

UNITY NOT UNIFORMITY

Saint Mark UMC

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Good morning. It's a real pleasure to be back before you today. I get a little grumpy when I don't get to preach often enough, so I like to seize any opportunity granted.

Now, it's no shock to any of you that the world is in terrible shape today. Nations fight against nations, natural disasters happen with increasing frequency, brothers are estranged from each other, parents are cutting their children out of the lives, and vice versa. Politicians seem to be intent on beating the other party, rather than promoting what is actually in the best interest of the country, or governing, and the news is always horrible. If you watch it regularly, it's no wonder that you have a sense of futility and even horror about what is going on it.

But is that all we really have to offer? One of the foreign soccer players from another country, who was here for the World Cup, said an astonishing thing: if you only watch the news, you'd think the world was about to end, but if you go out into the countryside and talk to real people and visit with them for a while, you get a completely different view of the state of America. And I think that that is a valid statement.

When you talk to regular people, they respond like regular people. This is true across the globe. Mary and I were fortunate to be able to go to Turkey, and it was the most wonderful trip we've ever taken. Southern hospitality can't hold a candle to Turkish hospitality, and our favorite parts of the trip were when various members of our group got to have dinner with a Turkish family in their home. During that trip, we were walking to the restaurant where we were going to have lunch, and we passed a park, where a mother and her young son were playing. The

mom was saying it was time to go home for lunch, and the son was having a fit, because he didn't want to stop playing. The interesting thing is that this whole conversation was in Turkish, which neither of us understands, but we knew exactly what was happening, which goes to show that all people have more in common than they have differences.

Which brings us to today's Scripture. In Psalm 133, David is rejoicing that the people of Israel were once again united following the end of Absalom's revolt against David. Listen now to Psalm 133.

¹How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!

²It is like the precious oil on the head, running down upon the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down over the collar of his robes.

³It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion.

For there the LORD ordained his blessing, life forevermore.

Pastor: This is the Word of God for the people of God.

People: Thanks be to God.

That's it, that's the whole Psalm, and you might be excused for thinking there's not much to it, but you'd be wrong. Let's delve into it a little bit.

The first verse says it's good and pleasant to live together in unity. Seems almost like a "duh" statement, but let's look at what it says. First up is the word "good." You might think that good is a nice word, meaning okay or some such. But the Hebrew word used here is "Tov," as in Maazel tov (good luck). It's the same word that God uses in the beginning, when he created the Heavens and the Earth and saw that it was good. In this sense, there is a moral element to it, as in it fulfills the purpose God had in mind for it. So it means much more than that's nice. It means that it is doing what God intended it to do. Pleasant then reinforces Good, doubling the emphasis on God's original plan for creation.

Kindred, here, means everybody, not just your family. Remember that we are all children of God, regardless of creed, color, country of origin, sex, gender preference, or anything else that people use to try to separate “us” from “them.” God loves all of his children equally, and if it’s a case of “us” or “them”, God is usually on the side of them, especially if “we” try to exclude others.

Unity is a slippery concept. Does it mean uniformity, everybody exactly alike in everything? Or does it mean that we come together in faith, hope, and love to serve God’s greater purpose? It’s pretty clear to me that God is not a big fan of uniformity. He made each of us different and special in our own way, and He knew what we would be like before we were even conceived, according to Jeremiah. He made us red and yellow, black, brown, white, and we are all precious in His sight. If he wanted all of us to be identical, we’d be clones.

Furthermore, the last time everybody thought exactly alike was at the Tower of Babel, and God made it quite clear that that wasn’t acceptable. In addition, ¼ of all of the animal species on earth are beetles. I hardly think that a God who spreads beetles so indiscriminately among the species would want everything exactly alike. I also can’t think of anything more boring than everybody being exactly the same.

So what does unity mean? It means we all have a part to play in the scheme of things, but we can come together. Think of Paul’s version of everybody having a different gift, but all are to be used to the glory of God. Think of it as a huge choir of everybody on earth, each with their own part to sing, but blending into a harmonious whole. Think of the early Christians, who were different people, with different needs, and ideas, but who were all in one accord. When problems arose, they worked it out with prayer and discussion, actually listening to each other, rather than stating a position, and saying that’s the only way to do things.

So it fulfills God's purposes when we come together in unity. It helps to restore the original intent to God's creation, even though, as humans, it's not a perfect re-creation of that world.

Verse two has some rather obscure imagery in it. It compares living in unity to Aaron's being anointed with oil. When Aaron was anointed as priest for the Tribes of Israel, oil was poured over his head. This wasn't just a consecration of his role, but also a blessing delivered through the anointing directly to Aaron. The Psalmist expands this imagery by saying that the blessings of God go far beyond the simple anointing. Indeed it's so overwhelming that it not only runs over Aaron's head and beard, but indeed it gets onto all of his clothes. In other words, God's blessing is poured out extravagantly on those who live together in unity.

Verse three also has a little bit of obscurity to it. Hermon is a mountain to the north of Israel, lying in modern Lebanon, and Zion, as a location, and not just a metaphor for Heaven, is to the south of Israel. So the dews of Hermon wind up drenching Zion, it means that the whole of Israel (which is a metaphor for everybody, not just the Hebrew people, since it goes beyond the confines of Israel) gets the blessing as well, which means that the blessing of God (eternal life) is for everybody that lives in unity with each other.

So in a nutshell, Psalm 133 is saying that the world fulfills God's purpose when they live in unity together, and that extravagant blessings flow from that action.

But is that realistic in today's world? Is it really possible to work together with a common spirit and a common goal? Aren't these examples just of Biblical folk doing Biblical things, and do you expect the same of us? The short answer is "yes." The longer answer is some more examples of everyday people doing things in real life that exemplify what it means to be in unity.

Here are Saint Mark, the last time we did a Rise Against Hunger event (2024), we had folks from over ½ dozen different denominations, put together 50,000 meals for starving people throughout the world in about 2 hours. The time before that, we put together over 120,000 meals with folks not only from different Christian denominations, but also our Jewish and Muslim brethren, along with a few secular humanists who heard what we were doing and wanted to help.

The potato drop (2021) in conjunction with other churches, sorted a massive amount of bags of potatoes to deliver to 17 different organizations throughout the upstate to help hungry people.

The day after the tornado ripped through Seneca, I missed the message about staying home, and got to the church before they closed the roads due to downed power lines. There was a line of trucks and cars filled with chain saws, axes, rakes and shovels waiting to get into the neighborhood and start helping clean up. They didn't care what denomination, or color, or economic status you were, nor did they care about your gender preferences. They saw people who needed help and jumped right on it. I'm still humbled by the amount of activity they accomplished in a very short time period.

When Hurricane Helene hit, the same folks were out in force cleaning up as quickly as they could. In addition, the folks in North Carolina were in desperate straits, and folks organized mule trains to get supplies to folks who couldn't get out of their houses. I understand that some of the roads won't actually be operable until 2029, so the mule trains will continue as long as necessary to make sure folks have enough to eat and enough fuel for cooking and keeping warm.

All of these examples are just common folk like you and me, who saw a need and worked together to solve it. They didn't act like they were better than anybody else, nor did they wait to see if it was politically correct, nor did they spend countless hours in debate as to whether or not

this was creating a culture of dependency. They saw a problem and they acted. When conflicts arose, they talked about it on the spot, solved it quickly and got back to work.

More examples than these are readily available, but the message is simple. Yes, we can live in unity, but it takes an effort to put everything else aside, and work for God's greater purpose. Many folk will deride you for being out of sync with the world, or will put you down because you make them uncomfortable talking about living in unity, or will think you are a sucker and try to take advantage of you.

But here's the thing: it doesn't take a Mother Theresa, or a Francis of Assisi, or even a Marvin Cely or a John Culp to get things rolling. It just takes regular folk with a desire to feed the hungry, give the thirsty something to drink, clothe the naked, welcome the foreigner, comfort the sick, and visit the prisoner. When we come together in unity to do these things, we don't leave our individual thoughts and ideas behind; we blend them into the greater whole. When such unity occurs, it fulfills God's purpose in the world, and the blessings flowing from that unity overflow the whole world because our God is extravagant in everything he does.

It is up to us to live into that unity for the sake of the world. And maybe, just maybe, God might say it is once again "tov."

Amen.