

Psalm 133
April 19, '09

“FULFILLING THE EASTER PROMISE”

I HADN'T PLANNED IT THIS WAY.

WHEN I DECIDED TO USE THE OLD TESTAMENT LECTIONARY PSALM FOR TODAY, I HAD NO IDEA THAT IT WOULD CORRESPOND PERFECTLY WITH A TRIP EMMA SUE & I HAD PLANNED MONTHS EARLIER.

WE WANTED TO TAKE HER DAD ON A JOURNEY FROM HERE TO KANSAS CITY WITH A FEW STOPS ALONG THE WAY TO VISIT FAMILY MEMBERS, CEMETERIES & CHURCHES HE & MY MOTHER-IN-LAW HAD SERVED IN MISSOURI & KANSAS.

LITTLE DID I KNOW THAT THIS PSALM WOULD BE LIVED OUT IN THE VERY WEEK THAT I WAS PREACHING IT.

“BEHOLD, HOW VERY GOOD & PLEASANT IT IS WHEN KINDRED LIVE TOGETHER IN UNITY.”

THAT'S WHAT WE EXPERIENCED FOR A FEW DAYS THIS PAST WEEK, SHARING FELLOWSHIP & MEMORIES WITH FAMILY MEMBERS, MANY OF WHOM EMMA SUE & MY FATHER-IN-LAW HADN'T SEEN IN DECADES.

ON THURSDAY EVENING, WITH LITTLE MORE THAN A FEW HOURS NOTICE, 25 OWENSBYS GATHERED AT A PIZZA PARLOR IN RAYTOWN, MISSOURI TO SHARE LAUGHTER & LOVE WITH ONE ANOTHER, MAKING THESE WORDS COME ALIVE – *“BEHOLD, HOW VERY GOOD & PLEASANT IT IS WHEN KINDRED LIVE TOGETHER IN UNITY.”*

IT WAS THE EMBODIMENT OF THIS PSALM.

NOTICE HOW SHORT PSALM 133 IS.

IT'S JUST THREE VERSES.

THE FIRST VERSE SIMPLY PUTS FORTH THE THEME & VERSES 2 & 3 PROVIDE VERY GRAPHIC ILLUSTRATIONS OF WHAT THIS THEME LOOKS LIKE WHEN IT IS ACTED OUT.

NOW, GRANTED, THESE TWO ILLUSTRATIONS ARE QUITE FOREIGN TO US AS 21ST CENTURY AMERICANS.

UNITY, THE PSALMIST SAYS, IS LIKE PRECIOUS OIL BEING POURED ONTO THE HEAD OF THE HIGH PRIEST – OIL THAT RUNS DOWN THROUGH HIS LONG BEARD, ONTO HIS COLLAR & DOWN HIS ROBES.

ITS SWEET FRAGRANCE PERMEATES HIS ENTIRE BEING.

FOR US, THAT MAY NOT BE A TERRIBLY APPEALING IMAGE.

FOR THOSE TO WHOM THE PSALMIST WAS WRITING, THOUGH, THEY WOULD CLEARLY HAVE UNDERSTOOD THE MESSAGE.

THE HIGH PRIEST WOULD HAVE BEEN CONSECRATED FOR SERVICE WITH THIS OIL UPON HIS HEAD.

AS HE WOULD WALK OUT INTO THE CONGREGATION, THEY WOULD ALL EXPERIENCE THAT FRAGRANCE & KNOW THAT THE LORD – THROUGH THE HIGH PRIEST – WAS PRESENT IN THEIR VERY MIDST.

THAT’S WHAT THE PSALMIST IS SAYING ABOUT THIS KIND OF UNITY THAT IS SHARED WITHIN THE BODY OF BELIEVERS.

IT CARRIES WITH IT SUCH A WONDERFULLY APPEALING SCENT THAT YOU CAN FEEL THE VERY PRESENCE OF GOD IN YOUR MIDST.

THAT’S WHAT ANYONE SHOULD BE ABLE TO FEEL THE MOMENT THEY WALK THROUGH THE DOORS OF THIS HOUSE OF GOD.

THEY SHOULD FEEL THE LORD’S PRESENCE IN THEIR MIDST BY SOMETHING THAT’S HARD TO DEFINE & EVEN HARDER TO MANUFACTURE.

IT’S AN ALL-PERVASIVE FEELING OF THE LORD’S PRESENCE AMONG US.

THE SECOND ILLUSTRATION THE PSALMIST USES IS FROM THE GEOGRAPHY OF PALESTINE.

IN THE FAR NORTHEASTERN PART OF THE COUNTRY SITS MOUNT HERMON.

IT’S AN EXTREMELY HIGH MOUNTAIN FOR THAT PART OF THE WORLD & AS THE WINDS BLOW ACROSS THE MEDITERRANEAN SEA & DOWN OVER THAT MOUNTAIN, IT ALWAYS LEAVES A BEAUTIFUL DEW.

THE DEW RUNS DOWN THE MOUNTAIN & PROVIDES NOURISHMENT TO THE LANDS BENEATH IT. IT, TOO, IS A BEAUTIFUL ILLUSTRATION FOR UNITY.

THE HOLY SPIRIT BLOWS OVER US & PROVIDES NOURISHMENT – NOURISHING WATERS THAT POUR FORTH FROM US & SOAK EVERYTHING AROUND US WITH STRENGTH & SUSTENANCE.

DO YOU SEE WHY THIS IS MY FAVORITE PSALM?

I LOVE THE IMAGERY IT PROVIDES.

I LOVE THE THOUGHT OF GOD’S PRESENCE BEING FELT IN OUR MIDST.

I LOVE THE HOLY SPIRIT WORKING IN & THROUGH US TO PROVIDE NOURISHMENT FOR A WORLD THAT IS DYING OF THIRST.

I THINK IT WOULD BE IMPOSSIBLE TO OVERSTATE THE IMPORTANCE OF THIS ASPECT OF OUR FELLOWSHIP AS A BODY OF BELIEVERS.

I THINK THAT’S WHY JESUS SPENT SO MUCH TIME ON IT IN HIS FINAL WORDS TO THE DISCIPLES. IN THE UPPER ROOM DISCOURSE IN JOHN – ON THE NIGHT OF HIS ARREST – JESUS TALKS AT LENGTH ABOUT THIS KIND OF UNITY – THIS KIND OF FELLOWSHIP AMONG HIS FOLLOWERS.

HE SAYS, IN HIS PRAYER IN THE UPPER ROOM, *“I ASK NOT ONLY ON BEHALF OF THESE, BUT ALSO ON BEHALF OF THOSE WHO WILL BELIEVE IN ME THROUGH THEIR WORD, THAT THEY MAY ALL BE ONE.*

AS YOU, FATHER, ARE IN ME AND I AM IN YOU, MAY THEY ALSO BE IN US, SO THAT THE WORLD MAY BELIEVE THAT YOU HAVE SENT ME.

THE GLORY THAT YOU HAVE GIVEN ME I HAVE GIVEN THEM, SO THAT THEY MAY BE ONE, AS WE ARE ONE, I IN THEM AND YOU IN ME, THAT THEY MAY BECOME COMPLETELY ONE, SO THAT THE WORLD MAY KNOW THAT YOU HAVE SENT ME AND LOVED THEM EVEN AS YOU HAVE LOVED ME.”

THIS IS THE EASTER PROMISE – THAT WE WILL BE ONE, EVEN AS GOD THE FATHER & JESUS ARE ONE – THAT WE WILL EXPERIENCE THAT WONDROUS UNITY THAT OFFERS SUCH A SWEET FRAGRANCE & PROVIDES NOURISHMENT TO A THIRSTY WORLD.

UNFORTUNATELY, THAT’S NOT ALWAYS WHAT THE WORLD SEES WHEN IT LOOKS AT THE CHURCH, IS IT?

AS WE BEGIN THE “UNBINDING THE GOSPEL” PROJECT WITH OUR OFFICERS & STAFF THIS WEEK, THAT’S ONE OF THE THINGS WE’RE GOING TO BE TALKING ABOUT.

WHAT KIND OF IMAGE DOES THE WORLD OUTSIDE HAVE OF THE CHURCH?

CHURCHES ARE JUDGMENTAL.

CHURCHES ARE HYPOCRITICAL.

CHURCHES ARE ALWAYS FIGHTING.

WHETHER THOSE CONCLUSIONS ARE ACCURATE OR NOT, IS IMMATERIAL.

THAT’S HOW THE WORLD SEES US.

WHEN YOU LOOK AT SOME OF THE CHURCH FIGHTS THAT HAVE ERUPTED OVER THE YEARS, IS IT ANY WONDER THAT PEOPLE OUTSIDE THE CHURCH HAVE DRAWN SUCH A CONCLUSION!?

THERE ARE CHURCHES THAT HAVE SPLIT OVER THE COLOR OF THE CARPET IN THE SANCTUARY OR THE NAME ON THE SIGN OUTSIDE!

THE WORLD LOOKS AT SUCH THINGS & SHAKES THEIR HEAD IN DISBELIEF.

THE UNITY CHRIST SO URGENTLY PRAYED FOR SEEMS MYSTERIOUSLY ELUSIVE.

IS IT ANY WONDER THE WORLD’S IMAGE OF THE CHURCH IS THAT OF PEOPLE WHO ARE CONSTANTLY FIGHTING, BICKERING & AT ODDS WITH ONE ANOTHER?

I IMAGINE THE OVERWHELMING MAJORITY OF SERMONS THAT ARE PREACHED ON THIS 133RD PSALM ARE PREACHED TO CONGREGATIONS THAT FIND THEMSELVES IN THE MIDST OF CONTROVERSY.

I’M THANKFUL THAT THIS ISN’T ONE OF THEM.

NOW I’M SURE LONGEVITY MAY HAVE SKEWED MY PERSPECTIVE A BIT, BUT WHEN I WALK INTO THIS HOUSE OF GOD, THE SWEET SCENT OF CHRISTIAN UNITY IS CLEARLY PRESENT IN OUR MIDST.

YOU CAN ALMOST FEEL THE MOVEMENT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT POURING OUT LIVING WATER UPON US.

NOW THAT’S NOT TO SAY, OF COURSE, THAT WE ALL AGREE ON EVERYTHING.

THANK GOD WE DON’T!

BUT, YOU KNOW, I’VE LEARNED OVER THE YEARS TO TAKE A DIFFERENT VIEW OF SOME OF THE CONFLICTS WE SEE IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH.

I KNOW THAT OCCASIONALLY SOME OF YOU ARE OUTRAGED AND IRATE OVER SOME OF THE THINGS THAT HAPPEN HERE & EVEN SOME OF THE THINGS THAT *DON'T* HAPPEN.

THAT'S NOT A BAD THING.

WHAT THAT SAYS TO ME, MORE OFTEN THAN NOT, IS THAT THIS IS IMPORTANT TO YOU.

WHAT HAPPENS IN THE CHURCH MATTERS TO YOU & IT AFFECTS YOU DEEPLY SIMPLY BECAUSE YOU *CARE* DEEPLY.

I MUST TELL YOU THAT IF I WERE PREACHING THIS SERMON IN A DIFFERENT LOCATION, IT WOULD BE QUITE A DIFFERENT SERMON.

IF I WEREN'T PREACHING THIS SERMON HERE AT EASTMINSTER, SOME OF YOU WOULD BE INCLUDED IN THE SERMON.

YOU WOULD BE INCLUDED AS A SERMON ILLUSTRATION IF THIS SERMON WERE PREACHED SOMEWHERE ELSE.

I WOULD INCLUDE SOME OF YOU BECAUSE YOU ARE LIVING EXAMPLES OF INDIVIDUALS WHO HAVE STRONG & PASSIONATE VIEWS ABOUT THE CHURCH BUT YOU DON'T LET THOSE VIEWS GET IN THE WAY OF AUTHENTIC CHRISTIAN UNITY.

YOU LOOK BEYOND DIFFERENCES OF OPINION TO SOMETHING THAT IS FAR DEEPER & FAR MORE PROFOUND & THAT IS THE UNITY WE SHARE AS FOLLOWERS OF JESUS CHRIST.

IN THE MOVIE "MIRACLE" THAT CHRONICLES THE STORY OF THE 1980 UNITED STATES OLYMPIC HOCKEY TEAM, THERE'S A GREAT SCENE THAT COMMUNICATES THIS MESSAGE OF UNITY.

THE PLAYERS ON THE TEAM CAME FROM ALL OVER THE UNITED STATES & MANY OF THEM HAD COMPETED AGAINST ONE ANOTHER IN COLLEGE WHERE THEY FORMED BITTER RIVALRIES.

AT VARIOUS TIMES IN THE MOVIE, COACH HERB BROOKS ASKS THEM THEIR NAME & WHO THEY PLAY FOR.

"WHAT'S YOUR NAME?"

"DAVE CHRISTIAN."

"WHO DO YOU PLAY FOR?"

"UNIVERSITY OF NORTH DAKOTA."

"WHAT'S YOUR NAME?"

"MARK JOHNSON."

"WHO DO YOU PLAY FOR?"

"UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN."

AND SO IT GOES.

OVER & OVER AGAIN, WHEN ASKED WHO THEY PLAY FOR, IT'S ALWAYS THEIR COLLEGE TEAM.

THOSE COLLEGE RIVALRIES CREATE TENSION & EVEN SOME FIGHTING AMONG THE PLAYERS.

AFTER A GAME THEY HAD WON, COACH BROOKS WASN'T PLEASED WITH THE EFFORT THEY PUT FORTH BECAUSE THEY WEREN'T WORKING TOGETHER AS A TEAM.

HE MADE THEM STAY ON THE ICE & SKATE, LONG AFTER THE ARENA WAS CLOSED FOR THE NIGHT.

THEY WERE FORCED TO DO SUICIDES – SKATING BACK & FORTH – BACK & FORTH.

SOME OF THE PLAYERS COLLAPSED FROM EXHAUSTION BUT THE COACH WOULDN'T LET UP.

FINALLY, THE CAPTAIN OF THE TEAM SHOUTED OUT, *“MIKE ERUZIONE- WINTHROP, MASSACHUSETTS!”*

COACH BROOKS TOOK THE BAIT.

“WHO DO YOU PLAY FOR?”

“I PLAY FOR THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.”

FINALLY, THE MESSAGE HAD GOTTEN THROUGH.

ALL THE PETTY LITTLE SQUABBLES BETWEEN THE PLAYERS HAD BEEN PUT IN PERSPECTIVE.

THEY HAD A HIGHER CALLING AS MEMBERS OF ONE TEAM.

“BEHOLD, HOW VERY GOOD & PLEASANT IT IS WHEN KINDRED LIVE TOGETHER IN UNITY.”

A COUPLE MONTHS AGO, WHEN WE WERE DEBATING A CONTROVERSIAL ISSUE IN A PRESBYTERY MEETING, I WAS REMINDED OF AN EVENT THAT TOOK PLACE WHEN I WAS BEING EXAMINED FOR ORDINATION BY THE PRESBYTERY OF DETROIT.

ON THE DOCKET AT THAT PARTICULAR MEETING WAS A VERY CONTENTIOUS MATTER IN ONE OF THE CHURCHES.

IT CONSUMED ABOUT 2 HOURS OF THE MEETING.

I DON'T RECALL THE SPECIFICS, BUT AN ADMINISTRATIVE COMMISSION HAD BEEN APPOINTED BY THE PRESBYTERY TO RESOLVE THE DISPUTE.

IN THE COURSE OF THE DEBATE ON THE FLOOR OF THE PRESBYTERY, CHURCH MEMBERS ON BOTH SIDES OF THE ISSUE, SPOKE OUT VEHEMENTLY IN DEFENSE OF THEIR POSITION.

ONE MAN, WHO HAPPENED TO BE ON THE SIDE IN OPPOSITION TO THE RECOMMENDATION OF THE ADMINISTRATIVE COMMISSION, WAS PARTICULARLY LOUD, PASSIONATE & VERY OFFENSIVE IN HIS REMARKS.

AFTER THE LONG & EXHAUSTING DEBATE, A VOTE WAS TAKEN ON THE MATTER & THE RECOMMENDATION OF THE ADMINISTRATIVE COMMISSION WAS APPROVED.

FOLLOWING THE VOTE, THE ELDER WHO HAD BEEN SO OUTSPOKEN IN HIS OPPOSITION TO THE COMMISSION, ASKED IF HE COULD SPEAK ONE FINAL TIME.

HEADS SHOOK & EYES ROLLED THROUGHOUT THE ASSEMBLY BUT THE MODERATOR GRANTED THE REQUEST.

AS LONG AS I LIVE, I'LL NEVER FORGET WHAT THAT MAN SAID.

“I KNOW YOU’VE ALREADY HEARD ME SPEAK ENOUGH TONIGHT. BUT I HAVE ONE MORE THING I’D LIKE TO SAY. YOU KNOW I STRONGLY DISAGREE WITH THE DECISION THAT YOU HAVE MADE TONIGHT.

BUT THAT’S THE LAST TIME YOU’LL EVER HEAR ME SAY THAT.

I WANT TO EXPRESS MY DEEP APPRECIATION TO THE MEMBERS OF THE ADMINISTRATIVE COMMISSION.

THEY HAD A VERY DIFFICULT TASK AND THEY PERFORMED IT WITH GREAT SENSITIVITY, UNDERSTANDING & FAIRNESS.

I HAVE A GREAT DEAL OF LOVE & RESPECT FOR EVERY ONE OF THEM.

I WANT TO ASSURE YOU THAT I AM A PRESBYTERIAN & WILL ALWAYS BE A PRESBYTERIAN.

I WILL REMAIN A MEMBER OF MY CHURCH & WILL DO EVERYTHING IN MY POWER TO BE A SUPPORTIVE & UNIFYING FORCE IN THAT CHURCH.

I TRUST THE DECISION YOU HAVE MADE BECAUSE I TRUST IN THE POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT WHO HAS GUIDED YOU IN THAT DECISION.”

AS HE SAT DOWN, THERE WAS ABSOLUTE SILENCE – BUT ONLY FOR A MOMENT – BECAUSE THEN, AS ONE, EVERYONE IN THAT ASSEMBLY ROSE IN SPONTANEOUS CHEERS & APPLAUSE.

THAT MAN WAS PASSIONATE ABOUT HIS POSITION BUT HE WAS EVEN MORE PASSIONATE ABOUT GENUINE UNITY IN THE BODY OF BELIEVERS.

DO YOU UNDERSTAND WHY THIS IS MY FAVORITE PSALM?

DO YOU UNDERSTAND WHY I SAY THAT THIS IS THE FULFILLMENT OF THE EASTER PROMISE?

THERE’S NOTHING QUITE LIKE THE UNITY WE SHARE AS FOLLOWERS OF JESUS CHRIST.

AS THE PSALMIST SAYS, IT IS THERE – THERE IN THAT UNITY, THAT “THE LORD ORDAINED THE BLESSING – LIFE FOREVERMORE.” AMEN.

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