

Sermon Theme - A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Community

12th Sunday after Pentecost

August 23, 2020

Ninth in a Series of Ten Sermons

Psalm 133 - Behold how good and pleasant it is when brothers and sisters dwell in unity.

Rev. Dr. Larry Griffin | Page 1 of 5

Dear Friends in Christ,

In previous sermons, we have focused on 1) pilgrimage, 2) repentance, 3) providence, 4) the value of worship, 5) servanthood, 6) distinctively Christian joy, 7) a proper view of work, and 8) perseverance or stick-to-itiveness. Today - a focus on community and what it looks like and what it sounds like and what it feels like when congregational members are getting along in such grand fashion that Jesus Christ is honored.

By nature, brothers and sisters do not get along in perfect fashion. There's nothing new about siblings arguing and fighting and holding grudges and worse. Three stories in Genesis immediately come to mind: 1) Cain hating and striking dead his brother Abel, 2) Joseph's brothers resenting their father's favoritism and selling him into slavery, 3) Jacob and his mother Rebekah conniving and successfully tricking his brother Esau out of his inheritance as the oldest brother.

We've all heard modern day stories of family life not going well. Stories of two teenage sisters drawing a line in a room they share and insisting that the other stay on her own side. Stories of children writing notes like "I hate mom" or "No girls allowed" and posting them on their doors. Stories of older siblings declaring the younger one to be spoiled rotten, stories of parents showing favoritism, stories of selfishness and bitterness and competitiveness and personality differences and so much more, stories of adults angry about how their parents' inheritance was divided, stories of families where hurt feelings and harsh words escalate into life long rivalries, immature behavior, embarrassing conflicts, and worse.

So also are our church families not exempt from baptized believers not getting along. Thomas Rainer from Outreach.com lists what he thinks are the top five reasons for congregational conflict. The first one might surprise you. 1) disagreement of over what time church will start. (story I heard of a member of a former parish who was part of a dual parish conflict over service times. He argued for the earlier time 10:30 instead of 11 and culminated his argument with "if I can't have my dinner at noon, I don't want it!"), 2) disagreement on how to deal with a pastor or staff member's behaviors or decisions, 3) disagreement about length of worship service, 4) lack of clarity regarding who makes which decisions, and 5) worship style.

Today we learn from Psalm 133 two lessons about what will help congregational life together flourish.

- ***Lesson #1 is that a community of faith flourishes when we see each other as God's "anointed."***

Sermon Theme - A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Community

12th Sunday after Pentecost

August 23, 2020

Ninth in a Series of Ten Sermons

Psalm 133 - Behold how good and pleasant it is when brothers and sisters dwell in unity.

Rev. Dr. Larry Griffin | Page 2 of 5

- *Lesson #2 is that a community of faith flourishes when we expect God to be refreshing each other on a daily basis.*

Lesson #1 is that a community of faith flourishes when we see each other as God's "anointed." The Psalmist compares brothers and sisters in the faith getting along to "it's like costly anointing oil flowing down head and beard, flowing down Aaron's beard, flowing down the collar of his priestly robes."

Throughout Scripture, oil is a sign of God's presence. It is a symbol of the Spirit of God. Listen to what Eugene Peterson says about this process of anointing a high priest with oil, "Oil glistens, it picks up the warmth of sunlight, it perfumes the person.... There is a quality of warmth and ease in God's community which contrasts with the icy coldness and hard surfaces of people who jostle each other in mobs and crowds."

Lutherans believe, confess, and teach the priesthood of all believers. In distinction from the Office of Pastor, we have the office of priest, which all Christians hold by virtue of their baptism into the family. Moses writes in Exodus 19 that the people of God are to God a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. I Peter 2 language is that we are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession and that our mission is to proclaim the excellencies of him who has called us out of darkness into his marvelous light. Dear friends, listen carefully, as New Testament believers, we are priests in the sense that we have direct access to our Father in heaven by virtue of the bloody and sacrificial death of Jesus. We are priests in the sense that we are set apart to forgive as we have first been forgiven and to love one another as we have first been loved by God in the person and work of Christ. Jesus said it this way, **"By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."**

Just imagine the respect an Old Testament priest would receive as people saw him coming. They saw him coming as the anointed one of God. They saw him coming with oil flowing over his head, down into his beard, and spilling over on his collar. They saw him as a man of God who mediated and interceded and sacrifice on their behalf before Almighty God. They held him in reverence and were grateful to God for the office he held.

Now imagine congregational life where brothers and sisters in the faith see each other as the anointed people of God. Where every time we see each other coming, we see a baptized believer whose sins have been forgiven and who has been set apart for holy purposes. Where we see each other as redeemed sinners for whom Christ has suffered, for

Sermon Theme - A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Community

12th Sunday after Pentecost

August 23, 2020

Ninth in a Series of Ten Sermons

Psalm 133 - Behold how good and pleasant it is when brothers and sisters dwell in unity.

Rev. Dr. Larry Griffin | Page 3 of 5

whom Christ has died, for whom Christ has risen, and for whom Christ is coming back again. Where we see each other as brothers and sisters worthy of respect and kindness.

Our life together in the church will flourish as often as we represent Christ to one another, it will flourish as often as we see each other as anointed with the Spirit of God, it will flourish as often as we speak truth in love to each other, as often as we look for the best in each other. It will flourish as often as we speak both the warnings and the promises of God to each other, with eternity in mind.

The kingdom of God is like a medium sized church in a medium sized city full of folks who don't always see eye to eye, but they need each other if they are going to be lifting high the cross of the Savior. In good times they don't always pay attention to each other, but as soon as illness and death knock at their door, together they run to their God for refuge and strength. Often they are delighted with each other, occasionally they rub each other the wrong way, but always the Word of God is a lamp unto their feet and a light unto their path. Some days they fall into thinking too highly of themselves, and other days they stumble into thinking that their gifts and abilities don't really matter, but as often as they are still and hear God's Word, as often as they eat and drink at the Table of their Lord, they get along with each other. They set aside their differences so that the Gospel might go forward. Their controversies get settled, their wounds have a way of healing, and their unity is a blessing to anyone who is paying attention.

Lesson #2 is that a community of faith flourishes when we expect God to be refreshing each other on a daily basis.

The Psalmist writes that the church is ***like the dew of Mount Hermon flowing down the slopes of Zion. Yes, that's where God commands the blessings and ordains eternal life.***

In that part of the world, Hermon is the highest mountain. It rises to a height of over 9000 feet in the Lebanon range, which is north of Israel. I'm told that the morning dew is particularly heavy at such altitudes. Peterson writes that in Psalm 133, "the morning dew symbolizes a sense of morning freshness, a feeling of fertility, a clean anticipation of growth."

Isaiah says it this way, "***Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.***"

Peterson suggests that when we expect God to be working stronger and stronger faith in each other's hearts, "***We refuse to label the others as one thing or another. We refuse to***

Sermon Theme - A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Community

12th Sunday after Pentecost

August 23, 2020

Ninth in a Series of Ten Sermons

Psalm 133 - Behold how good and pleasant it is when brothers and sisters dwell in unity.

Rev. Dr. Larry Griffin | Page 4 of 5

predict our brother's behavior, our sister's growth. Each person in the community is unique, each is specially loved and particularly led by the Spirit of God."

Dear friends in Christ, imagine how God will bless us as often as we view each other with an expectation that God is doing something new, as often as we are curious about each other's stories, as often as we are interested in learning new things about each other, as often as we explore deeper friendships, as often as we refuse to be bored with the way things are and enthusiastic about what God may be doing.

One of my wife's particular strengths is doing new and surprising things in life together. She specializes in making our home a beautiful and enjoyable place to live. And on the other hand, one of my particular weaknesses is not paying attention to nor appreciating the creative ways she is decorating our residence. In so many ways I fail the test of attentiveness, and I'm wondering if any women out there today could give me an amen in terms of wishing men would be paying closer attention? Recently Debi and I were on the subject of wall hangings and decorative items in our living room area, and she wondered if I could name the items that were new in our living area. I'm ashamed to admit that there were items she had lovingly purchased and place months ago, and I had not noticed.

It's easy to fall into this mindset that doesn't appreciate the little things and the new things going on in the hearts and minds of loved ones. It's easy to stumble into a self-centeredness that over the course of time wounds the hearts of our family members, also in the church. As a result, our life together becomes routine, our expectations go low, and boredom and worse sets in.

The last line of this Psalm concludes that the good and delightful life together is where God commands the blessing and ordains eternal life. In this line we have just a hint of the rousing good fellowship we possess by faith in Christ. Here on earth, Paul pictures this flourishing congregational life as a place where brothers and sisters in the faith are joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer, generous with those in need, and famous for hospitality.

Peterson pictures this fellowship in heaven as a place where relationships are warm and expectancies are fresh. He invites you to imagine the friends you enjoy being with most, imagine the companions who evoke your deepest joy, think about your most stimulating relationships and your most delightful experiences and the people with whom you feel completely alive, and that, he says is a hint of heaven, *for there God commands the blessing, ordains eternal life.*

Sermon Theme - A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Community

12th Sunday after Pentecost

August 23, 2020

Ninth in a Series of Ten Sermons

Psalm 133 - Behold how good and pleasant it is when brothers and sisters dwell in unity.

Rev. Dr. Larry Griffin | Page 5 of 5

The kingdom of God is like parents who fix their eyes on Jesus Christ by focusing their attention on getting their children baptized and raised up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. It's like grandparents who fix their eyes on Jesus Christ by caring deeply about the Sunday School and the Confirmation classes and the Divine Services and the Bible Classes and the outreach efforts of their beloved home church. It's like single people who fix their eyes on Jesus Christ by focusing on serving and giving and living out their vocations in a way that attracts others to Christ. It's like brothers and sisters who have all kinds of squabbles and misunderstandings and worse, but at the end of every day, they rest in the arms of a God who specializes in new beginnings and second chances. **Behold how good and pleasant it is when brothers and sisters dwell in unity.**