



Third Sunday of Advent - December 15, 2013
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Legacy: A legacy of Love Psalm 133

Eighteen years ago this coming Christmas Day was a significant moment in the Toone household. Do you remember? Cooper was born! Were any of you in the gym for Christmas Eve services the night I had a cell phone on my pulpit in case Cyndi called? 18 years. Wow. Well, last week our baby boy received news that he had been accepted into the fall class at Whitworth University. Rachel finished at Whitworth Friday and Cooper steps in next September... unbelievable!

Recently, Coop was meeting with his "D Group" and his leader, Todd Davis, asked them what one thing they were most concerned about regarding college. Cooper shared his answer with us. He said, "Finding a good church right away so I get settled in from the start." I couldn't be more pleased. Obviously, many PKs (preacher's kids) can hardly wait to get out of church and out of the limelight. The fact that finding a church home is important to Cooper blesses us. And you know who gets credit for that? You do! Because you have been a Sweetheart Church to our kids, too! You have loved them, prayed for them, disciplined them, and raised them. And they have experienced—for their entire lives—what it means to be part of a church family that is united in their love for Christ and in their love for each other.

I wish that were not so unusual but regretfully, it is. Too often, the church of Jesus can be a battleground. But, boy when it works like it should—when the Spirit binds hearts and lives together in genuine love—it is a precious thing... and a wonderful witness to the world. So thank you for your witness to our kids. Now, let's take a look at a psalm that speaks about this very thing. *[Read Psalm 133]*

We come this morning to the penultimate Psalm of Ascent. If you are visiting, there are fifteen psalms that have the word "Ascent" in their title. They were sung by pilgrims on their journey to Jerusalem. But another translation for the word "ascent" is "degree"... Psalms of Degrees. Some scholars see movement by degree—from psalm to psalm—each one taking you a bit closer to a place of joyous worship in the presence of the Lord.

That certainly rings true here. In Psalm 133 we sense real progress from the start of the journey back in Psalm 120. In 120 we heard the longing of the psalmist to leave a horrible place called Meshach—a place of conflict and hatred where violent

people lied about him—a longing to leave Meshach and return to Jerusalem... to be among his people where he would find love and peace... where he could worship God freely. And over the span of the Psalms of Ascent, we followed him on that upward journey home, degree by degree, facing the perils and fears of the pilgrimage... finding strength and hope in the Lord along the way.

One of the things that has made our journey through these psalms so meaningful is how real they are. They don't sugarcoat the challenges we face in life! They are honest about those times when we feel hopeless; when we feel like the bad guys are winning and the good guys are getting crushed. That kind of message resonates with every single one of us, doesn't it? And especially during the holiday season when, for so many, loneliness and loss are particularly painful. We need to have permission to struggle together; to acknowledge that our "upward" journey can be difficult and costly.

But now, in Psalm 133, he has arrived. He has endured! And he discovers that it is worth it, this upward journey in life. Not just because one day we will be with the Lord. No, in this life, as we seek to live faithfully to the Lord we get glimpses of what life was really intended to be... what life was created by God to be. And one of the places we can see such life is in the church. When we live together well in community, it can be a wonderful taste of the eternity that awaits every believer.

The psalmist starts by declaring, "Behold (look; take notice!) how good and pleasant it is... actually, the word is beautiful... how good and beautiful it is when brothers dwell together in unity." We certainly have plenty of biblical examples of disunity among brothers, don't we? Cain killed his brother Abel. Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery. David's brothers were sick with jealousy toward him. Even Jesus' own brothers tried to take him away to an asylum because they thought he was crazy. It is good when brothers dwell together in unity, and it is really awful when they don't. For those of you living in sibling hatred, you know that only too well.

But this psalm is also talking about brothers and sisters in faith... the church. And again, regrettably, we have plenty of embarrassing examples of disunity within church bodies. I heard recently about a church sanctuary that was built with brick on one side and stone on the other—two entirely different treatments—because the members could not agree, so they split the church right down the middle!

But at least they stayed together. There have been so many church splits over so many stupid things. One church split because they couldn't agree on the spelling of "Hallelujah." Another church split because a deacon put a peg in the wall for the pastor to hang his hat on without getting permission from his "rival" deacon. There are now two Baptist churches in that town: the Peg-Baptist church and the Anti-Peg Baptist Church. Yet another church split went all the way to the Supreme Court to decide who could keep the property. The reason for the fight? An elder

was offended at a church dinner because he was served a smaller portion of food than the teenager next to him.

How many of you have lived through a terrible church fight? It's painful, isn't it? And if you have, you will really appreciate the truth of this psalm! "How good and beautiful it is when brothers and sisters dwell together in unity." Then the psalmist offers an illustration to make his point... an odd illustration. Here it is: the psalmist says that true unity in the church is like this [*pour oil out on Ben*] precious anointing oil... poured on the high priest's head dripping down through his beard right down onto his robe.

Okay, pretty weird, right? If you were going to illustrate the blessing of church unity, would you pour oil on a man's head to make your point? What does it mean? How is this a picture of how "good and beautiful" church unity can be? This is odd to us. It seems yucky and messy, but in that time it was a holy and venerated ritual. So let's set aside our squeamishness and see how this illustrates "unity."

First, Aaron was a high priest, the chief representative who stood between God and his people. He was anointed for that role, and they used a very special oil to do it. The recipe is in Exodus 30: twelve and a half pounds of liquid myrrh; six and a quarter pounds of cinnamon; six and a quarter pounds of cane (a fragrant herb), twelve and half pounds of cassia (a fragrant spice), and a gallon of olive oil.

That was God's recipe for the holy anointing oil that was poured on the high priest as well as on the furniture and utensils in the sanctuary of the Lord. It was a proprietary recipe. Coca-Cola locks its recipe in a safe. The Lord published his, but then he warned that no one was to make or use this except for the purposes he had described. Anyone who used this holy oil on an ordinary person or who mixed up a batch without permission was kicked out of the tribe. That's how serious this was.

The aroma of this oil was so beautiful—so distinct—that once you smelled it, you never forgot it. If I had anointed Ben with this oil, the sanctuary would be awash in the fragrance. This unique combination of different ingredients came together to produce a fragrant reminder and every time they smelled it, they knew they were in the presence of someone or something that had been set aside as holy.

Okay, tuck that away. Here's another thought: Oil in the Bible always represents the Holy Spirit. The pouring out of holy anointing oil on the High Priest's head was a reminder that God had poured out his Holy Spirit upon him to equip him to minister to his people. And anointing was something that had to be received. You could not anoint yourself. You had to kneel quietly and wait for the oil to be poured out upon you.

Here's something else: The anointing was extravagant. The psalm describes how an abundance of precious oil is poured out and how it flowed down, down, down. Notice, "downward" is used three times. ² "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. In fact, the idea of downward flow is implied in verse 3, too, where the dew up on Mt. Hermon, 9000 feet high, somehow finds its way down to Mount Zion which is 2,500 feet high and 100 miles away. Really, this is a psalm of Descent! So far, the psalms of Ascent have taken us up, up, up. Now having reached the "top," blessings begin to flow back down, down, down... a Psalm of Descent.

One last little piece. The High Priest wore this as part of his uniform. [*Show ephod on screen.*] Do you remember what this is called? An Ephod. It was a vest with twelve stones on it; each stone represented one of the twelve tribes of Israel. The priest wore this when he was performing his rituals or praying. So when he was anointed with the holy oil—when it had dripped down his head, down his beard, down onto his robe—it would have dripped down onto the ephod, too, touching the tribal stones.

Let's put all of this together. First, various ingredients are mixed to produce a unique and precious oil. The anointing represents the work of the Holy Spirit and it must be received in order to do its work. The anointing spreads from the head down the body, ultimately touching every tribe in the nation. And when that happens, it leaves behind a fragrance that is unmistakable, good and beautiful.

So what does this mean for us? How do we experience this "good and beautiful" unity within our church? It means that every unique member understands he or she is an essential ingredient in this church body; that without the "aroma" they bring by their engagement in the work of the Holy Spirit something is missing from what God longs to do. It means remembering that unity is both a work of the Holy Spirit—something God pours out upon us to be received—and something for us to receive as a precious gift. We treasure our unity, long for it, and preserve it against all enemies. And it means, when we are living under the anointed power of God's unity, that our influence—our aroma—drips down onto everyone who is nearby... blessing everyone it touches: our church, our converts, our community, even our enemies. This is God's "Trickle Down" economy. If a church is living out a testimony of love and unity, it can't help but dribble out onto the community, too. They "smell" us. Even if they don't know God or love Jesus, when they watch us living in unity, we "stink pretty" to them.

Unity. We aren't talking about uniformity. Every single one of us is different. God made us that way. We've got a Ben with his beard and tattoos, and we've got Gene who always wears a coat and tie. We don't have to be uniform to be united. And we aren't talking about unanimity; there are many things we disagree about. We vote in different ways, like different music, treat the earth differently, and

spend money differently. We don't have to agree to be united in our love of Christ and our devotion to his call.

You know my nickname for you, right? The Sweetheart Church. One of the reasons you are a Sweetheart Church is that you have managed, over fifty years, to stay united. We've had our disagreements. We've had crises. We've certainly dealt with issues bigger than brick style or a peg in a wall or potluck portions... big, important issues that could have torn us in two. But they did not. Why? Why do we have the fragrance of Holy Spirit unity and how can we cherish it and hold on to it?

Several things. Most importantly, we are centered in and focused upon Christ. When Jesus prayed his high priestly prayer for us in John 17, he prayed that those who believed in him would be one, even as he and the father are one. In other words, it is our individual relationship with Christ that unites us with each other, and when we live in that unity we enter into the mystery of life in the Trinity. Wow! Second is humility. Unity is not possible in a church where people consider themselves more important than others; where we look to vaunt ourselves and protect our "rights" and preferences... and that starts with your leaders. We are a big church; we are not big shots. I'm not and you aren't, either.

Here's a third: church discipline. The elders of this church have not put up with gossip or dissension. When someone tries to stir up trouble, elders have been ready to confront that person in love and insist on honesty and transparency. Anonymous letters go into the garbage can. And when we as leaders have an issue, we deal with it. Recently, our session had a point of significant disagreement. It had the potential of being divisive. Instead, we came together, shared our anger and pain with each other, went around the circle and confessed our own sin, and prayed for each other. We put it behind us, and we haven't looked back. Unity is too precious and too important to our witness as a congregation not to preserve it ruthlessly.

We can sum all this up in one word: love. If we love Christ with all our heart, soul, mind and strength—if we love each other as Christ loved us... if we love one another enough to sacrifice our preferences... if we love one another enough to wish the best for each other... if we love one another enough to only speak well about each other and only speak truth and grace to each other... if we love one another as brothers and sisters in Christ—unity will be the result. A unity that drips down from our top to our toes, a unity so extravagant, so obvious, so fragrant, so counter-cultural that the world will notice it and long for it!

One of the hardest things about Christmas can be the divisions within our own families. What would happen if you prayed that God would anoint you with his fragrant Holy Spirit—anoint you so extravagantly—that your love would spread out and touch and taint every difficult relationship around you? It could be a radically different Christmas than you have ever known.

Centuries ago, when I was a teenager, we sang a song that went like this:

We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord.

We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord.

And we pray that all unity may this day be restored.

And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love.

Yes they'll know we are Christians by our love.

Will you sing that with me as we celebrate, declare and preserve our unity in the love of Christ?

Sermon Questions

- REFLECT & APPLY TOGETHER: Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.
- PRAY TOGETHER: Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for, and lay one concern before the Lord.
- DIG DEEPER
 1. Pastor Mark spoke of this being a "Psalm of Descent." What does he mean by that?
 2. What are the images the psalmist uses to describe the power of Christian unity? Which image do you find most powerful?
 3. Are you living in loving unity with your brothers and sisters right now? If not, will you share? What would God call you to do?