

Joy of Unity

Psalm 133

Rev Dr Jos Strengolt

Ahh! The joy of family relations... I look forward to seeing my daughters in Holland this summer, and grandson Hugo. And to see my youngest daughter Justine marry! And to see other family members again.

But we all know that in many families, the gatherings of brothers and sisters can be times of great tension. When there is a family feast, there are always family members who steer away as far as they can from each other.

Sometimes it is much better for certain family members not to 'dwell together', because there will not be unity - but a fight, if not physical then at least verbal.

When we do see a family that is really warm and united, we are aware that this is quite unique. So unique that we even have a song about it in the Bible - Psalm 133: 'How good and pleasant is it when brothers dwell together in unity.'

Beauty of Unity

Psalm 133 does not speak of brothers in a single family; it is a song that was used in the temple of Israel; it speaks of the religious brotherhood of all of Israel.

This same unity is also the Christian ideal. And this unity of Christian brothers and sisters is also to be celebrated - when we see it - because we know how divided the church is, and how often in local congregations there are be frictions and fractures - in the body of Christ that actually should be one in love and peace.

True unity is unique, that is why the songwriter of the Psalm says: 'behold!' 'Pay attention!'

If unity among Christians would be easy and normal, the apostle Paul would not have to urge the church to 'make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit.' (Eph 4:3-4)

When do we say to someone that he 'has to make every effort'? Make every effort to lose some weight. Make every effort to be in time. Make every effort to wake up in time. Make every effort to pass your exam.. We only say that when the matter is important, and when it is hard to do. Make every effort to keep the unity - because heartfelt unity is important, and it does not come easily.

But it is worth it... It is 'good and pleasant', we have read in the Psalm. We all love pleasant things, but often the things we deem pleasant, are not so good. And the good things we avid because we think they are do not pleasant. Why do mothers never have to tell their child, 'eat your ice-cream', but they do say: 'eat your spinach'.

Christian unity is both good and pleasant. But not easy to attain. But then, the most valuable things in life are often very hard to reach. Most things of real value, come at a high price.

This Christian unity is really worth it. It is compared with a wonderful fragrance. The image is of Israel's high priest, Aaron, who gets fragrant oil on his head, it drips on his beard, and then on his cloak. Such abundance of oil fills the house of God with wonderful fragrance.

The oil begins on the head - think of the head of the church, Jesus Christ. He was anointed with the Spirit of God, and it dripped from him onto the church with Pentecost. And in the church, everyone, the whole cloak, the whole body, is touched by this Spirit of God.

Jesus first gave his Spirit to the church when the apostles were together praying in the upper room. And Jesus promises to be in our midst - when two or three are gathered in his name with a common purpose.

When we are together, united in a community where love and peace are the cement of relationships, then we may expect the fragrant presence of the Spirit of God.

The beauty of unity is also compared with the dew on Mount Zion that comes from Mount Hermon. When the sun would shine on the snow covered top of Mount Hermon, far to the north, the vapour would be deposited as dew on dry and thirsty Mount Zion in Jerusalem.

We are often dry and thirsty - but if the brothers in Zion are united, God will give refreshment on hot, difficult days.

If you need that fragrance of the presence of God, and his refreshment in your areas of need, Christian unity is the road to achieve it.

This works in a very practical way; God uses means; he uses others to lift you up and to help you and encourage you. If you live in unity with your fellow Christians, you put yourself in the place where God can lift you up when you are down; where he can satisfy many needs by others who are close to you; where your loneliness will be softened by the love of many.

This Christian fellowship is also the place where you can satisfy your need to serve God. Look around you - what people need your help? Who needs someone that God - through you - looks after them?

Who needs a bit of refreshment? In the community of the church, you can be the hand of God. And together with the community of the church, you can be God's hand for outsiders as well.

Jesus prayed for this unity of his followers:

[I ask] that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. [...] that they may be one even as we are one, [...] that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me. (John 17:20-23)

If we as followers of Jesus are one - then the world will believe that Jesus was sent by God. And it will make the world know that God loves them.

The loving community of the church is presented here by Jesus as the true heart of mission. All we do in this world in mission and for God is lame without this being done from the heart of the one church of Christ. Denominational division, racial division, age- or gender separation, all this militates against the will of God. He wants us to be one body, united in love and peace.

2 Unity is not uniformity

One body - but this does not mean uniformity. Christian unity is not a negation of our racial differences, of different needs of young and old, of some differences between men and women.

The Psalm celebrates unity in the temple - but the people who came to pray were not a uniform group. People came from many nations, with different habits, different skin colors, different dreams and desires.

The New Testament is full of reason why the church could split in many fragments. Jewish followers of Jesus came from a very different culture than the gentile followers of Jesus. Especially when it came to eating each others food, this created a real problem.

But the church can't allow itself to split over matters of culture, habits, nationality, etc. The early church underlined, we are catholic, that means, from all nations, from the whole world. The true church is worldwide. And therefore, per definition full of differences.

If we divide over racial or cultural matters, we are no longer catholic, of the whole world. Then we undermine us being the true body of Jesus Christ.

Maybe you think, well yes, culture is no reason for splitting of from this or that church, but look at those others, how unholy they are!

In the early church, in North Africa, there were major debates about how holy the leadership of church should be, and because some were not found holy enough, there was a major split in the church. Division was rife. They found it hard to be one and holy at the same time.

How do we define the real church? That was the central question in those days, and it is still important. Is the church the community of those who are perfect in holiness?

The vast majority of the early church agreed, eventually, that a lack of perfection in some, is no justification for separating the one body of Christ.

And mind you, how do we define true holiness anyway? What is the sum of all the laws of God? That we love God and love others. Holiness should not separate people, but draw them together; it is the holy cement of love that is needed for keeping the body of Christ together.

The answer of Paul was, bear the sensitivities of those who are weak, do not sacrifice your unity over things that are not truly important. Stop criticism of others who do not think or live exactly as you like it. Criticism is a sure way toward division.

Maintaining heartfelt unity when you notice real differences in opinions and lifestyle can be hard, but it is what our Lord asks from us. But it is not easy.

I think it does need some clear agreement about what is truly important and what is not. I believe the answer lies in the fact that we must also be apostolic.

To be an apostolic church means - to agree that we together abide by the faith of the early church, the faith of the apostles. This faith is most eloquently expressed in the Creed that we repeat together each week.

If we together focus on our Lord Jesus, and the Trinitarian faith that is expressed in the Creed, if we focus on loving God and loving each other, we have the right ingredients for the cake of unity here.

Then we can expect God to bless us together.

3 Blessing assured

Psalm 133 speaks of blessings that follow the unity of the believers. Maybe the writer thought of the blessing the high priest gave to the people after he had been in the Holy of holies, with God. The united group of Jewish believers, standing there together, would be blessed by God through the words of the High Priest.

Just as Jesus promises to be in our midst if we are together in his name, just as he promised that God will answer our prayers if we pray in unison. Where love reigns, God reigns. Where your love wants to be a blessing for others, God blesses all.

The Psalm even speaks of 'life forevermore' as the ultimate blessing. In the Old Testament this is rather unique - there are not many indications in the old testament of the life hereafter. I think it is significant that in one of the few occurrences, it is linked with the believers' fellowship.

This unity has the fragrance and the refreshment that comes from eternity - and it cannot even be broken by death. Our brothers and sisters who passed away before us are now with God, in eternal life. But they are not cut off from us, they are still part of our Christian community.

The community of believers cannot be broken, not even by death, because our Lord rules over all. Through him, you and I are family, and so are those who worship before his throne today. We are one body, one family.

At Holy Eucharist we bow together with those who are already in heaven before our Lord, and we are together refreshed by His presence.

This being the case, we have no other option but to be one in love and peace. All of our differences become minute when we together worship our Lord. His love for us makes us bear each others burdens, accept each others imperfections, and it makes us sensitive to the needs of others.

In this context of love and service to each other, we immediately experience God's presence and his blessings.

Conclusion

God is uniquely present in the loving unity of his children; that is where his blessings are assured.

Let us therefore make every effort for this unity. By first and foremost focussing on our Lord God and on what is truly important - that is to love God and to love each other.

If we do this within the context of the historic creeds of the church, without making too much fuss about the details in which we are different.

If we grow closer to Jesus Christ and serving him, we grow closer to each other. Close to Jesus, close to each other - that is where the Lord commands his blessings.

Amen