

CALLED INTO COMMUNITY

Psalm 133

(sermon idea from *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction* by Eugene H. Peterson)

**Dr. Howard Batson
First Baptist Church
Amarillo, Texas
September 10, 2023**

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote these words six years before his imprisonment by the Gestapo: “When Christ calls a man, He bids him come and die.”

Even at age 16, Bonhoeffer knew he wanted to study theology. He had the opportunity of studying with the great German theologians of his day, including Karl Barth. In 1939, he was in the United States for a brief time. His friends urged him to remain, to use his gifts as a scholar, a teacher, and a preacher in the service of a church here in America. He was already at odds with Hitler and the Nazi government. He returned because of his love for German Christians, because of his courage. He was arrested in 1943. On Sunday, April 8, 1945, pastor Bonhoeffer conducted a service of worship for his fellow prisoners. He hardly ended his closing prayer when the door opened and they declared, “Prisoner Bonhoeffer, come with us.” That could have only one meaning. The gallows. The next day he was hanged in Flossenburg.

You are familiar with Bonhoeffer’s *Cost of Discipleship*. But there is another book, a smaller work, that was all the more intriguing to me. It’s entitled *Life Together*. The opening words of the first chapter are the opening words of Psalm 133: “Behold, how good and pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together in unity.” He opens his great book with this great psalm.

Indeed, Bonhoeffer was willing to give his life, to leave the safety of America, to go back to be with the church in Germany. When Christ called Bonhoeffer, He did call him to die.

“Behold how good it is for brothers to dwell together in unity!”

Perhaps you’ve heard someone say, “I love God, but I hate church.” What they’re saying is, “I like the Father of my family, but I can’t stand to be with my siblings.” The problem for those folk is that having God as your Father (if you want to be His son or His daughter) means you automatically have a lot of brothers and sisters. You automatically have to relate to the church. God doesn’t have any “only children.” No only sons or only daughters. He never ever makes private, secret salvation deals with people.

Yes, our relationship with Him is personal. Yes, it’s intimate. But private? No. We are a family in 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?”

There are some of God’s children who run away from the church and try to pretend that they don’t even have brothers and sisters who are gathered together today. They pretend as if the family doesn’t exist.

But scripture knows nothing of a solitary Christian. People of faith are always 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).

The Bible knows nothing of any religion that is based upon what a person does privately in relationship with God based upon their own spiritual development, their own spiritual formation on a retreat or in solitude away from the people and the place of God. Psalm 133 is one of those songs in the dog-eared songbook of Israel – songs that they sang as they made their way upward to Jerusalem for festival worship. They are not on a solitary path. 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!

We are called into community when we’re called into Christ. We’re called into the church when we are called into Christ. The call was not meant for you alone. In the community of the called, you bear your cross. You struggle. You pray. As Bonhoeffer has said, **“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)

How good it is to be among the brethren as they march up to Jerusalem to worship. “Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together in unity!”

These words remind me of the words of the Apostle Paul in Romans 15, where the Apostle declares in verse 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.”

But it’s hard, isn’t it, for even brothers to dwell with unity.

The Bible is full of stories of brothers who cannot and do not dwell in unity. Relatives fight. Sisters fight. Brothers fight. I think about the story of Cain and Abel – the first story of sibling rivalry. The first siblings were competitive and cutthroat, jealous and jaundiced of eye. Rachel and Leah were sisters who fought – jealous over who would bear Jacob’s children.

There is the story of Joseph and his coat of many colors and his brothers who are jealous – a sibling rivalry – and they throw him into the pit and sell him off into slavery in Egypt. There is the story of David and his brothers – the discord they experience as he goes to check on them and tattle on them as they go off to war.

Jesus and his brothers fight, disharmony rather than peace. One picture we have of them is the brothers trying to drag Jesus away from His messianic work because they are convinced He is

crazy. And yet, in another scene, they try to convince Him to go up to Jerusalem to do His magic tricks as they sarcastically put down His messiahship. Kids are so full of themselves and their own needs that they look at their brothers and sisters not as allies, but as competitors. Sometimes, living together like brothers means in actuality squabbles and angry arguments and fights.

Living together, how good it is when, as brothers and sisters in Christ, we can live in unity. Not always agreeing, necessarily, but living in unity. With one voice of praise, rising to heaven, praising God.

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 another (Matthew 24:31).

When we come together and gather together for worship each week, it is in anticipation of the last things, the last day when God's people will be gathered together. This fellowship is a foreshadowing of that fellowship.

How good it is when we are in unity.

The world is broken, isn't it? Fences and walls are symbols of our age.

James Gallagher and Ronald Volpe were childhood friends. They grew up to purchase houses next door to one another. Gallagher planted a hedge on his property. In 1992, Volpe trimmed that hedge without Gallagher's permission. An argument followed, and the two friends ceased speaking. Two years later, Volpe again took shears to the vegetation. This time Gallagher, his neighbor and former lifelong friend, shot him dead. A Providence, Rhode Island judge sentenced Gallagher to 40 years in prison.

We live separated from God and separated from each other. The scandal is not the brokenness of the world, but the brokenness of the church. There is a constant expanding number of denominations and independent congregations. What's worse, still, is the brokenness of relationships within those broken congregations.

Notice, there are two descriptions of brotherly unity within and amongst the people the people of God.

I. First, look at verse 2. For brothers to dwell in unity...

It 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.

What does he mean by that?

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 29:7, 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 the other. When we see each other as priests, as we see each other as God’s anointed, our relationships with each other are profoundly changed.

Not what we are in ourselves – what you are in yourself and what I am in myself – is the basis of our community, our relationship in church. What determines our brotherhood and sisterhood is what Christ has done for us. What He has done for you, and what He has done for me. 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 each other we need to be the bearer and the proclaimer of the word of God.

How good it is when God’s people dwell in unity because they are as priests to another. The anointing of the oil of Aaron, the pouring out of the presence of the Spirit of God. And in scripture, the Spirit is the spirit of unity.

II. There is something else he says that’s good, a second image. Look at verse 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 is the highest mountain in that part of the world, rising to a height over 9,000 feet. Dew is heavy at that altitude. When you awake in the morning, you’re 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 person 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.

As 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 sins of the brother teach 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 Jesus Christ.

Yet, even before we decide to sin, we have to realize that there is no sin in thought, word, or deed – no matter how personal or secret – that does not inflict injury upon the whole fellowship.

Scientists are now talking about the “butterfly effect” – that belief that the flapping of the wings of a butterfly in China may, one day, eventually affect the weather in the United States. Everything is related. Everything is tied into one single whole. We are members of the body, not only when we choose to be, but with our whole existence. And every one of us – listen carefully – everyone of us serves the whole body of Christ, either to bring this body health or to bring this body to destruction.

There was one particular person who was thinking about joining our fellowship. He said it would be an honor to join the fellowship, and it was his hope and his prayer that he would never, ever bring reproach upon the fellowship that had welcomed him into its membership.

We must be like fresh dew every morning upon the ancient mount. We must be willing to forgive each other, to move forward, to be sorrowful for the pain we’ve caused each other, and to allow each other to grow in Christ. We are all partakers of undeserved grace from God.

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! 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 to each other, realizing that we're all beggars, we're all sinners, we're all completely undone without God. Only because of His grace through Christ Jesus are we invited to the messianic banquet, to the table of the community of faith, to have a seat among the people of God.

How beautiful it is when brothers dwell in unity.

“But concerning brotherly love, you don't have any need that I write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another. But we urge you, brothers, that you would increase even more” (1 Thessalonians 4:9,10).

We can come to church demanding our way, demanding our will be fulfilled. All because we have focused on self – our desires, our wants, our wishes. But how beautiful it is, how good it is, when brethren decide to dwell in unity.

Unity. It's a choice that each of us makes individually, and we make together corporately.