

Risking Unity

Text: Psalm 133

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The spirit in me greets the spirit in you, Hallelujah!

During Lent, I had the privilege of facilitating a group who studied Amy-Jill Levine's book *Entering the Passion of Jesus: A Beginner's Guide to Holy Week*¹. The author presents each of her chapters using the perspective of the risks Jesus took during the last week of his life, including risking reputation, risking righteous anger, risking challenge, rejection and loss of friends as well as risking temptation. When I read each of the four lectionary Scripture options, Psalm 133 really stood out to me.

While the wonderful blessing of unity is praised in this hymn, it also reveals that unity is messy – and rare. Using my newly fitted lens of “risk” it became clear to me that while humans recognize the importance of unity– the reality is that we have to take a risk in order to achieve it. What is the risk?

Just two nights ago, during our final session of the Lenten book study, one of the participants touched the edges of it in a comment she made, “I can't be me without other people.” Can you hear the risk here? We have to be in relationship. Relationships are hard, they are messy and really good ones are rare. Why? We have to give up something of our self in order to achieve unity. Perhaps it is in risking our identity in light of the widely-held ethic of rugged individualism in order to recognize our real identity as part of a greater whole. On this second Sunday of Eastertide when we celebrate being Easter people ... isn't that what Jesus did for us? He not only risked, but gave up his life for the greater good, so we might all be united with God and all of God's people throughout time and space.

Let's get into Psalm 133.

It begins with the words “How very good and pleasant it is when kindred spirits live together in unity.” It's interesting that the words are good and pleasant. Not just “good” as in, we “should” want it, but also “pleasant” as in we *actually* want it.

“Kindred spirits live together.” This is the language of the NRSV, but in other translations the words are “brothers” “brethren” “families” “relatives” “God's people” – some scholars attribute the language of brothers to the fact that in ancient Israel sons would remain in their father's home even as adults. Some translations, instead of brothers or brethren, use the language “kindred” or “God's people.” The thought here is that this Psalm, one of 15 psalms which bears the title “song of assent” so named, many scholars believe, because these psalms were sung by pilgrims, gathering from afar and ascending the road to Jerusalem to the temple for the three festivals which required the faithful to embark on a pilgrimage to the Holy City. These festivals are a joyful and holy time of celebration. Pilgrims would often travel long distances and when finally reaching the hill into the city, it meant they were close. I imagine here a road trip during which the kids constantly ask, “Are we there yet?” This would be the point in the trip where parents finally respond, with conviction, “almost!”

¹ (Levine 2018)

“Live together in unity.” We also read “as one”, and “in harmony.” The Psalmist provides two examples to illustrate how good and pleasant this unity is:

First, “It is like the precious oil on the head.”

This is not any oil, it is precious oil, giving the connotation of special or rare oil. It is also not just a smear or a rubbing. We read the precious oil is not just on the head, it is running down upon the beard! A generous amount of precious oil is being poured out.

Also, it is not just any beard, it is the beard of Aaron whom we know was anointed a priest, the brother of Moses. Anointing is mentioned often in the Old Testament. It is symbolic of being made holy, of being given God’s blessing, God’s favor. The emphasis is exaggerated even more... not only is this oil precious, it is special enough for a priestly anointing, and in large enough quantity not only to run down the beard, but also it is enough to run down over the collar of his robes. That is a lot of oil!

The dry summer climate, hot winds, and fine, powdery dust of Israel lead the skin to dry out. To be able to rub something oily on the skin would have been very much appreciated. A large amount of oil would have felt like an extravagant blessing from God!

A second example of how good and pleasant this unity is: “It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountain of Zion.”

Mount Hermon is in the far north, on the border between Israel and Lebanon, so its dew would not likely flow literally upon the mountains of Zion, near to Jerusalem. Mount Hermon is high enough to be snow-capped and thus attracts abundant moisture. The Psalmist speaks of refreshing dew.

“During the summer when it does not rain at all, the dew will be appreciated more than it is in moist climates; so it is praised by Old Testament authors as one of God’s blessings (e.g. Gen. 27:28; Deut. 33:28; 1 Kings 17:1; Proverbs 19:12)”²

So, here we have these two blessings that would have been deeply appreciated during the Israelite summer with which to compare the blessing of “brothers/brethren” “kindred” or “people of God” living together in unity.

They both seem to illustrate not only how wonderful, but also how messy (think about having all of that oil running down your head, all the way to your collar – yuck!) AND how rare that kind of unity really is.

And yet – it is in such unity that “the Lord ordains the blessing of Life Evermore!”

I’d like to talk about these three things in relationship to unity: rare, messy and wonderful – in light of a story. In 2018 I participated in a class “Religious Education in the Holy Land” during which class members traveled to Israel and Palestine. One of the most moving experiences I had on that trip was one afternoon in Jerusalem when we gathered in one of the lounges off of the hotel lobby to meet with two guests who are part of an organization of peace builders in Jerusalem.

These two guests, an Israeli man and a Palestinian woman shared their stories with us. I want to let you know that this next part I share may be difficult to hear. If you are someone who is prone to trauma response, perhaps step out of the room for a few minutes. The man recounted the

² (David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor 2008)

death of his 19-year-old daughter who was serving her obligatory term of two years (it's 2.5 for men) in the IDF (Israeli Defense Forces). She was protecting a post when a Palestinian crude rocket struck and exploded the tower she was standing in.

The Palestinian woman shared her story of being widowed when her husband was driving to his mosque for Maghrib (sunset) prayer. He happened to be in an area where some Israeli soldiers had been hit by rocks launched into their camp, which is a fairly common occurrence. He resisted orders from an Israeli soldier to get out of his vehicle. As a result, he was pulled out of his vehicle, thrown down on the side of the road and shot. She described that he was left for some time on the side of the road in order to be an example for others to think twice before attacking the soldiers.

These two unlikely people, on opposite sides of a seemingly intractable divide, have become allies. Think about the risks they take in their communities, in their families, to reach a place of unity, against all odds. How have they done this? They see each other. They see their own pain mirrored in the eyes of the other. They listen. They show respect. They are embracing the dignity and worth of the other – the humanity of the other. They recognize that they are “the other.” They told us that what they’re doing is not easy, and deep sadness remains. But it is clear that this rare, wonderful unity is, in fact, messy. They shared with us that this unity with one another, and others in their organization, is helping them heal from their personal losses. They seek, in the recognition of one another’s humanity and dignity, to do their part to end the conflict.

I’m recording this on Thursday, which is during the time Yom HaShoah, the observance of Holocaust Remembrance Day. A friend of mine, Rabbi Jessica Goldberg posted these words on her Facebook page this morning (I’m sharing with her permission).

“Hatred and bigotry are flourishing in this country and around the world. The lines between ignorance, scapegoating, discrimination, persecution, and genocide are very blurry. We have not moved past the evils of the Holocaust; they simply manifest in different ways, in different places, against different groups of people.”

So, I ask us to really consider: Where in our lives might we need to seek unity? Who do we need to really see? Which people do we struggle to understand? To whom do we need to listen? During every encounter we have there exists an opportunity to take a risk by seeing one another, listening to one another, showing respect for one another, recognizing the dignity and worth of each other. We don’t have to reach agreement to have unity. The invitation is to accept God’s blessing of a more abundant life in community.

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Works Cited

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