

“Kindred and Kind”

Psalm 133 A Song of Ascents.

How very good and pleasant it is
when kindred live together in unity!

It is like the precious oil on the head,
running down upon the beard,
on the beard of Aaron,
running down over the collar of his robes.

It is like the dew of Hermon,
which falls on the mountains of Zion.

For there the LORD ordained his blessing, life forevermore.

Kindred and Kind

Psalm 133

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I.

Though unintended at the onset, it appears *this* week's sermon will build on *last* week's sermon which, if you missed it, sought to make the point that only a little can make a difference; and, it is surprising just how much.

We begin this morning with a short story which is only tangentially related to our scripture reading for today from Psalm 133. A couple of weeks back, I was talking with my lake neighbor, Al, and he was relating an interaction he had with some folks who were renting a camp near both our houses who were seeking a little advice on where and how to fish. Turns out, Al gave the the same advice that another guy had given them early in the week. Al said, "You mean Mike?" To which they just shrugged, not recalling my name. Al clarified, "the guy with the white beard?" "Oh yes," they replied, "*that* guy.

II.

Which, if I am being honest, struck me as kind of odd. Whereas for most of my life I've been "the *big* guy" now, it would seem, I am now "*that* guy with the white beard." Being "*that* guy," however, makes me uniquely suited to speak to you today on Psalm 133; particularly the verse about, "precious oil on the head, running down upon the beard, on the beard of Aaron."

While anyone with or without a beard may correctly infer this to be a positive, unless you have had a beard you are at a disadvantage to fully grasp just *how* pleasant a well-oiled beard can be. Some years ago I, too, got swept up in the beard care and male grooming rage, and decided to try one of the numerous commercially available beard oils. Wow! What a difference it makes. Not only does it condition and soften the beard, as well as hydrate the skin beneath (no more itching) a fringe benefit is the wonderful scent which wafts up to one's nose; with sandalwood being a personal favorite of mine.

III.

In Exodus chapter 30, we find the Lord articulating to Moses the recipe for what is known as the “oil of anointing” which is used in Jewish rites to sanctify, or set apart, objects and people for special or sacred purpose. In short, to make or proclaim them “holy.” Here, then, is how one is to make the sauce of sacredness: take 2 parts myrrh oil (with its warm, dry, musty, woody, herbaceous, and smoky scent) and add to it 1 part cinnamon oil (sweet and spicy), 1 part calamus oil (a unique scent of wet cake dough, with a woody leathery/suede effect) and, finally, add 2 parts cassia oil (which has a spicy, warming aroma; slightly sweeter than its close relative cinnamon). As you might imagine, such exotic oils and fragrances were both quite dear and hard to come by in desert climates, so when the oil of anointing came out you knew it was a very big deal and a very special purpose or occasion.

IV.

Though sitting here in the middle of August with the relative humidity hovering in the very sticky 75 to 80 percent range, it is difficult for us to remember what we feel like around March when, after being trapped in the house for months with our home heating systems stripping out every last bit of moisture in the air, our skin is all dry, flakey, cracked and callused. All winter long, I slather on oil after a shower, go heavy on the hair conditioner, oil my beard until it glistens, and apply liberal amounts of moisturizing lotion throughout the day. And *still* I itch.

Now imagine, if you will, living in such an arid environment *all* year round. Oil running down the collar of your robe would sound pretty good and pleasant indeed. Not unlike the dew of Hermon, the tallest mountain in Palestine which usually remained snowcapped even throughout the drought season which stretched from May to October, imparting its dewy moisture down the mountainside each morning to refresh and sustain the land around it.

V.

Anytime we study scripture it is a challenge to understand the meaning of any particular passage for our lives, especially when our lives are so far removed from the context out of which the text arose. In the case of Psalm 133, 2,500 years have passed since it was written in the 5th century BCE

following the return of the Jewish people to Palestine after 70 years of exile in Babylon.

If I was seeking to convey to you, in our time, that something was good and pleasant, I would simply use an analogy to ice cream cones and air conditioning and you would, of course, know *exactly* what I'm talking about. The goodness and pleasantness of oil on one's beard, and dew from the mountain of Hermon? Not so much. While goodness and pleasantness are notions which are timeless, the ways in which we might seek to understand them are a function of our specific historical and cultural context.

VI.

Said another way, our values and what we determine to be valuable are a function of who we are, what we experience and the age in which we live. In essence, we must seek to define value and meaning in every generation; even those ideas and ideals which once might have been considered universal.

Never has this been more true than for all of us living in the early part of the 21st century as it regards the notion of unity. These days, when people hear the word "unity" they often take it to mean uniformity or sameness. While, strictly speaking, this is correct, for most of the generations which have gone before us "unity" has primarily been understood to mean: oneness, singleness, wholeness, integrity, undividedness, cohesion, coherence and congruity.

VII.

This was certainly true for the founders of our nation who, in the *Preamble to the Constitution*, wrote:

"We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America."

Not only were these "states" different and various geographical entities which sought to be united, but also as differing and various states of economic status, political empowerment, social standing and personal prosperity. With

all of these diverse states striving for a *more* perfect union (that is to say unity) not just *with* each other, but *for* each other. Which, I am sorry to say, is an historical and cultural context we, in this generation, seem to be unable to fathom as much as the difference between air conditioning and ice cream cones are from beard oil and mountain dew.

VIII.

Of course, all of you are astute enough to recognize that at least one of the seeds of today's sermon springs forth from recent news events, political machinations, and our increasingly polarized national landscape. However, rather than jump on *that* particular bandwagon, I would like to suggest that today's sermon text provides us the means by which we might fall *off* of such a wagon, so to speak. Not only for ourselves, however, but also for the community we all share and for the nation to which we each belong.

Simply stated, let us remember and endeavor to rediscover, here in our own current historical and cultural context, just *how* good and pleasant it *actually* is when kindred dwell together in unity. We do this, by doing what we do best: by simply being the church.

IX.

While the psalmist (whom we suppose to be King David) certainly understood "kindred" in a way that was tribal, as with those with whom one shares a common genetic ancestry and lineage, kindredness also springs forth from a common spirit, a joint identity, shared perspective, and mutual goals. In other words, a church.

In a church, our identity is defined by what we hold in common, and that which we endeavor to undertake together; as one, in unity, so as to form a more perfect union. Not just with each other, but with our God as well. I mean, where do you think the framers of the Constitution got the idea in the first place?!?

While a bit of a quaint notion, "kindredness" is something which all of us have experienced, to varying degrees, at some point in our life. Almost always, though, kindredness is the result of either one of two things: reaction or proaction.

X.

Kindredness born of *reaction* arises from a shared enemy, threat or problem, which can be either real or perceived, and is almost always random or occasional. When you find yourself in a fox-hole, filling sandbags to stem rising flood waters, or trying to stay warm and fed in the aftermath of an ice storm, a sense of kindredness naturally and rightly arises.

Kindredness born of *proaction* arises from mutual endeavor, striving for a shared vision, and builds upon common values, which can be either innate or adoptive, and is almost always planned and long-term. When you find yourself raising children, living and working in community, or attempting any labor which requires the whole to be greater than the some of its parts, a sense of kindredness organically forms and naturally grows.

While the conditions which cause *reactive* kindredness are unfortunately common, the conditions that cause *proactive* kindredness are very difficult to discover and quite a challenge to create. Everywhere, that is, except in a church.

XI.

The church, both as ancient institution and modern manifestation, is built for the very purpose of proactively creating kindredness. Why? Because we share a common sense of gratefulness for what God has given us, and the set of values which grow from such a deep and abiding gratitude. Because we are honest about our own humbleness which is born of very real trials and tribulations. Because we share a hope about the future; both our own and the future we all share. Because we rejoice in the opportunities to give the gift of grace to others, which we ourselves first received.

How? By reveling in the simple goodness and forthright pleasantness of sharing our lives with each other. By recognizing the value of fun, laughter and enjoying ourselves; as ends in and of themselves, but also as the means to those ends, as well as standards by which we gauge the health of the community. By understanding all these things to be who we *really* are, and resist the temptation of allowing our problems to define us. And, finally, by being kind to others; the first step of which is recognizing our kindredness, and how we come to be kindred and kind to each other.

XII.

For years now, I have joked tongue-in-cheek about the Church on the Park being akin to the Island of Misfit Toys from the 1964 Christmas TV Special, *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*, narrated by Burl Ives. This is owed, in part, to the incredibly diverse, eclectic and, yes, *odd* group of people that constitute the congregation. However, diverse does not mean divergent; eclectic does not mean ego-centric, and odd does not mean off-putting.

While unusual, rare and (very often) greatly amusing, what is so remarkable is that rather than choosing to focus on those things which make us *unlike* each other (which can often lead to *disliking* each other) we always endeavor and seem to manage to find the ways in which are related to each other even if only tangentially so; that is to say, even if only a little bit.

XIII.

As we discussed last Sunday, only a little can make a very big difference indeed. I would suggest to you this morning, that the tangential, but tangible difference at work in the congregation is one part the kindredness we create and one part the kindness we show. This is the recipe for our own sacred sauce, which we apply liberally all over ourselves so as to run down our collars, and fall like dew upon our mountainside to refresh and sustain all those around us.

Being kindred and kind to each other are the means by which we are anointed: set apart for the special and sacred purpose of being a real and vibrant example of just *how* good and pleasant living together in unity can be. And, of course, being “*that church*” is a WHOLE...lot of fun! Quite dear, and hard to come by. Amen.