

The Lord Bestows His Blessing

Psalm 133

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Psalm 133 is a travel tune. It is included with fifteen other psalms in what the bible refers to as the Psalms of Ascent. Israel had annual festivals, and for the festivals the people would travel to the Temple, which is in Jerusalem. Jerusalem is a city set on a hill. To get to Jerusalem you ascended. And as Israel ascended, they sang songs of ascent.

The Psalms of Ascent begin on a note that might resonate with us as our world struggles to find its balance during a time when the threat of nuclear war is heightened and the hatred and renewed presence of white nationalists and neo-Nazi groups serve as a stark reminder of how ingrained prejudices can be. Psalm 120, the first of the Psalms of Ascent, finds the psalmist lamenting, “Too long have I lived among those who hate peace. I am for peace; but when I speak, others are for war.” Thankfully the psalmist is not stuck. He is on a journey. He is headed somewhere.

Psalm 121 is the second of the Psalms of Ascent, and it begins with words familiar to many. “I lift my eyes to the hills—where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.” It has been suggested that on the journey to Jerusalem, as the people traveled they couldn’t help but lift their eyes to the hills. Those hills, unfortunately, were littered with shrines and altars dedicated to idols and false gods. As the psalmist lifts his eyes to the hills, as he observes these symbols of false hopes in false gods, he asks, “Where does my help come from?” The statement of faith that follows is powerful. “My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.” The psalmist is not only headed somewhere, he is headed there with someone.

What follows are songs that exult in the anticipated arrival in Jerusalem, “I was glad when they said unto me, ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord.’” (Psalm 122) There are remembrances of times God delivered the people from darkness and despair. “When the Lord restored our fortunes, we were like those who dreamed. Our mouths were filled with laughter.” (Psalm 126) The remembrance of past deliverance leads to the hope of future deliverance. And the ascent continues.

And then at one point, one moment when the many who are ascending, the multitudes who are ascending, there comes a moment when all those ascending realize they are on a journey together, on a journey as a community, on a journey as a people called by God, rescued by God, redeemed by God, strengthened by God, loved by God, and made one by God. At one point, at one joyous and glorious moment, the realization that God has given them a common purpose and a common goal because of their common faith, the song breaks out as the many voices are joined as one. “How good and pleasant it is when God’s people live together in unity!”

The psalms of ascent might begin with the lament, the real and legitimate lament of Psalm 120, “Too long have I lived among those who hate peace. I am for peace, but others are for war.” Today it might seem like our journey is just beginning, that we find ourselves living in a time filled with hate and conflict. The Psalms of Ascent serve as a living witness to the reality that the people of God, people of faith, are on a journey that moves from hatred and conflict and evil and wickedness toward the healing and wholeness found only in God.

But maybe the reality is more than that. Maybe we not only move from a world filled with hate and conflict and evil and wickedness, we move *through* a world filled with hate and conflict and evil and wickedness toward the healing and the wholeness found only in God. The God to whom we lift our eyes, the Maker of the heavens and the earth, is the God whose clear intention is to bring unity to this broken and fractured world. That God, the living God, the God who called us and claimed us, is the God who moves his people on their journey of faith from hatred and violence and through hatred and violence to unity. This God puts a song in our hearts. “Behold how pleasant and how good it is when God’s people live together in unity.”

A compelling event in the life of Israel allows us to see what it might look like as God is about the work of moving us from and through the conflict and strife of this world to a place of healing and wholeness and yes, a place of unity. This compelling event is found in the latter part of Genesis, the first book in the Bible. It is the story of Joseph and his brothers. We heard the ending of that story today, with Joseph hugging his brothers and weeping and everyone coming together for a big group hug. What we didn’t hear is where that story began and how that story progressed. If the ending is every bit as beautiful as Psalm 133 and the unity that is so good and pleasant, the beginning is every bit as hopeless and filled with conflict and alienation as Psalm 120 and the lamentation about living among those who hate peace.

The roots of Joseph's story go back to his father Jacob, the younger of two sons born to Isaac, the son of Abraham...yes, that Abraham, the father of faith for Israel. Though Jacob is younger he uses deception to grasp first the birthright from his older brother Esau, and then the blessing. Fleeing in fear from Esau, who is intent on getting revenge, Jacob travels east to find refuge with his uncle. There he meets and falls in love with Rachel, but finding turnabout is fair play, Jacob is deceived by Esau into marrying the older sister Leah. Jacob then works so he can marry Rachel as well, and finds he not only has two sisters as his wives he has their concubines as well. When all is said and done there are 12 children by four mothers and they all live together as one big happy family.

Um...not so much. But whatever troubles you might anticipate in this combustible nuclear family are compounded greatly by the fact that the father Jacob plays favorites with his 12 sons, and Joseph is the favorite. Jacob gives Joseph a famed coat of many colors, a sign not only of the favor Jacob had for Joseph, but a sign as we read in Genesis 37 that Jacob *loved* Joseph more than any of his brothers. And his brothers realize that. This is sibling rivalry on steroids. Because these 12 brothers will become the 12 tribes of Israel, we can view this story as not only a family story, but a story of tribes and people groups and countries and nations. Borders and boundaries are crossed and fought over and pride and power are added to the mix and there is some old fashioned tattling by Joseph as he gives his father Jacob a bad report about his brothers. The jealousy and bitterness of the brothers boils over so much that they make a plan to kill Joseph, and are only barely talked into downgrading the plan from murder to casting him in a pit and selling him into slavery. Perhaps the sparks that ignite this firestorm are the dreams that Joseph has that he will be great and magnified and glorified above his brothers and his whole family and his family will bow down to him. In the end this fractured family explodes and is shattered and scattered.

Except that is not the end. Maybe you find yourself today in your own version of conflict and chaos, betrayal and bitterness. Maybe that is how you feel about our nation as old wounds of racism and white supremacy are freshly and painfully reopened. Maybe you feel closer to the explosive and destructive beginnings of the Joseph story than to the tearful and tender reunion. Maybe you feel closer to the lament of Psalm 120 than to the celebration of Psalm 133. Know that the journey of Joseph's family moves forward. The journey of your life can move forward. The journey for our nation can move forward. Over the course of some twenty two years Joseph goes from a slave in Egypt to being Pharaoh's right hand man. His journey teaches him about suffering and rejection, about faith and trust, about humility and patience, and about a God who has a purpose and a plan. His brothers are on a journey as well. We don't know everything they experienced, but by the time they meet Joseph, unrecognizable to them after all these years, these brothers

have learned hard lessons about looking out for one another, about taking responsibility for one another, about stepping up to defend one another. We are led to believe the brothers have learned to regret and accept responsibility for actions they took against Joseph, actions that brought pain and heartache to their father Jacob. It seems the brothers have come to share in that pain and heartache. They learned the consequences of their actions.

All of which leads to this dramatic encounter in Genesis 45, where now Joseph, the one betrayed and beaten and sold into slavery has all the power. He has the upper hand. He has the opportunity for vengeance, the opportunity for violence. Talk about an explosive situation. But God has brought this family to a new place. God has brought this family to a different place. The desire to hurt is gone. The desire to heal is present. Showing more than a desire to heal, Joseph takes the opportunity to use his power and authority to provide for his family, to make a home for his family, to give his family a hope and a future. That is how we get to the place in Genesis 45 where Joseph threw his arms around his brother Benjamin and wept, and Benjamin embraced Joseph, and they wept. And Joseph kissed all his brothers and they wept. What were those tears? Bitter tears? Hot and angry tears? No! By the grace and mercy and healing power of God, those were tears of joy. “Behold how pleasant and good it is when God’s children dwell together in unity.”

The journey of Joseph began with an explosion that ripped a family apart. God can work even in the most desperate and destructive of situations. But it doesn’t have to begin there. Our journey toward unity can begin in normal times, in peaceful times, by developing patterns and making plans that build and support and develop and connect and strengthen and encourage life and relationships and community.

We had a really positive theme for our Vacation Bible School this year. The theme was Maker Fun Factory. We celebrated God as our Maker, and we also were encouraged to consider how each of us can be a maker, using our gifts and talents, our time and our treasure to make and build good things in life. I hope we don’t let go of that theme. God is the Maker, with a capital M. But we are makers with a small m. I mention Vacation Bible School because many of us involved in working with our children have come to long for our church to grab hold of this ability we have to make. Within our ability to make things is an opportunity to teach our children to make things, to discover their gifts, their talents, their passions, and hopefully their purpose in life. We all can be makers, and when we join our gifts of making with the gifts of making that others possess, guess what comes from that? Community. And that moves us one step closer to the psalm. “Behold how pleasant and how good it is when the children of God live together in unity.”

Julie had an idea years ago. She was working with the junior high kids at our church in Houston and she wanted to help the kids learn how to make things. As any good Presbyterian church does, our church had some people who were famous for the food they could make. An older woman from church was held on a high pedestal for the biscuits she could make. Her name was a wonderful rhyme, Polly Colle. Combining her rhyming name with an alliteration, you might say Polly Colle's biscuits were buttery and bountiful and beautiful to behold...bursting with flavor. Julie asked Polly to come to our house and teach the junior high kids from church how to make biscuits. Polly must have been in her 80s, the girls were in their early teens, they lived in different worlds with different experiences and expectations, and yet in that kitchen, as they joined together to make something, the years faded, the differences melted away, any anxiety about how that day would work out vanished, and for a few brief hours, the unity that is so precious to God, and precious to God's children, was present in a way that was vibrant and full of life. That unity continued on, as once the relationship was formed, Polly and these young girls had something in common, something they shared.

Polly was not only a member of our church, she was our neighbor. I would often see her out in her gardens as I would walk on our street. I found that along with getting her hands dirty by making biscuits, Polly also loved to get her hands dirty in her garden. Then over time as we visited together, I discovered she got her hands dirty in some ways that made me love her even more.

Right out of school Polly went to work as a social worker in Mississippi. She met countless families whose lives were marked by poverty, struggle, and hardship. As she met these families she got her hands dirty digging into the challenges these people faced.. For eight years Polly worked as a social worker. Those years shaped her life and her commitment to helping people in need. Helping others she was helping to make community.

When she left social work she volunteered at a hospital in Houston. Over the course of the years she was with the hospital as a volunteer she accumulated 25,000 hours of service. Her husband, being an engineer calculated her volunteer hours to be the equivalent of 12 ½ years of full time work at 40 hours a week. Polly was volunteering at the hospital in the early 1980's when they began to have patients with AIDS. Back in those early days, people were afraid of AIDS, afraid of people who had AIDS, afraid of catching AIDS if they came into contact. Polly, who spent her whole life not being afraid to get her hands dirty in the details of life volunteered to work with the AIDS patients.

How do we make community? We get involved in the lives of others, like our children, people of different generations. We work with those who have needs. Polly was a trained social worker, but you don't have to have a degree to care, to be concerned, to help others. Polly volunteered at a hospital. Many of you volunteer at hospitals, with civic clubs, with local charities, with schools, with your church...That's how you make community. That's how you build community. Thank you for who you are, and for what you do. It is a good and pleasant thing to be involved in building community.

Even though we might not ever get to that point in our lives where it all works together, where the whole family, the whole nation, the whole world joins hands and sings together, my guess is that along the way God will surprise us with some pretty special moments of unity.

That woman named Polly Colle was there for me on one of the most meaningful days in my life. My mom died on Saturday, May 5th, of 2012. On that day Julie was scheduled to fly to New York City. She boarded the plane and made that trip. Our two daughters were living out of town. Our boys, who lived in town, were both away that weekend. My mom died in California and I was all alone in Texas. Late that evening I went out for a walk. I was walking with a heavy heart. I was walking through our neighborhood. I walked down the street where our neighbor Polly Colle lived. She was in her front yard, working in her flowerbed. Knowing who Polly was, what her life stood for, it was kind of neat to see that her hands were dirty. I walked toward her and said hi to her. She stood up with her hands covered in dirt. I said, "Polly, my mom died today. I could really use a hug." Sure enough I had come to the right place. This sweet woman named Polly Colle felt my sadness, felt my pain, felt my loss, and so she reached out and hugged me. But her hands were dirty. After she hugged me I looked and the back of my shirt had these two handprints left from the muddy dirt she had been working in. After we cried together we laughed together. And we shared a moment of unity.

We have two hands. We have two eyes. We have two ears. We have a heart. Let's get our hands dirty in the business of life, the business of caring, the business of building, the business of making, the business of loving. Let's get our hands dirty with the business working for unity. As we get our hands dirty, may we leave marks, fingerprints, signs of God's goodness and grace wherever we go and in whatever we do. "Behold how pleasant and how good it is when God's children live together in unity."