

**Songs of the Heart:
ONE IN THE SPIRIT**

Psalm 133

*The community of faith is united
in authority, purpose, and love.*

A sermon preached by
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Fort Smith, Arkansas
September 2, 2018

Unity is a rare commodity these days. Division we have; polarization, rancor, discord, antagonism, hatred, and violence—we have plenty of that. Unity not so much. We see the lack of unity in the political world, as we always have. But there are also divisions in our community relations, race relations, school systems, work places, even our homes and families. There have always been sources of discord and division; it comes from sinful humans trying to live together. But I think you'll agree with me that the situation has deteriorated over the last few years, and that it is increasingly difficult for people just to get along.

This week we have been mourning the death of Senator John McCain, a war hero and patriot and political leader for the last 50 years. As many have said, even if you didn't agree with John McCain, you could always trust his honesty and integrity.

One of the moments of statesmanship that has been replayed this week happened when McCain was running against Barack Obama for President in 2008. At a town hall meeting in Minnesota, a woman began making racist and derogatory remarks about Obama. McCain stopped her and told the partisan crowd that Barack Obama was a decent man, a family man, and nobody had to be scared if he was elected President. McCain went on to say that he disagreed with Obama on some fundamental issues, and that was what the campaign was about. The crowd ended up applauding McCain's statement. The next day, Obama thanked McCain and returned his respect for his opponent. In McCain's service at the National Cathedral yesterday, two of the speakers, George Bush and Barack Obama, were his former political opponents.

Knowing that he was about to die, John McCain wrote a farewell statement to the American people. In part it said,

We weaken our greatness when we confuse our patriotism with tribal rivalries that have sown resentment and hatred and violence in all the corners of the globe. We weaken it when we hide behind walls, rather than tear them down, when we doubt the power of our ideals, rather than trust them to be the great force for change they have always been.

We are 325 million opinionated, vociferous individuals. We argue and compete and sometimes even vilify each other in our raucous

public debates. But we have always had so much more in common with each other than in disagreement. If only we remember that and give each other the benefit of the presumption that we all love our country, we will get through these challenging times. We will come through them stronger than before. We always do.¹

It was a great statement of unity and hope. Rest in peace, John McCain. May your tribe increase.

We finish our series on the Psalms today with Psalm 133, a strange little Psalm that makes one simple point: unity is good. “*How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!*”² Then the writer follows that statement with two illustrations of just how good unity is. It’s like olive oil poured on your head and running down your beard and onto your clothes, like the beard and robes of Aaron, the brother of Moses and the first high priest of the Hebrews. To us, that just sounds messy and sticky and gross. But to the first audience, it sounded luxuriant, effusive, abundantly good. That’s what unity is like.

Or if oil is not your thing, unity is like the rain that falls on Mt. Hermon, the big mountain north of Galilee that stays snowcapped most of the year. The rain that falls on Mt. Hermon drains through the valley into a smaller lake, which becomes the headwaters of the Jordan River. The Jordan flows into the Sea of Galilee, then runs south through the Rift Valley into the Dead Sea. The waters that flow from Mt. Hermon are the lifeline of Israel and provide life and food and vegetation for the whole region. They are a blessing from God, as the Psalmist says: “*For there the Lord ordained his blessing, life forevermore.*”³

What the Psalmist is trying to describe is how good it feels to be a part of the community of God’s faithful people. This Psalm is a “Song of Ascents”; it was written for pilgrims making the journey to worship in the Temple in Jerusalem. Coming in to that place was like the luxuriant experience of being anointed with fragrant oil or rain falling on dry land—refreshing and revitalizing. That’s how it is when people are united in faith.

The church can provide us that kind of experience. The church can be the community of unity. I feel so blessed by the unity and positive energy

and joy that I feel in our church right now. It hasn't always been that way, and that's not to say there won't ever be any trouble again, but right now God is blessing us with unity. How very good and pleasant it is!

But being a community of unity does not mean that we are a community of unanimity. Churches are like any human organization. There are differences of opinion, disagreements, conflicts, sometimes even alienation and hostility between the members. Sometimes there are deep divisions within the Body of Christ, and whole churches will split apart. There are certainly divisions between denominations and nationalities within Christianity. It is nearly impossible to get everybody singing off the same page of the hymnal, so to speak.

The United Methodist Church has been struggling to maintain unity of late. Actually, I believe we are unified on the big things: the authority of Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience, our Wesleyan heritage, our theology of grace, our mission to make disciples, our attitude of openness to people of diverse backgrounds and opinions. What we are divided on is our opinion about how to treat homosexual people, whether to allow gay marriage or not, whether to ordain gay people as ministers. It's way too complicated to cover in a sermon, but on Sunday, September 16, we are going to have a town hall meeting to inform anyone who is interested about where we are as a church on this issue. I am still hopeful for a unified outcome.

What do we mean by unity in the church? Jesus prayed that his disciples would be unified. How do we do that? How can we experience the pleasure of kindred spirits the way the Psalmist described? I believe the life of the community of faith comes from God, and out of that life comes a unity that is deeper than unanimity, a unity of the Spirit that is much greater than the absence of conflict. It's these spiritual principles of unity that I want us to focus on today.

The community of faith is united in **AUTHORITY**. We have one Lord, Jesus Christ, and we are united under his authority in all that we do. Jesus is the Cornerstone of our existence and his Church.

Paul expressed this so beautifully in his Letter to the Ephesians: "*I therefore... beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have*

*been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.”*⁴ That’s where our authority lies, and when we are focused on Jesus, our witness is unified. When we’re not, we are powerless and ineffective.

The community of faith is united in its **PURPOSE**. This is where so many churches fall by the wayside. They fail to have a shared vision for their ministry, a common mission. They are fuzzy and unclear about their purpose. They are attacked by the “weapons of mass distraction”—petty conflicts, minors that become majors, molehills that become mountains. Therefore their unity suffers, their energy cannot be focused, and their impact is weakened.

Jesus told his disciples the purpose of the community of faith: “*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you.*”⁵ We call this the Great Commission, and it is still our fundamental mission: to make disciples, baptizing and teaching, that the world might be transformed.

Paul expanded on this understanding in the Letter to the Ephesians, just after the text I read to you a moment ago. He wrote that the purpose of the church is “*to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.*”⁶

Making disciples of Jesus Christ, equipping the saints for ministry, transforming the world—that’s our purpose. We share in the unity of a vital mission for God.

Most of all, the community of faith is united in **LOVE**. We don’t always agree or see eye-to-eye on everything, but if we are God’s people, we will love one another. I believe Jesus had a commandment about that, didn’t he? “*I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this*

everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”⁷ If we love one another, we can trust that even someone who disagrees with us loves the same Jesus and has the same purpose and mission as we do. In love we can forgive a brother or sister who has hurt us or made us angry. Love reconciles enemies; love overcomes barriers; love transcends our differences to draw us together in a community of unity.

A pastor friend told me about a woman in his church who found herself in an uncomfortable position. This woman had a son who was mentally ill and got into all kinds of trouble with drugs and the law. He finally came to a violent and bloody end, which the TV news reported in graphic detail. The mother was humiliated and angry about the way her son had been portrayed by the media.

One Sunday in church, she sat down in her pew, and she noticed that the reporter who had exposed her son was sitting in the same pew with her. He didn't know her, but she wanted to get up and go slap his face. As she tried to worship, she knew that she needed to forgive the man and share the love of Christ with him. But it was hard!

The turning point came when the church came down for communion. The woman received the Body and Blood of Jesus, and as she knelt at the altar rail, the reporter knelt beside her. Suddenly she felt her anger subside, and the sweet peace of forgiveness flood her heart. She felt united again in a bond of love.

We are united today in Jesus Christ, who gave us a sign of our unity in Holy Communion. If you remember, the last supper itself was not all that unified. The betrayer dipped his hand in the bowl with Jesus. Yet the Spirit drew the disciples together as Jesus offered even Judas the bread and the cup. As we share his body and blood today, we draw together and eat this sacred meal in the unity of Christ's authority, in the unity of our purpose, and in the unity of love.

Gordon Cosby was the founder and pastor for many years of the Church of the Savior in Washington, D.C. He was in the habit of visiting a little diner not far from his church every morning. At 6:30 a.m., Gordon would be sitting in this greasy spoon eating a donut and drinking coffee before

he started his day. He noticed that it always seemed to be the same crowd in the diner, so one day he stood up and said, “Hey, everybody! Can I get your attention, please? I see you people in here every morning, but I don’t know who you are. My name’s Gordon, and I pastor the church around the corner, and I was wondering if you would all introduce yourselves.”

So they did. One by one, they stood up and told who they were and what they did. One of them happened to be Tom Wolfe, the well-known writer. From that day on, they began to form a little community of donut-eaters and coffee-drinkers, and they would greet each other as they came in each morning. They began to get to know one another, except for Harry, the owner of the diner.

So one morning, Gordon said, “Harry, we don’t know much about you. Do you have a family? Where are you from?”

Harry didn’t much want to talk, but everyone pressed him until he spoke.

He said, “For starters, my name’s not Harry. It’s Hasim. I’m from Baghdad, in Iraq, and my family is still there until I can bring them to America.”

Suddenly a silence invaded the diner. The year was 1991, and the Desert Storm conflict was about to reach fever pitch. America was hostile toward Iraq, and at that moment Saddam Hussein’s missiles were pointed at Israel. Half the people in the diner were Jewish. Hasim was an Iraqi and a Muslim, and his loyalties and his family resided in enemy territory. Everyone ate their donuts quietly and left as soon as they could.

The next morning, Gordon’s phone rang about 5:00 a.m., and a church member said excitedly, “Did you hear the news? We’re bombing Baghdad!”

Gordon jumped out of bed, threw on his clothes and headed for the diner. He knew Harry—Hasim—would get there about 5:30 to open up, and he wanted to be there. When Gordon rounded the corner, he discovered that every single person from the regular morning crowd was there. In a few minutes, Hasim rounded the corner and was met by the whole group. They gathered around him and offered words of support, then Tom Wolfe said, “Hey, Gordon, you’re the pastor. Pray!”

So standing on a street corner in Washington, D.C., in a group that included non-believers and Jews and Christians and one Muslim, Gordon Cosby prayed. When he was through, Hasim looked up with tears in his eyes and said, "You still have to pay for your donuts." Then he quickly added, "But from now on, my friends, the coffee for you will always be free."

Gordon recalled later, "As I sat there drinking my coffee and eating my donut that morning, I wondered if I had ever taken Holy Communion with such an awareness of the presence of God."⁸

There is a unity among God's people that reconciles enemies, that overcomes barriers, that transcends differences. We have one Lord, one purpose, one bond of love in Jesus Christ. How very good and pleasant it is when we dwell in that unity!

¹ *Arkansas Democrat Gazette*, August 28, 2018, A2.

² Psalm 133:1.

³ Psalm 133:4.

⁴ Ephesians 4:1-6.

⁵ Matthew 28:19-20.

⁶ Ephesians 4:12-13.

⁷ John 13:34-35.

⁸ Told by Tony Campolo in an address to a Youth Specialties conference, October 1999.