

GOOD AND PLEASANT
Psalm 133
(some thoughts from Trevor Brown)

Dr. Howard Batson
First Baptist Church
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Fred Craddock was once flying back to Atlanta from the Ontario, California, airport. He had been visiting the Seventh-Day Adventist community in Loma Linda. Craddock inquired of his seatmate, just being neighborly, "Do you live in Atlanta?"

"Oh, no," she replied. "I used to live there. Now, I'm going back to see my grandkids. What were you doing in California?" she asked, continuing the conversation.

"I was in Loma Linda," Craddock replied.

She said, "That's that Seventh-Day Adventist place, isn't it?"

Craddock replied, "Yes."

"Are you a Seventh-Day Adventist?" she asked.

"No, no, but they invited me."

"You went to a Seventh-Day Adventist place and you're not a Seventh-Day Adventist?"

Craddock replied, "Yes." He thought to himself, "What's got this lady so worked up?"

She replied, "I know what you were doing."

"What?" he asked.

"You were 'othering,'"

Craddock said, "I was?"

She said, "Yes, you were 'othering.'"

"What's 'othering'?" Craddock inquired.

"My preacher preaches on it every Sunday. 'We need to do more othering.' What he means is to get acquainted with people who are different from yourself - establish friendships, share in work and play, in prayer and praise, in everything together. Other people. The 'other.' Get acquainted

and relate to the ‘other.’ He calls it ‘othering.’ He preaches on it every Sunday. I am so sick of his talking about ‘othering.’ It’s just a fad,” she said. And she got all bothered about it. “It’s just a fad. I’ll be glad when it passes. If he says one more word about ‘othering,’ I’m going to throw up right there in church. I am so....”

Craddock interrupted. “It’s not a fad.”

She said, “It is a fad. Look here.” She opened up the *Sky Magazine*, the airline magazine, and there was an article that was in English and Spanish and Japanese. She said, “Now look a-there. The airline thinks they are ‘othering.’ A few years ago, it would just be in English like it should be. And we’ll all get back to just having it in English. It’s just a passing fad.”

Craddock replied, “It’s not a fad. It’s as old as Christianity.”

She said, “What do you mean?”

Craddock replied, “When Jesus died, Pilate put a sign on the cross: ‘Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.’ And it was written in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek.”

The woman didn’t say another word the whole trip. Craddock said he hated to pull his Bible card, but that lady was starting to get on his nerves.

“Othering.”

Bonhoeffer’s best work in my opinion, the little book *Life Together*, opens its first chapter with the proclamation of Psalm 133: “Behold how good and pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together in unity.” He opens his greatest book with this great psalm.

Our relationship with God is personal. It’s intimate. But by no means is it private. We are the family of Christ. As Eugene Peterson has said, the question is not “Am I going to be part of a church, a community of faith?” but, rather, “How am I going to live in my church or my community of faith?”

Scripture knows nothing of a solitary Christian. People of faith are always, everywhere, at all times, members of a community. When, in the early church, some Christians began dropping out and pursuing private interests, a pastor wrote to them, urging them to nurture their precious gift of community. “Don’t neglect meeting together, like some of you are doing, but encourage one another, and all the more, since you know Christ is returning” (Hebrews 10:25).

Scripture knows nothing of any religion that is based upon what a person does privately in relationship with God based upon his own spiritual development, her own spiritual formation.

Psalm 133 is one of those dog-eared songs in the songbook of Israel – songs that they sang as they made their way upward to Jerusalem for festival worship. Psalms of Ascents. They are not on a solitary journey. It’s a group traveling together, sharing a common purpose, a common path, striving toward a common goal.

How good it is for brothers to dwell together in unity!

Bonhoeffer says, **“You are not alone, even in death. On that last day you will only be one member of a great congregation of Jesus Christ. If you scorn the fellowship of the brethren, you reject the call of Jesus Christ, and thus your solitude can only be hurtful to you.”** (*Life Together*, p. 77)

Paul echoes this psalm when he says in Romans 15:5, “Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus; that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Wherefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God.”

Now scripture is not naive. In fact, you could call scripture as a collection of family feuds.

From the very beginning: Cain and Abel (4th chapter of scripture), the first story of sibling rivalry. The brothers were competitive and cutthroat, jealous and jaundiced of eye. Fast forward: Rachel and Leah were sisters who fought, jealous over who would bear Jacob’s children. Then, there is the story of Joseph and his coat of many colors and his begrudging brothers – sibling rivalry. They pounce on him, put him in the pit, and sell him off into slavery in Egypt. Next is the story of David and his brothers – the resentment the older brothers experience as their kid brother, David, checks on them and tattles as they head off to war. In fact, Jesus and his brothers fight – disharmony even in the holy family. One Gospel snapshot we have is the brothers trying to drag Jesus away from His messianic work because they are convinced He is crazy – they accuse our Lord of lunacy. And still, in another scene, they try to convince Him to go up to Jerusalem to do His messianic magic tricks as they sarcastically put down His movement.

But in the very midst of the biblical accounts of division and discord among God’s people, we are constantly told by both prophets and evangelists that God’s people are a gathered people. “I will gather them, for I have redeemed them” (Zechariah 10:8). Jesus died, “that He should gather together into one the children of God who were scattered abroad” (John 11:52). And what happens on that final great day? The angels of God shall gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to a another (Matthew 24:31).

When we come together and gather together for worship each week, it is in anticipation of last things, the last day when God’s people will be gathered together at the table in His presence. This fellowship is a foreshadowing of that banquet fellowship. In our faith community, not the private prayer closet, we locate the experience of “God with us.” It was God who said in the beginning, “Let **us** make man in our image.” God, who Himself exists in community, desired to make us to have fellowship with Him and with one another. For isn’t it God who said, “It is not good for man to be alone?”

David Augsburger says in *Dissident Discipleship*, “Spirituality is not free floating; it has a location, and that location is community. Our spirituality is not a private inner temple, it is a place of meeting where we can safely share our private souls, and that meeting place is community.”

Leave it to Westerners to make it all about me, myself, and I, when it's never that way in scripture. It's about we and us and our – togetherness. The only habitat of any disciple of Jesus is community.

In scripture, love of God and love of neighbor are side-by-side, flip sides of the same coin, of one piece. Those who seek to know Christ know that He is most truly known in community.

I want you to notice something about a little passage in the first Johannine Epistle, chapter 1:7. “But if we walk in the light, as He himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, His Son, cleanses us from all sin.” When we have fellowship with one another, we are cleansed from our sin. The addressing of sin in my life depends on you being with me in fellowship. Likewise, your forgiveness is connected to me. Our cleansing requires connection, requires the community of the redeemed.

The church in the earliest days realized that sin was communal and forgiveness was, as well. The Bible says that as we fellowship together, we have the hope of being cleansed. To live in fellowship, to live in *koinonia*, is to rely on the web of relationships of loving, caring community. When this community is centered in Jesus Christ, it takes on the unique character of the one who was willing to suffer on behalf of others. To have *koinonia* with the suffering of Christ means to identify with His way and His church and to suffer the consequences of loyal engagement in His mission (Kraus, p. 39-40).

This psalm goes on in Psalm 133:2. The unity of a worshiping community is “like the precious oil upon the head, coming down upon the beard, even Aaron’s beard, coming down upon the edge of his robes.”

The picture comes from Exodus 29. The instructions are given for the ordination of Aaron and other priests. After sacrifices were prepared, Aaron was dressed in the priestly vestments. Then this direction is given: “You shall take the anointing oil and pour it on his head and anoint him. Thus you shall ordain Aaron and his sons” (Exodus 27:7,9).

Oil, throughout scripture, is a sign of God’s presence, a symbol of the Spirit of God. This is the anointing oil. It makes a person a priest. Living together means seeing the oil flow over the head, down the face, through the beard, onto the shoulders of another. When we see each other as priests, as we see each other as God’s anointed, our relationships with each other are profoundly changed. We are set apart – even like Aaron is ordained – anointed, says David – to serve one another. We are the conduit for each other of the mysteries of God. To each other we speak God’s word.

To be in church is to have a priest at every elbow.

But there is a second image here (Psalm 133:3).

It is like the dew of Hermon, coming down upon the mountains of Zion; for there the Lord commanded the blessing – life forever.

Hermon, of course, is the highest mountain in that part of the world, rising to a height over 9,000 feet plus. Dew is heavy at that altitude. When you awake in the morning, you are drenched. The dew communicates a sense of freshness, a feeling of the anticipation of growth.

Part of what it means to be in the body of Christ is to have rising expectations of each other. We must refuse, absolutely refuse, to label one another as one thing or another. We must refuse to predict each other's behavior. We must see each other in the church family as unique, led by the Spirit of God. How can we presume to make conclusions about anyone? How can we pretend to know each other's place or each other's worth?

The dew says we should have a fresh expectation of newness in each other.

Bonhoeffer has said even when sin and misunderstanding burden the communal life, is not the sinning brother still a brother, with whom, we, too, stand under the word of Christ? Will not his sin be a constant occasion for us to give thanks that both of us may live in the forgiving love of God in Jesus Christ? The sin of the brother teaches us that neither of us can live under our own words and deeds, but only by that one word and deed that really bind us together – the forgiveness of sins in Christ Jesus.

Bonhoeffer lived and died by the adage that church is life together or not at all.

God will have a “people,” not a collection of individuals. To be a “people” is to exist collectively through our prayer, our piety, and our purpose – inseparable from one another. We are way too busy making the church successful when we need to be focusing on making the church a community.

If the de-churching of America is to be addressed, the response cannot be more of the same that led us here. For the church offers us something that cannot be found elsewhere: The church gives us Jesus and makes us part of the body of Christ. And it is in this body that we become Christian, in which we experience the presence of Christ and are changed. (Myles Werntz, “Church Is Life Together or Not at All,” *Christianity Today*, Sept 14, 2023).

Scientists speak of the “butterfly effect,” the belief that the flapping of the wings of a butterfly in China may, one day, eventually affect the weather in the United States. Likewise, everything and everyone is related in the church, everybody is one – tied to a single whole. We must be like fresh dew every morning upon the ancient mount. We must be willing to forgive each other and move forward, to be sorrowful for the pain we've caused another, and to allow each other to grow in Christ. We are all partakers of undeserved grace of God. God's kingdom is little more than a gathering of a motley crew centered around the Christ.

In June 1990, the Boston Globe gave the account of an unusual wedding banquet. Accompanied by her fiancé, a woman went to the Hyatt Hotel in downtown Boston and ordered the meal. The two of them poured over the menu, made selections of china and silver, and pointed to pictures of the flower arrangements they liked. They both had expensive tastes, and the bill came to \$13,000. \$13,000! (That would be \$31,460 in today's dollars.) After leaving a check for half that amount as a down payment, the couple went home to flip through books of wedding announcements. The day the announcements were supposed to hit the mailboxes, the potential groom got cold feet. “I'm just not sure,” he said. “It's a big commitment. Let's think about it a little longer.”

When his angered fiancée returned to the Hyatt to cancel the banquet, the events manager could not have been more understanding. “The same thing happened to me, honey,” she said, and told the story of her own broken engagement. But about the refund, she had bad news. “The contract is binding. You’re only entitled to \$1,300 back. You have two options: to forfeit the rest of the down payment or to go ahead with the banquet. I’m sorry, really, I am.”

It seemed crazy, but the more the jilted bride thought about it, the more she liked the idea of going ahead with the party. Not a wedding banquet, mind you, but a big blowout. Ten years before this same woman had been living in a homeless shelter. She had gotten back on her feet, found a job, and set aside a sizable nest egg. Now she had the wild notion of using her savings to treat the down-and-outs of Boston to a night on the town.

So it was that in June 1990, the Hyatt Hotel in downtown Boston hosted a party such as it had never seen before. The hostess changed the menu to boneless chicken – in honor of the groom, she said. She sent invitations to rescue missions and homeless shelters. That warm summer night, people who were used to peeling half-gnawed pizza off of cold cardboard dined instead on chicken cordon bleu. Hyatt waiters in tuxedos served hors d’oeuvres to senior citizens propped up by crutches and aluminum walkers. Bag ladies, vagrants and addicts took one night off from the hard life on the sidewalks outside and, instead, sipped champagne, ate chocolate wedding cake, and danced to big dip band melodies late into the night.

Just so is the grace of God. Among the people of God, it should be as fresh as the dew upon the mountain. We must be forgiving of each other, realizing that we’re all beggars, we’re all sinners, we’re all completely undone without God, without each other. Only because of His grace through Christ are we invited to the messianic banquet, to the table of the community of faith, to have a seat among the rag-tag people of God.

How beautiful it is when brothers dwell in unity.

“Othering” is not a fad. “Othering” is not some new agenda whose taproot must descend into a political agenda. “Othering” is us. “Othering” is the church when God calls all people from all nations, all cultures, to make up His community.

In Latin, Hebrew, or Greek, in English, Laotian, Vietnamese, or Swahili, in Spanish, Mandarin, or Russian, in Persian, French, Hindi, in 7,000 languages accompanied by 100,000 dialects, in sign language and Braille, we all proclaim with one voice of praise: Jesus of Nazareth, King of God’s people – everywhere, all together, forever. One Lord. One church.