

Psalm 133 (1984 NIV)
The Wisdom of Unity in Community

1 How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!
 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.
 3 It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion. For there
 the LORD bestows his blessing, even life forevermore.

Introduction

I have the opportunities to minister in different churches. Some of the comments that people say to me about their own church are:

- The people in this place are very cold.
- When I am hurting, nobody bothers to come and comfort me.
- When I struggle, nobody bothers to lift a finger to help.
- When I do things badly, people accuse me of lacking in commitment.
- When I do things well, people never say a word of praise.
- People think it is their divine duty to keep me humble.
- If this place is where God's people live, serve and worship together, why am I feeling so lonely?

"If this place is where God's people live, serve and worship together, why am I feeling so lonely?" Does this feeling sound familiar to you?

The late Mother Teresa who had served among the poorest of the poor and the lowest of the low once said: "The biggest disease today is not leprosy or TB, but the feeling of being unwanted, uncared for, and deserted by everybody."

The first verse of Psa 133 exclaims: "How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!" A more accurate translation of the Hebrew, I think, would be, "Look! How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity." You see, the psalmist (traditionally believed to be King David), is not here expressing just a wish or a hope. Rather, he sees and so tells his readers that God's people living, working and worshipping together in unity is not wishful thinking, but a reality. And this togetherness of God's people is a good and pleasant thing.

How could David be so sure of such a thing happening? It is likely that David wrote this psalm at a time when he had finally united all the 12 tribes of Israel. In 2 Sam 5:1-5, we read that David at first was ruling only the southern tribes from the city of Hebron for 7½ years. Later, the northern tribes came down to him and said: "We are your own flesh and blood. We too want you to rule over us." With this united commitment, David then moved his seat of power

from Hebron to Jerusalem. He finally brought the Ark to Jerusalem so that all the tribes of Israel could worship God as a community.

Now, if you are familiar with Israel's history, you will realise that the different tribes were constantly fighting one another because of jealousy, pettiness, mistrust and competition. So, Israel had a long history of hostility and disunity among themselves. The people were very much like clans rather than like a community.

With this as the background, imagine how overwhelming the experience was when after so many years of tribal rivalry, the 12 tribes of Israel came together in Jerusalem to worship God as a community of people under King David. This tremendous experience must have moved David to write this psalm. Togetherness as a community of God's people was no longer a dream, a wish or a hope. It had become a reality as David worshipped together with all the 12 tribes in Jerusalem. And out of that moving experience, David exclaimed in v. 1: "Look! How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity."

If you look at your Bible, you will notice a tiny subscription telling you that this psalm is "a song of ascents". This means that in later history, the Jewish people would sing this psalm as they gathered from all over Israel and made their way up the worship place in Jerusalem. They used it as a pilgrimage psalm. They would do this three times a year—at the Passover, the Feast of Pentecost, and the Feast of Tabernacles.

And as they used this psalm in their religious observances, it reminded them that they were God's covenantal people and a brotherly community. Psalm 133 called on them to ...

I. Focus on that one thing that would unite them—the worship of God (v. 2).

Verse 2 tells us that brotherly unity in God's community is like oil running down on the beard of Aaron. He was the high priest in Moses' time. Moses anointed him with oil so that he could be dedicated to take up his special role.

Aaron is named here to represent the service of the priests in Israel. Through their service, the people of Israel were being mediated for God's forgiveness and blessing when they came together to worship God. During such times, the people from all walks of life, places and tribes gathered for one unifying purpose—to worship Yahweh. In their worship, they put aside their various differences and became united as they celebrated their common heritage in Yahweh.

Hence, the psalm tells us that God's people coming together in unity is like oil running down on Aaron's beard. It was through the service of the priests that

the people expressed their desire to worship God in oneness, and to celebrate their common heritage in Yahweh.

Some have interpreted the oil here as the Holy Spirit, and espouse that it is the Spirit who unites God's people together in worship. While this is theologically true, it is exegetically flawed. Notice that v. 2 does not say it is the Spirit who is like precious oil running down on Aaron's beard. Rather, the verse says that "IT" is like precious oil running down on Aaron's beard. Now, what is this "IT"? If you look back at v. 1, it is quite clear that the "IT" here has reference to "brothers living together in unity".

If I may stretch your imagination a bit, just visualise Aaron with his bushy beard and strands of it fanning out. When the oil is poured on his head, just imagine how it flows down his head to his bushy beard, and how it sticks the fanning strands of Aaron's beard together. Perhaps, that's how we are to understand unity as God's community—sticking together in spite of our diversity.

The worship of Yahweh brought the people of Israel together in spite of their tribal differences. Therein lies a principle for building unity in God's community—*focus on the things that unite, not on the things that divide*.

But unfortunately, we live in a fallen world and an expression of this fallenness is human individualism. You and I can be so guilty when we keep harping on our differences; when we focus on the things that divide rather than those that unite.

I am reminded of this story of a church in a small town in Tennessee (US) with this big sign: LEFT FOOT BAPTIST CHURCH.

Someone who saw this sign became curious and asked a local resident about the reason for this unusual name.

It seems that some years ago, there was a split in the local church over the issue of foot washing. An argument broke out over which foot should be washed first.

The group which insisted that the left foot should be washed first finally split off to set up their own congregation called "LEFT FOOT BAPTIST CHURCH".

Well, we may laugh and shake our heads saying: "Baptists in America are crazy people. They stress so much on individual rights and fight over foolish things."

But individualism is an expression of the tendency of fallen human nature. You and I can be just as vulnerable to it when we keep

harping on our differences; when we focus on the things that divide, not on those that unite.

(<https://www.neverthirsty.org/bible-studies/life-of-christ-ministry-judea/division-about-who-jesus-is>)

One common reason for this misplaced focus is unfulfilled idealisation on our part. What are some of these ideal pictures that you and I may have about the church?

Let me repeat what some people have told me about their unfulfilled idealisation of their churches:

- I picture the church as a place where people will come with broad smiles whenever they meet me, but what I get are often cold, unfriendly stares.
- I picture the church as a place where people are always ready to give a helping hand, but what I hear is often, "Sorry, I have no time."
- I picture the church as the place where people are always there to cry with me. But what I see is how they conveniently look away when they notice my teary eyes.
- I picture the church as a place where people will appreciate one another, but I realise that when I say "thank you", people forget it very quickly; but when I fail to say it, they remember it for life.
- I picture the church as a place where people are always excited about worshipping God, but I often notice many catching up on lost sleep in the worship service.
- I picture the church as the place where people are always keen to share the gospel. But in reality, I am made to feel that sharing the gospel is the most unpopular thing to do for many of them.

You probably have heard of similar frustrations, but the question for us today is: "Are you similarly frustrated because of your own unfulfilled idealisation of the church?"

The very human way to react to such frustration is to say: "I disagree with everything because it is not what I picture the church to be." The result of this spirit of disagreement is that it keeps us focused on our differences rather than on our common aspirations.

Someone once said, "For a man and a woman to fall in love at first sight is no miracle. What is miraculous is that after so many years, they are still looking at each other." And if marriage is the basic expression of community, then this is also true in a larger community (the church).

Our togetherness in unity as God's people is not based on some initial attraction we have towards one another. Rather, it is based on our commitment to our oneness in Jesus Christ in spite of our differences. It is

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our commitment to focus on the things that unite, not on the things that divide that will keep us together as a community when the novelty of idealisation wears off, and we begin to see one another's ugliness and weaknesses.

One thing we can do to counter the ill-effects of idealisation is to treat one another as a gift from God.

I remember one day my younger daughter brought home an art-card necktie that she had made in her craftwork at nursery school.

When I first saw it, my immediate response in my heart was: "Yucks! What awful colours."

But my younger girl said this to me: "Daddy, this is my Father's Day present for you." She then put it round my neck.

Almost immediately, my attitude changed. I felt myself liking this tie because it was a gift from my younger girl, never mind it was not exactly pretty.

What I am trying to stress is that when we regard one another as a gift from God, we learn to treasure one another, never mind we are all less than perfect.

When we in the church of Jesus Christ learn to treasure one another as a gift from God, we will not reject him/her because of human imperfections. Rather, we will learn to respect differences. Indeed, the church is a community of imperfect people redeemed by the perfect love of God in Jesus Christ, and aspiring to live as best as they can for God.

And as we focus on the things that unite, not the things that divide, we allow that one God who unites us to be bigger than our differences. We learn to forgive, accept and work at being a blessing to one another in God's love.

It was the worship of Yahweh administered by the Aaronic priest that led the different tribes of Israel to exercise unity in community. They did not deny their differences or pretend there were none. Rather, as they worshipped God through the service of the high priest, they focused on being community in spite of their differences; they saw their oneness in Yahweh as bigger than their differences. Put in another way, whatever distinctiveness they had was not viewed as a dividing factor, but as an integral part of the bigger whole. That's the wisdom of unity in community.

As the pilgrims of Israel used Psalm 133 in their religious observances, it reminded them that they were God's covenantal people and a brotherly community. It gave them another focused perspective as they worshipped together. It called on them to ...

II. Look anticipatively to something that only God could bestow (v. 3).

Verse 3 tells us that brotherly unity is like the dew of Hermon falling on Mt Zion in Jerusalem. Hermon was about the highest mountain in the region of ancient Palestine (about 10,000 ft above sea level). Its top was covered with snow all year round, causing very heavy dews to fall. The heavy dew fall provided a rich source of refreshment and nourishment to the dry and parched land of that region. This was no mere accident but a deliberate blessing bestowed by God. Through His divine blessing, God could refresh and nourish the land with the dew of Hermon. It was not an accidental act of nature but a providential act of God.

When David had finally united the 12 tribes of Israel, and when they all finally came together as one people to worship God in Jerusalem, it was such a refreshing and renewing experience. In his psalm, David likened it to the refreshing dewfall from Hermon. It brought forth a new zest in the spiritual life of all Israel. More importantly, David attributed this refreshing experience of worshipping God as one united people not to his own ability, but to the blessing of God's work.

Similarly, when the Jewish pilgrims used this psalm in their worship and religious observances as they gathered in Jerusalem in later years, they were reminded that God could do that which man could not. This thought inspired and refreshed them because they could always look out for better things from God regardless of their circumstances.

God could do for them what they could not humanly do for themselves. Their unity as God's community of people was not the result of their human belabouring, but that of divine blessing. Hence, they were reminded to treasure and guard their unity in community because it was a blessing from Yahweh Himself. Therein lies a second principle for building unity in community—*look anticipatively to what God can do, not anxious of what man cannot do.*

George Mueller, a man of great faith, once remarked: "The beginning of anxiety is the end of faith, and the beginning of faith is the end of anxiety." I believe what Mueller is saying here is not that we cannot be anxious; but in our anxiety, we should not lose faith in God. Our anxiety of what we cannot do should not be allowed to undermine our anticipation of what God can do. If our anxiety over our limitations can cause us to turn to God in faith, anticipating Him to do the humanly impossible, then that's a blessed experience.

When we become Christians, we do not become non-anxious people (or even less anxious people). We continue to carry our human tendency to be anxious into our relationships with others. This tendency to be anxious can destroy our sense of togetherness. Being anxious of what we cannot do humanly, we begin to focus on the worst in people.

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When we keep looking at the worst in a person, we undermine his worth and begin to stick a label on that person—"He is Leopard Man ... no way he can change his spots!" And if everyone keeps looking at the worst in one another, the natural consequence is that they begin to isolate themselves from one another. And therein is the answer to the question: "If the church is God's people living, serving and worshipping together, why am I feeling so lonely?"

How then can we look anticipatively to what God can do, and not be anxious of what we cannot do? We can always commend people to God in prayer, and anticipate Him to change and transform them AND us. Indeed, when we anticipate what God can and will do in people, we will begin to hope and look for the best in them.

My older girl was a very shy girl when she was in kindergarten. I remember at a year-end concert, she had to play a major role in the item that her class was presenting.

In addition to singing and dancing with the rest, she had to introduce the item to the audience. Weeks before that, the teacher had written her some lines for her to practise. My wife was also asked to help her in this.

On the evening of the concert, my wife told me: "When she is saying her lines, don't look at her and smile. Otherwise, she may become so self-conscious that she forgets her lines."

When she finally came on stage with her classmates, I immediately dropped down my head and pretended that I was not interested in what's on stage.

Suddenly, the voice of a young girl thundered through the microphone loud and clear: "Ladies and Gentlemen, my name is Vera Yuen ..."

Vera Yuen—that's the name of my daughter! I just had to raise my head and look at her.

She ran through her lines flawlessly. She also sang and danced enthusiastically with her classmates. And you know something—she was constantly casting her eyes on my wife and me to make sure that we were watching her perform!

One prayer that my wife and I had often prayed to the Lord was that our elder girl could be more self-confident and less self-conscious. That evening, the Lord showed us a beautiful side of her—she could perform confidently on stage.

As we commended her to the Lord in prayer, she could have potential which we had yet to see.

We often get exasperated when we try to mould someone with our own personal influences but find that little is working. So, the tendency is to keep looking at the worst in people, writing them off without seeing the best side that God can bring out of them. The counsel of God for us today is—don't always look at the worst side of a person for by God's grace, this person can have a beautiful side to show us as well.

Indeed, to see God moulding and bringing the best out of people in spite of their imperfections; to see God transforming the life of someone whom we can do little to influence in our own strength is certainly refreshing like the "dew of Hermon". For such a person, we don't finish him off by saying "gone case". Because of what God can do, we say that for such a person, the best is yet to be.

Conclusion

The church is God's people living, serving and worshipping as a community in unity. Today, the Word of God tells us that we can demonstrate this community spirit by two actions:

- Focus on the things that unite, not on those that divide.
- Look anticipatively to what God can do, not anxious of what we cannot do.

Be thankful to God for the church you are in (I mean the people, not the building). Learn to see this community as God's gift. Learn to see people around you here as God's gifts. And with the same gusto, shout with the psalmist and say: "Look! How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity."

I want to give you now a brief time for personal prayer. Would you bow your head with me? In the quietness of your own heart:

- Thank God for your brothers and sisters here in this church. Yes, they are imperfect; they may not always agree with you and you with them. But today, take a brief moment to thank God for them.
- Ask God to help you love your brothers or sisters here (or perhaps, one particular person that He has brought to mind). Ask God to help you love each person as God's gift. They may have their weaknesses, but so do you. So, ask God to help you trust Him mould and bring out the best in them AND in you.

Pray that the Lord will help us nurture and guard our unity as His people for this is not only the wise thing to do, but also the right thing in His sight.
Amen!

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