

## ***Good and Pleasant***

### **Psalm 133**

Wayne Eberly

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On this Music Appreciation Sunday, a day when we celebrate the many members and friends of Dunn's Corners who have shared their gifts of music with us, a gift which has blessed us in rich, wonderful, and deeply meaningful ways, we have a psalm before us as our scripture. Because it is a psalm it was in all likelihood a song, a song set to music. This particular psalm, the 133<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, holds a special place in my heart. When I served as a youth pastor years ago in California we had a youth choir, some 100 high school and college students who would travel around during their spring break giving witness to the love of God through music and testimonies. One year we sang a simple chorus of praise.

***Father make us one...Father make us one...that the world may know thou hast sent thy Son...Father make us one***

The simple chorus was followed by an equally simple verse.

***Behold how pleasant and how good it is, for all to dwell in unity. For there the Lord commanded thy blessing, life forevermore.***

One hundred young people singing together a prayer that the Father in heaven would make us one, would bless us with unity was an experience of grace. On that tour, in those concerts, in our life together, the Father was making us one. Unity is a good and pleasant thing.

On this Music Appreciation Sunday, I hope you have experienced the unity that this simple psalm, this simple song, holds out for us. I hope that by offering a few experiences where the unity of God was brought to life in vivid and powerful ways through the medium of music, I hope we might find ourselves joining together in that simple chorus of praise. "Behold how pleasant and how good it is, for all to dwell in unity."

There was the day I thought I was going to a small afternoon reception, when it immediately turned into a heartfelt time of prayer and worship. I had a message at church from a man named Joe Peacock who said he was going to be in Dunn's Corners and he wondered if I could join him and some others for some refreshments. Some of you recognize the name of Joe Peacock. In an early history of the Dunn's Corners Church we read that "During the gas-rationing days of World War II...a group met in the Community House each Sunday morning and had for its students and teachers many who are presently members of the church...Then in 1951 the Pastors Association and the group known as Dunn's Corners Community Chapel concluded that a student pastor could best serve the needs of the chapel. Joseph N. Peacock, a student at Yale Divinity School, spent the summer here on a trial basis and on September 15, 1951, was called to a weekend ministry by Dunn's Corners Community Chapel and Babcock Memorial Chapel in Potter Hill. Under Mr. Peacock's leadership, the Dunn's Corners Community Chapel was incorporated as a church in 1951." (History of Dunn's Corners Community Church Presbyterian, written by Eloise Saunders)

So there I was with Joe Peacock, the founding pastor of our church, who was called in 1951. We were in the home of Ellen Madison, whose home was built on the same piece of land where her mother Florence grew up. There were several of you who were there back in those early years when it all started. Joe Peacock stood up in our small gathering and with a warm and welcoming smile said, "Let's begin our time together with a song." Leaning on his cane he lifted his voice and we all joined in. It was just a few of us in a living room of a house, but it never ceases to amaze me how powerful it is when folks of common mind sing those words that are packed with such meaning. "Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love. The fellowship of kindred of minds is like to that above." For the next hour I listened to sacred stories, some of them humorous and sacred, stories of how it came to be that this wonderful church came to be. Singing with Joe Peacock and Florence Madison and others who have been a part of our church since the beginning, it was not hard to imagine that others were gathered with us in that small living room. The ones who were there in the beginning, the ones who followed, the ones of us who are here now. We are all together. We are all one in the Spirit. We are all part of one holy communion of the saints. Blessed be the tie that binds our hearts

in Christian love. “Behold how pleasant and how good it is, for all to dwell in unity.”

That experience with Florence Madison in the home of her daughter Ellen as they hosted Joe Peacock came back to bless me a second time. Andy Wallace sent out notice that we would be going caroling on a Monday night in December. We gathered in Fellowship Hall, had some delicious refreshments, and then loaded up in cars and headed to our first stop. Sally Scholtz, a friend who did so much for this church, and meant so much to this church, was in the last stages of cancer. We visited her in the home of Carol and Chris and 20 or 30 of us squeezed in and sang our hearts out. Sally might have been ill, but you would never have known it from the beaming smile on her face. Our next stop was at the Apple Clipper. Then we made our way up Woody Hill Road, to that same house where I sat with Joe Peacock back in June. Now it was Christmas. We crowded around Florence and two sweet little angels, Shelby and Laci picked out the carols. We jingled bells and wished you a Merry Christmas. During one break in the singing the most precious thing happened. Joyce Dionne walked over to Florence, knelt down and took her hand, and told all of us how when Joyce was a young teen Florence made such an impact on her with her kindness, her wisdom, her knowledge, and her spiritual depth. When we joined our voices to sing Silent Night, it truly was a holy night filled with heavenly peace. “Behold how pleasant and how good it is, for all to dwell in unity.”

We served a church in the downtown area of Fresno, California. Many refugees from Southeast Asia had settled in the downtown area, and there was a large and racially diverse community with many Hispanic and African-Americans along with the Southeast Asian population. Many of the area churches joined together to do an outreach in the community, which suffered from poverty, gangs, drugs, and violence. For one week in the middle of the summer a whole slew of youth from more than ten churches scattered throughout that downtown area to share the love of Jesus Christ. The sharing of Christ’s love happened in backyard Bible Schools, recreation programs at local parks, and numerous community clean-up projects. Some of the kids who were blessed with homes in the nicer parts of town saw life in a new way. Friendships were built across racial and economic lines. It was a powerful week that reminded all of us

that God's love is for every single person, or as a phrase I have fallen in love with puts it, God's love is for the least, the last, and the lost. And if we are honest, we all fall into those categories. These youth worked hard for that week. They sweated, they cleaned, they taught, they played, they laughed, and they cried. Now at the end of the week we had a closing dinner, sharing testimonies and commitments and talking about how we felt God calling us to continue this type of ministry. A friend named Lee, who helped organize the event, gathered us all in a circle for our closing prayer. He said a beautiful prayer, and then he started to sing. Again, it was just a simple chorus. But as voices joined in, that song touched a deep place in our hearts.

***I love you, Lord...and I lift my voice...to worship you, O my soul rejoice. Take joy my king...in what you heart...may it be a sweet, sweet sound in your ear.***

And then we sang, "We love you, Lord..." We lifted our voices as one to the God who loves us so much he sent his Beloved Son to be our Savior. "Behold how pleasant and how good it is, for all to dwell in unity."

It has been more than 25 years since the Berlin Wall was torn down, that wall that separated people and served as a symbol of oppression and repression. Not long after the wall fell a German pastor visited the church we were serving. A group of college students had gathered in our living room as this German pastor told the story from his perspective of the forces that joined together to lead to that historic moment of freedom. When he finished talking he took out a bag filled with broken stones. He gave a piece of broken stone to each one of us. The broken pieces of stone were from the Berlin Wall.

There is yet another simple chorus of praise and yet again that chorus of praise comes from a psalm. This simple chorus comes from Psalm 118. You might know it. "This is the day...this is the day...this is the day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice...let us rejoice...let us rejoice and be glad in it. This is the day that the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it. This is the day...this is the day...this is the day that the Lord has made." During his presentation the German pastor had been telling us how a movement of prayer, much of that prayer underground, had led to the tearing down of the dividing wall of hostility. He firmly believed prayer was at the heart of that transforming moment.

When he said that it brought to mind a news clip I saw when the Berlin Wall was being dismantled. A group of Germans had gathered and they were singing a song. I don't speak German, so I didn't understand the words they were singing. But I knew the tune. These Germans, experiencing freedom, a freedom that had grown out of a movement of prayer, were singing, "This is the day the Lord has made."

Earlier in our service this morning we read from Ephesians 4, which is a passage about unity. "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all." (Ephesians 4:3-6) The repetition of the word one and the direct reference to unity is inspiring. But Ephesians recognizes you don't simply wake up one morning and say, "Let's all decide to have unity." Ephesians recognizes there are walls of hostility that divide and separate and isolate people one from another. Before that inspiring passage about unity there is an equally inspiring passage that tells us Jesus Christ has torn down the dividing walls of hostility. When those walls are torn down, then the way is clear for true and unfettered freedom. Then the way is clear for peace and harmony and unity.

We know the tearing down of the walls of hostility did not come without a cost. So it is in the same psalm that exults in the praise of "This is the day the Lord has made" we also find a reference that would one day take on a meaning both profound and humbling, a meaning that is literally earth-shaking. Psalm 118 is where we are told the stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. When Jesus was betrayed; when Jesus was arrested; when Jesus was whipped and stripped; when Jesus was sentenced to death; when Jesus suffered and died; he was rejected. Rising from the dead we were able to see that he was indeed the cornerstone of our faith. The stone the builders rejected became the cornerstone. Holding a piece of broken stone from the Berlin Wall, a concrete piece of evidence for what we believe will one be an eternal reality, that Jesus Christ will tear down every dividing wall of hostility, that sparked a glimmer of hope that there will be a day when all of God's children will be one. And I wouldn't be surprised if when that happens the saints break out in a chorus

of, “this is the day”, and proclaim with thanksgiving how the stone that was rejected has become the cornerstone. And without a doubt we will join our voices to say, “Behold how pleasant and how good it is, for all to dwell in unity.”

There are days when the love of God fills us and blesses us and surrounds us and embraces us. A group of us hopped on a ship that sailed out on the Sea of Galilee. Yes, that sea, the very one where Jesus walked and taught and traveled. Everything was perfect. The Spirit of the Lord was present in a very special way. We spent a long time in silent wonder and reflection. I don’t remember how it began, but at one point we started singing How Great Thou Art. On a ship on the Sea of Galilee, surrounded by a sweet spirit of God’s peace and presence we sang, “O Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder, consider all the worlds thy hands have made...” We sang of brooks and birds and gentle breezes. Then we sang, “And when I think that God his Son not sparing, sent him to die, I scarce can take it in...” And as each verse ended our hearts and emotions soared. “Then sings my soul, my Savior God to thee, how great thou art...” On that ship we raised our voices as one, and in that moment we truly were one body filled with one Spirit loved by one God and Father of all. Behold how pleasant and how good it is, for all to dwell in unity.

There is one story about a hymn that is particularly well known, and the story and the hymn are connected to a ship. Horatio Spafford sent his wife and daughters on a transatlantic ship in the 1800’s. There was a tragic shipwreck. His wife survived but his four daughters all died. The cable his wife sent contained the sad news: “Saved Alone.” Horatio Spafford boarded a ship bound for Europe to bring his wife home. As the ship passed the area where his daughters had perished, we are told, “In the depth of his sorrow Horatio, a man of strong religious faith, wrote, on a piece of note paper the words of the hymn which has since given comfort to many, *It is Well with my Soul.*” In a few moments we will close our service by singing that very hymn. Can you imagine the depth of faith to look out on the place that symbolizes all that is lost and say, “It is well with my soul”?

Friends, let me leave you with the image that we are on a ship...together. We are sailing the seas. Because our God fills our lives with joy and many rich blessings, there are moments of profound grace when we join our voices as one, "Then sings my soul, my Savior God to Thee, How Great Thou Art." There are moments when dividing walls of hostility come down, walls like the ones in Berlin and walls like the ones that divide people by race and gender and wealth and so many other ways. Those walls come down and we sing, "This is the day the Lord has made." As we sail, there are moments when the stone the builders rejected becomes the cornerstone, moments when people like you and me and men and women and boys and girls discover the amazing truth that God loves us as his precious children, moments when Jesus Christ enters a person's life and brings the fullness of new creation and hope. We respond to this amazing grace, "I love you, Lord, and I lift my voice..." And there will be moments, sad and sorrow filled moments, when we look over the side of the ship and see what has been lost. As Horatio Spafford lost his four daughters we have all experienced painful loss, loved ones who are sick and suffering, loved ones who are separated from us by death.

In those moments we are bold enough to believe that we are not alone on this ship. Jesus is with us. He is not asleep. He is wide awake and fully aware of all that we face. He will never leave us and he will never forsake us. He has the power to calm the storms. He has the mercy to comfort us. He has the love to sustain us. And because he is with us, because he has not only faced death but risen from the dead in triumphant victory, we know that this ship we are on will make it safely to the other side. There will be a day when the journey ends and God gathers all his children together in a place of safety and security. The final lines of the hymn Horatio Spafford wrote are these: "O Lord, haste the day when our faith shall be sight, the clouds be rolled back as a scroll; the trumpet shall sound and the Lord shall descend; even so it is well with my soul." Jesus will come back and take us all safely to the other shore. That is why we can sing with such confidence, "It is well with my soul." And when we all get there, when we all get together, one body with one Lord and one faith and one baptism, and one God and Father who is over all and through all and in all, when we all get there together, may our voices unite to sing that beautiful song of praise. "Behold how pleasant and how good it is, for all to dwell in unity."