

Sermon: Proper 15A

Title: How Good it is to Live in Unity

Author: The Rev. Hal Weidman | St. George's, Bismarck

When you open the Book of Psalms near the end, you find a small collection known as the “Psalms of Ascents.” These were the songs ancient pilgrims sang as they climbed the roads to Jerusalem. They traveled together through heat, dust, and uncertainty, strengthening one another as they journeyed toward the Temple.

Right in the middle of those pilgrim songs sits Psalm 133: “How very good and pleasant it is when God’s people live together in unity!” It is only three verses long, yet it speaks a word the Church and the world desperately need to hear.

Notice what the psalm does **not** say. It does not say, “How good it is when everyone agrees.” It does not say, “How good it is when everyone thinks alike.” It simply says, “How good and pleasant it is when God’s people live together in unity.”

Unity is not the absence of differences. It is the presence of love that is stronger than those differences. In a world where division is constantly encouraged and outrage has become a business model; Christian unity is more than a pleasant idea. *It is a living witness to the power of the risen Christ.*

When I attended the School of Theology at the University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee, the opening words of Psalm 133 appeared everywhere in Latin: *Ecce Quam Bonum*. “Behold, how good,” which we have translated today to be, “How very good.”

Those words are the university’s motto. They are carved into buildings, printed on publications, and woven into the life of the campus. Every seminarian preparing for ministry is reminded that Christian community should be something people notice. It should cause someone to stop and say, “How very good.”

That remains a challenge for every congregation. When visitors walk through our doors, do they encounter a people who genuinely love one another? Do they find kindness instead of suspicion, welcome instead of judgment, grace instead of division?

The psalm gives us two unforgettable pictures of unity.

First, unity is like the precious oil poured over the head of Aaron, Israel’s first high priest. That sacred oil flowed down his beard and onto his robes as he was consecrated for God’s service. To us, oil running down a beard may seem a bit messy, but to ancient Israel it represented holiness. The fragrance filled the room and marked Aaron as one set apart for

God. The psalm tells us that when God's people live together in unity, God's grace fills the community in much the same way. Unity carries the fragrance of holiness.

Second, the psalm says unity is like the dew of Mount Hermon falling upon the hills of Zion. Mount Hermon, with its snow-covered peaks, produced abundant moisture that refreshed the dry land. In a hot climate, dew meant life. It quietly nourished the earth when everything else seemed dry. That is what Christian unity does. It refreshes tired people. It offers peace in a noisy world and hope in places worn down by conflict.

But unity must never be confused with uniformity.

Uniformity demands that everyone think alike. Unity allows different people to belong together because Christ is greater than the things that separate them. A choir creates beautiful harmony because different voices sing different notes while following the same conductor. The Church is much the same.

Our readings today show us that this kind of unity is never easy, but it is always worth pursuing. In Genesis, Joseph finally stands before the brothers who betrayed him years earlier. They had sold him into slavery and believed they would never see him again. Now Joseph holds power over them. He could have taken revenge. Instead, he weeps, embraces them, and says, "God sent me before you to preserve life."

Joseph teaches us that unity often begins with forgiveness. Families, churches, and communities cannot flourish while old resentments are carefully protected. Healing begins when someone chooses grace over revenge.

The Gospel gives us another picture.

Jesus meets a Canaanite woman; someone considered an outsider by nearly everyone around him. The disciples wanted to send her away, but she persisted in faith. Jesus praised her faith and granted her request. Once again, the kingdom of God reaches beyond expected boundaries. God's family is larger than human prejudice. Unity grows whenever welcome replaces exclusion.

During my three years at Sewanee, I spent much of my academic work studying Archbishop William Temple, one of the great Anglican theologians of the twentieth century. Temple wrote a sentence that has stayed with me throughout my ministry: "The Church is the only society that exists for the benefit of those who are not its members."

Most organizations exist primarily to serve the people already inside them. The Church exists for those who are not yet here. When a congregation remembers that mission, many smaller disagreements lose their importance. We become less concerned about protecting our preferences and more concerned about sharing the love of Christ with the world around us.

As Episcopalians, we have been given a remarkable gift for nurturing unity: the Book of Common Prayer. Notice its name. It is not the Book of Common Opinion. It is the **Book of Common Prayer**.

For centuries Episcopalians have recognized that faithful Christians will not always agree about every issue. Yet we gather around the same Scriptures. We confess the same creeds. We pray the same prayers. We celebrate the same sacraments.

The Catechism on page 855 asks: “What is the mission of the Church?” The answer is: “The mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.”

Notice that word: restore. Unity is not something we manufacture by our own efforts. It is God’s gift through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Our calling is to protect that gift, repair it when it has been damaged, and live into it every day.

Every Sunday we see that unity made visible at the altar. People of different generations, occupations, political opinions, and life experiences come forward together to receive Holy Communion. No one receives a different bread because of how they voted. No one drinks from a different cup because of their income or education. We all come with empty hands. At the altar rail, we are reminded that our deepest identity is not found in our politics, our accomplishments, or our failures. Our deepest identity is that we are beloved children of God, redeemed by Jesus Christ. The Eucharist proclaims every week that *what unites us is infinitely greater than anything that divides us*.

So how do we live Psalm 133?

First, listen before reacting. Our culture rewards instant opinions. Christians are called first to understand. Listening is an act of love.

Second, forgive quickly. Joseph reminds us that bitterness destroys community while forgiveness restores it. Every healthy parish depends on people who are willing both to ask for forgiveness and to offer it.

Third, widen your circle. Notice the newcomer. Speak with the person sitting alone. Welcome those who feel like outsiders. Every act of hospitality reflects the heart of Christ.

Psalm 133 concludes by saying, “For there the Lord ordained his blessing, life forevermore.” God’s blessing rests where his people dwell together in unity. Our world is hungry for communities where people love one another across real differences. It longs to see relationships shaped not by fear or suspicion but by the grace of Jesus Christ.

May your parish be that kind of community. May those who enter your doors be able to say, *Ecce Quam Bonum*, “How very good.” May we become like the fragrant oil that consecrates God’s people and like the refreshing dew that brings life to dry ground. And may the Holy

Spirit give us the grace to forgive generously, welcome joyfully, worship faithfully, and walk together as one Body in Christ.

IN THE NAME OF THE HOLY TRINITY: FATHER, SON, AND HOLY SPIRIT.

DO NOT COPY