forming and shaping me. It is expecting that God is renewing and restoring you. So that means that I must refuse to have labels or stereotypes or assumptions of people. I must refuse to decide how someone will behave or

how someone may grow. As I reflect on my life over the past 30-some years, I know that my behavior and perspective and actions and thoughts are not the same today as 5 or 10 years ago. I expect that in 5 or 10 years from now, I will also be different because of God's renewal and refreshment in me.

We grow and flourish when we look at one another with such expectations, wonder, curiosity, and hope. It invites me to ask "how is God working in your life today?" making space for God to renew, to restore, to refresh. And when I ask that question, it invites me deeper into communion, deeper into friendship for it means that I discover all sorts of things about you. I learn about your pain and your joy, I learn about your brokenness and your beauty, I learn about your doubts and your faith. And through it all, I listen with expectation that God is at work renewing, restoring, refreshing.

How good and pleasant it is when brothers and sisters live together in unity! It is like precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard, running down on Aaron's beard, down upon the collar of his robes. It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion. For there the Lord bestows his blessing, even life forevermore.

The Psalmist concludes with a beautiful proclamation of God's blessing upon the gathered community of believers' life together. And in this statement, we capture a glimpse of what life in the New Heavens and New Earth will be like. *For there the Lord bestows his blessing, even life forevermore.* We capture a glimpse of the beauty of heaven.

Our view of life eternal bears significant impact for our life here on earth. When we come to understand that this life on earth is preparation for life eternal, it will likely change how we go about relating and interacting with others. When we realize that our brother at the Church of the Northern Apostles, our sister at Yukon Bible Fellowship, our brother at Sacred Heart Cathedral, our sister at Mountainview Church will all gather in Heaven with us, then it changes how we relate to them now.

So how do we do this? How do we grow together in unity? How do we be priests to each other and come with certain expectations? Last week, I attended the Whitehorse Hospital Spiritual Care meeting. In the absence of a hospital chaplain, there is a group of religious ministers and leaders – mostly Christian – who offer care to patients and staff at the hospital. Each Wednesday, one person is in the chapel to pray or speak with those who come. Every month, we change who is leading that. We were recently discussing how to help patients and staff become more aware of our presence. We observed that there's been a cultural shift. Years and decades ago, when there would be a major life event, whether joyous or tragic, a pastor would be called. Whether that was birth or death, school graduation or a trip to the hospital, marriage or a family relationship breakdown, one of the first people someone would call would be the pastor or church elder. But now, when there is a life event, when there is a celebration or sickness, we are more apt to post it on facebook or twitter, text our friends and family. The pastor or church elder or church family may not even know.

How is it that we as a church family can be united and share fellowship with one another if we do not know what is happening in the family to minister, support, care, rejoice and celebrate with each other? In committing to be part of a church family, it is committing to be vulnerable, to be honest. It is opening ourself to the other.

Allow me to read the RBC 7-year vision: By the year 2025, we will see RBC continue as a house of God and grow into a home in Christ. We will create a welcoming space for people to belong, grow our family, and renew lives, one disciple at a time, so that each sphere of influence will have mature Christian leaders.

A place that is welcoming means a space to belong. A place to belong is a place where vulnerability is safe, where questions are asked, where stories are listened to, where hope is restored. In that kind of place you relax, you are comfortable and you want to stay and talk and listen to what matters most. By 2025, RBC will feel like that: welcoming, hospitable, and a place to call home.

Our rich history of thoughtful and engaging worship services will continue to invite more families to hear and respond to the good news of the gospel. Worship services that centre us in God's Word through song, prayer, and Biblically-based preaching will help to grow our church family. As a community of believers who participate in passing on the faith to the next generation, we will see our family grow as young people choose to love and follow Jesus Christ.

We will renew lives through a clear and robust discipleship strategy. Many years and life experiences have gifted RBC with godly men and women whose quiet strength and character

model Christ. By harnessing their wisdom and love for one another, we will raise up more disciples and leaders who model Christ in their spheres of influence.

So as we strive for a home in Christ, we will see a renewal of the heart in relation with Christ and others.

Friends, this is your vision as much as it is mine. This is your hope as much as it is mine. This is your prayer as much as it is mine. This is not something that will suddenly start to happen when we get another pastor. This is something that starts to happen now when we choose to be part of each other's stories and lives. It happens when we gathered to celebrate the marriage of Nathan & Sharon. It will happen this Saturday as we gather to celebrate the birth of Peter Harms. It happens each week at the Ladies Bible study, the North end Bible study, the bi-weekly Saturday evening study, the Chinese Bible study, Friday night youth group. It happens when you pray together and read God's Word together. It happens when you grieve and rejoice together. It happens when you invite someone over for dinner, to go ice fishing, or to play games. It happens when you speak God's word to another, when you expect that God is at work in someone's life renewing, refreshing, restoring.

This Psalm is a song I keep singing over and over again. It is a song that gives me great joy and great hope. It is a song that teaches me how to describe and define the church, especially as a pastor. I have heard many pastors who describe church life as hard, difficult, challenging, hurtful. I know many pastors who have been burnt-out, left the pastoral vocation because of disappointment, bitterness, unmet expectations, betrayal, hurt. Few pastors describe it as 'good

and pleasant'. But that is what the Psalmist does. And that's how I choose to describe God's people. For when I see fellow priests, when I enter into relationships, when I expect that Jesus Christ is at work in you renewing and refreshing and restoring you, the only way to describe the church is good and pleasant! Amen!