

Alliance Theological Seminary
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Assignment 1: Sermon

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PSALM PASSAGE: Psalm 133

INTRODUCTION

“Can we really get along?” It’s the question I often get when I meet up with people sharing about their family members. It’s a tragic question as many of them are from Christian households. I get that in our mind, this might be a question that is common in a secular, wordly home, but to have an issue in the household of faith might be shocking. Truth is that there will always be disagreements when we do life with one another. It often feels like we tend to argue much more with our family members. They are the ones who we spent the most of our lives with. They are the ones who we are most comfortable with, and therefore we often show our true colors around them, although sometimes they might not be the best colors.

But in truth, this is a question that we can ask in any area of our lives. With people comes disagreements over our values, opinions and positions. With the various arenas of existence around that we are engaged with on a daily basis, it does beg the question; “Can we really get along?” In the passage we read today, the psalmist believes that as the people of God we can really get along, in fact, it is exactly what God has intended for humanity.

BACKGROUND OF THE SONG OF ACCENT

Psalm 133 begins with a powerful note with the statement *Behold*. This is a bold statement to begin the psalm with. Other English translations use the term *Look* or *Come See*. The author is drawing people to listen to the powerful statement to follow. It is as if the psalmist has found the secret solution to all this chaos. Psalm 133 is part of a collection of psalms called the *Song of Accent*. Traditionally these fifteen psalms from Psalm 120 to Psalm 134, are songs used during the pilgrimages to Jerusalem. It was meant to represent the fifteen steps that are on the temple in Jerusalem. If you think about it, that means each Psalm has a build up to the final Psalm of 134 where the Psalmist begins with a powerful shout of “Come Bless the Lord!” Being

the fourteenth psalm in the *Song of Accents*, it can be interpreted that the step before us entering into praise, the Lord is asking His people to live in unity with one another. Jesus has shared this thought as he taught the people to reconcile with their neighbor before bringing our offering to the temple (Matthew 5:24).

AS PEOPLE SIT TOGETHER

The Psalmist begins this short psalm with a statement in which drawing the reader to come and see “how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!” It is good and pleasant when people are together because it was the original intention of humanity. As we explore the beginning of Genesis, it reveals that God intended humanity to be together as He notes: “It is not good that the man should be alone (Genesis 2:18).” As God saw his creation of humanity dwelling together, He saw that it was good and pleasant because as the image bearers of God, our unity models who God is. Our faith has a confusing undertone if we don’t realize. We believe in One God, yet it is represented in three persons also. If we understand that God himself is community, then it makes sense that we are called to be in community with one another. Think about it, without community, humanity is imperfect. We are the living image of God, yet we only possess one of His special attributes to create only in a covenant of marriage. It is His intention for humanity to dwell in unity.

It is truly good and pleasant when brothers dwell in unity. Recently, I have been counseling two brothers as they are caught in the middle of their parents' difficult divorce. While they are brothers, they have yet to truly know each other before this incident in their family. Realizing the weight of what is happening in their home, the two began to connect with each other for they realized that no one else would really understand them as well as each other. They knew that in order to get through their difficult circumstance, they as brothers have to be willing

to “dwell in unity.” They have to support each other, then their father is unable to in his depression. They learned to strengthen each other when life gets hard. There is great power that can happen when we are willing to do so.

It is interesting how the psalmist phrases it when brothers “dwell” in unity. The word dwell in the original language stems from the action of “to sit” and is often described as a temporal action. While it can mean such as dwelling in a place or lingering, it takes a conscious choice to stay for a long duration. Can I suggest that this means at any moment brothers can stop dwelling, but we will have to choose to sit down and stay, or dwell. It is hard for people to be united unless they are willing to actually still down and be present for one another. In my denomination, we have been divided for too long over stances that after a while have no relevance to the gospel. When I enter into meetings and gatherings, you feel the tension in the room, and often so thick that you can figuratively taste it in the air. The divide is so clear yet, no one is willing to budge to listen to the otherside. While yes we might temporarily sit with one another, we are not present for each other. In this case there is no unity, willingness is the important element in which unity can take place when we sit together.

Being a mentor and counseling many youth in most of my ministry career, one of the bigger topics has been their relationship with the parents. Somehow, someday, we will get to the same conversation and question, “Do you have dinner with your parents?” I am actually quite surprised as the years have gone by how little families still have dinner together. More surprising is how many of these kids who don’t, have greater difficulties with their parents compared to those who do have family dinners often. But the kicker is that the follow up question I would ask is “How often does your parents, ask you ‘Did you eat?’” Many of their responses, if not all will tell me they hear it all the time. I’ve begun to believe that in the Asian context, this is their only

means to tell their children “I love you.” I encourage these guys to really consider taking those offers and sitting with their parents over a shared meal. I know it’s often awkward to sit there in silence or having generic questions and responses, and even in some families, the often bickering or fights that could occur. As those latter examples could be reason to resist attempting, but without even trying to sit down, you cannot have an opportunity to see something different happen. Who knows maybe at first these dinner moments might be very uncomfortable, but with consistency perhaps things could change. We won’t know unless we are actually willing to try and attempt to be present as we sit at the tables. I encourage you to think about the people you have a hard time with, especially those who you have no choice but know are stuck in your life for a while. Your situation will not change for the better if we keep it as it is.

LIKE A LOT OF ANOINTING OIL

The Psalmist in this passage tries to encourage the hearers to seek unity by sitting with one another, and he gives two simple illustrations to drive the point. The psalmist shares that when brothers dwell in unity, it is like oil poured down on Aaron. Oil is used in various ways. It was customary for a host to give oil to their houseguest, the fragrance of oil gives a refreshing welcoming to guests. Often the use of oil has a meaning of anointing or a symbol of consecration or to be set apart. As I shared earlier, this was God’s intention for humanity to be united together. Therefore why would we not have anointing as we gather together in unity.

In the description of this illustration, we notice that there was an abundance of this good oil in which it was poured on Aaron’s head, down on his beard, and all the way down the collar of his robes. This anointing was not a sprinkle, God was not being stingy when he was anointing Aaron. When Aaron was being anointed in Leviticus 8, you notice in the narrative, Moses was sprinkling oil over the elements of the altar, but when I came with Aaron, he was not stingy at

all, he poured that jar on this guy compared to the other items being consecrated. This was something I learned in conducting my first baptism after my ordination. Unfortunately no one told me in preparation that we aren't gonna be stingy when it came to the water. In my tradition, due to time and convenience we do not do full immersions, unless it was a special day like we somehow ended up in the Jordan River. We instead baptize with water on the head. My first baptism was to a young gentleman who came to faith through his girlfriend. It's a great story but what was ironic was that his Chinese name actually translates to "drowning in grace" which was the opposite of what I did. As I baptized this young man I just dabbled my hand in the baptismal font and baptized him in the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. It was a dry baptism, so dry that paper towels weren't even required. Afterwards, when my associates baptized their congregants I realized you don't just twirl your fingers in the bowl, you are supposed to scoop some water out and pour it on their heads. As the baptism class took their photos, everyone was drenched as if they were immersed besides my guy. He thanked me since the couple had a date afterwards, but I felt bad, because our kingdom is not a stingy kingdom.

When the people of God dwell together in unity, there is an overflow of anointing that is visible for all to see. Just as the photos of the baptized are drenched, people who see those photos on the wall will right away know that those people have been baptized. It's the same when we dwell together in unity. The world will notice something interesting when we do so, that we are living set apart from what the world often would do. If the people of God are willing to actually sit down together to address disagreements it speaks volume to the world about who our God really is. It is really by God in which the wolf and the lamb are able to dwell together (Isaiah 11:6).

Imagine what people will say when they see two people who are enemies willing to sit across from each other? We see this a lot in the global political arena. When we see leaders of rival countries in photographs together having conversations, the world sees it as hope that perhaps these talks could change the course of their tension in a positive light. Now if the world can see this in the secular arena, what would they notice about God when they see followers of Jesus who at a time were against each other gathering together? The ironic tragedy is that in every church community, there is always conflict and bad blood within the congregation. Some have been prolonged and unspoken, but everyone who has been attending for a while knows it's underlying. Some even create silent factions like team Jim and team Bob, that get in the way when the church has to make important decisions. Now imagine what could happen if Jim and Bob sat down one day or however long they need to recognize they have conflict with each other, but for the sake of the gospel and the community they are willing to work it out and reconcile. I'm quite sure the church will have better things to talk about after that. Each church has its own struggles, and I encourage you to take that step to engage in it. It can be the opportunity in which God would unleash a great anointing among us.

BLESSING FROM MOUNT HERMON

Like a good preacher, the psalmist includes another illustration to express how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell together in unity. If the priestly anointing illustration is too high level thinking for the hearer, the psalmist uses a very vital element for survival, water. Everyone needs water, and for the context of the land of Israel, you notice how scarce this vital element actually is. Mount Hermon is the tallest summit of that region and it's known that the snowfall that accumulates on top of the mountain sources a good portion of the Jordan River. As this psalm is sung during pilgrimages in Jerusalem, you have to understand the annual rainfall in

Jerusalem averages to about two feet. That is very little rain, I am sure as the season of spring rolls in, we get about two feet of rainfall here in just a couple of hours on a rainy day. For the people in the context, seeing the dew on Mount Hermon is truly a great sight and a great blessing to a dry region.

Here the psalmist compares how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity to the great blessings of water in a dry land. In an agricultural society like ancient Israel, many will seek deities that would help resource their success. Hence why the Old Testament has many stories with struggle over worshipers of Baal who is the Canaanite deity of rain. I remember when I spent some time on a mission with the Hopi Native Americans in Arizona, when our team arrived on the reservation land, it began to rain. While for us it might seem like a normal occurrence as people living in the northeast, however in the desert region of the southwest, rain is limited. Apparently by chance that it rained while we were there helped us engage the locals who would have normally been skeptical about outsiders. In their tradition, those who bring rain are a blessing.

The same way here the psalmist is sharing the secret that when people dwell together in unity, it is like water that comes as a blessing. For an agricultural society any moisture is wanted in any capacity. It is interesting how the psalmist uses the word “dew” in this verse. As Issac’s song shares when he was blessing Jacob accidentally (Genesis 27:28), dew is a blessing from heaven. Dew can be used to describe various types of moisture. For a climate such as Israel with limited rainfall, vegetation survives through the production of morning dew from the change of weather in the night. It can also mean rain as dew falling from a high point such as Mount Hermon. It can also mean the melted snow flowing down through the valleys as the water source for their crops.

For the non-farmers, it can also represent an important symbol for their faith life. For ceremonial washings are frequently practiced in Jewish tradition, many have to bathe in cleansing pools around town. However stagnant waters are often seen as “dead” water. It is only considered living water, if rain water falls in the pool or the water source comes from a moving body of water. As dew from Mount Hermon, it defines both rain and the flowing waters into the valley. Overall it shows the deep blessing in which the hearer would understand from the illustrations of blessings of the dew of Mount Hermon.

If flowing water is a symbol for blessing, then it makes sense how uniting together will give us great blessings. First thing is that when people work together, we are able to accomplish some amazing things that we would have not been able to do alone. No one here has mastery over everything in life, we can be great at some but not all. For those who believe so, we all know the phrase “Jack of all trades, master of none.” There will be something that we have no proficiency with or if we are since we dabble in everything, our end product is probably not so great. Sure if we are great stubborn go-getters, we will try to figure it out, with many resources now available around us, we can try to get by yet the finished product might not be what the results from the YouTube DIY guide turned out to be.

A buddy of mine stopped by a few weeks ago asking me for some help putting a new bumper on his car. I am mechanically inclined, but my weakness is body work. But we decided to try and figure it out together while spending time catching up with each other about our busy lives. It took us the whole day, and the end result was far from perfect. I think he was content with it just because he gave up for that day and accepted the fact it would probably be the best the two of us could do. I also know he was discontent with it actually because he took it to a body shop a week later. Ironically they only took thirty minutes, and it was perfect. It’s nice

when you have others around you that know stuff you don't. It can even be called a blessing. My buddy felt blessed just to have me as someone who is mechanically inclined, we also joked that our little tribe gotta expand to find a body guy. Then how good and pleasant would it be for brothers to dwell together?

When we think about blessing, we also have to see the other side of that story. When people are united, they are blessed, but blessing can also be limited or even choked when we do not live in unity. I was a part of a committee recently for my denomination helping to mediate for a local Chinese American Church. The church is struggling with conflict within and their attendance and financial situation took a downturn recently. Unlike most situations with Asian American Churches in which the first generation tends to be seen oppressing the next generation, in this church was the opposite. The old guard has aged and when the Chinese speaking lead pastor retired, they passed the mantle to the younger English speaking congregation to take the lead of the church. However the English speaking leaders disliked the new Chinese pastor although he was loved by the Chinese congregation. With a majority voice in the Elder Board from the English congregation, they voted to fire him. It was a ugly situation and many left due to how the leadership handled the situation. It caused the church to go from being the church in our district with the most members to a church struggling in the span of two years. Here's the thing the English Congregation didn't know, while the English Congregation was great in numbers, the financial support came from their Chinese speaking counterpart. Without the offering of the older generation, the church struggled to stay afloat. This shows how important it is for communities to dwell in unity together. There is a reason that God put us into these church communities, we are meant to dwell in unity together, although there are differences with one another within our church community, if we want to see God's blessing over us, we have to

honor the community He has led us to and choose to be willing to work things out with one another.

ANOINTING AND BLESSING FOR ALL

These two illustrations show something special about what happens when the people of God choose to dwell with one another. The anointing and blessing does not just benefit us or our small community, it will also trickle down to those around us and who know even further than we can possibly imagine with the human mind. Both illustrations show this action of movement in which the oil and the dew is falling down, and down, and down. With the image of anointing, the psalmist chose to note Aaron's name. Aaron was the high priest of the people which meant that anointing him was for the benefit of all. Aaron's role as the high priest was to go to God and intercede on behalf of the people. In the description that the anointing oil dripped down to the collar of Aaron's robes implies that it must have soaked throughout the garments of Aaron. High priests wear on their chest a breastplate with twelve precious stones. It was known that these twelve stones represent the twelve tribes of Israel. It wasn't just for Aaron who was blessed but the entire tribe of Israel having a mediator.

In the blessing illustration, we see the dew from Mount Hermon, flowing down from the mountain impacting everyone on its path down to mountains of Zion or often known as Jerusalem. As the people flood into Jerusalem for their annual pilgrimages, it is like the waters from Hermon or far away places making a meaningful moment in which the people of God three times a year gather together although they live in regions locations and lives. But without these people gathering, there will be no celebrations of Booth, Passover, or Pentecost. When people come together, it impacts more than just us.

It's often said that showing up is half the battle. It is actually one of the more difficult tasks to do. We could have been in so many different places this morning, but all of you choose to join this community to worship our Lord today. Without each and everyone of you there could not be a meaningful moment that can happen. Without each and everyone of you, there will be no witness this morning for the world to know that people are gathering together in this building to worship the Risen Lord. But because you are here, and the staff that is here to take on their roles, we are blessed and so is his neighborhood.

I still remember when we first gathered after the COVID-19 restrictions were lifted. As a church leadership, we were uncertain who would show up and who would return. Some of us were also discouraged to learn that some of our people may not return for various reasons. However, those who were willing to come back and gather, to serve and to worship God in a physical space, we became an anointed space that was opened to be a blessing for the community around us. As we look at the people here this morning, the old timers will recognize that we have received many newcomers since then. We showed up, united together, and people came and joined in on this amazing movement of following Jesus Christ. It is this that the psalmist closes this psalm with the statement "For there the LORD has commanded the blessing, life forevermore." It is truly when God's people dwell together in unity that blessings of heaven are activated.

THE CHALLENGE

This morning I challenge you here in attendance to consider this. We all want God's blessings over us and our lives. However it will require us to make the decision to be willing to sit with one another and give God permission to move among us. The hardest part of this whole process is to be willing. We have to make the conscious choice on our own to believe that God

has a greater plan for all this and if we are meant to dwell with one another, we will do so because we believe He knows something that we don't.

So here's the deal, there are people in our lives in which we know deep down, we have to make amends or extend forgiveness with. I am sure that the Holy Spirit has been nudging you to take action and go. For some of us it's been far too long in which it has choked us from the blessings of God. Would you be challenged to extend the invitation to go and sit with them, whoever they are or whatever they did before, and see what perhaps God could really do among you. It might not be quick and easy and some of them you might need to take a few attempts. Others might not even respond or get anywhere, but if we do not even give it a chance, we will stay where it is in those relationships when perhaps God wants to give you another outcome.

CLOSING: IT CAN ONLY HAPPEN WITH GOD

Friends know this as we close, none of this can happen by our own power and ability. Just as the disciples asked Jesus, how can anyone be saved when Jesus let a rich young man go, Jesus said "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible (Matthew 19.16)." It is truly only through God that reconciliation can happen. Those who are in great divides can sit among one another. Only God can surrender us in Love so securely, that we are able to live in suspension of a wretched divided world in which things can actually happen. Question is will we allow God to be God, or have we tried to use him for our agendas? Surrender to Love, unity and change starts with us.