

Sharing the Presence

Psalm 133, Galatians 3:28

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La Verne Church of the Brethren

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I was on Facebook this week catching up on the lives of people I know and love. One of my friends had posted a call for understanding and justice about an event in the news. Someone's response to my Facebook friend was so filled with judgment and righteous certainty that I sat and cried. I wanted to respond back but everything I thought about saying also sounded filled with judgment and righteous certainty.

For several months we have been doing a Zoom group here at the church about having difficult conversations around racism. Many of the people who have joined share that these difficult conversations in which they find themselves are often with those closest to them....family, friends, co-workers.

Our denominational leadership sent out an email this month to everyone on their mailing list. It said that the division and discord in our larger church body had reached such a crescendo that the break off group called Covenant Brethren Church was now actively recruiting people and churches to leave the denomination and join their new fledgling denomination. Leadership was clear that if churches join this new group they are no longer affiliated with the Church of the Brethren and pastors who go will lose their ordinations.

It isn't just in our political realm that we feel disunion these days. We are finding it in our friendships, family relationships, work settings and churches. It is hard to function in that kind of disharmony, in that place of judgment and righteous certainty.

That is what makes Psalm 133, the scripture that Donovan read today seem like needed rainfall after a long drought. *How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity.* You know that feeling? The one where you are sitting in the glow of connection and those deep feelings of joy you have that you usually try to keep to yourself spill over and you just have to tell everyone in the room how much you love them, and everyone in the room feels just a little embarrassed by your exuberant declaration of love. *How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity.*

The Psalmist uses two metaphors to describe this joy. The first one is oil...not just any oil. This is precious oil. This was the oil that was used to anoint someone for ordination or as a sign of hospitality upon arriving in a person's home, hot, tired and spent from travel. But the amazing part is not just that it was costly oil but that it is used extravagantly. This isn't the prudent way we Brethren use it in our ordinance of

anointing...a couple dots on the forehead in which if the breeze blows just right you might smell the frankincense in it.

This is an extravagant pouring of oil on the head. The Psalmist describes the very good and pleasant feeling of unity as precious oil poured on the top of the head that then runs down through the beard of Aaron and then over his collar and down to the hem of his garment. Sounds messy to me....but so is highly sought after unity between the divided.

The other metaphor used in this Psalm is dew on Mount Hermon, which is in the northern part of Israel. This dew is so heavy it runs all the way down to the mountains of Zion....dew that runs like a flood and refreshes all the dry places...miles and miles away.

The Psalm ends with “For *there* God ordained blessing, life for evermore.” What is the *there*? It is unity. That is the way the Hebrew word *yachad* is translated in most of our Bibles. It doesn’t mean uniformity. It means joined together. How very good and pleasant it is when we are joined together...there is the blessing of God...the presence of love. For where love is, God is present for God is love. That is the *there* of God’s blessing....our togetherness.

When I was in seminary, one of my classes was going to take communion together and one student said he wanted to opt out because he was not in right relationship with everyone in the class. The professor stopped us. He said that in the spirit of communion and our Brethren heritage, we would not share the bread and cup at this time. He said, “Our tradition says that unless we are all in right relationship with each other we cannot share communion. It goes against the very meaning of communion. The etymology of the word *communion* is *something that is common to all*. This is something we must do together or not at all.” I was stunned by this turn of events. The popular theology of the time was very individualistic – “Just Jesus and me.” I even had a friend in college who had that embroidered on her shirt – “Jesus and me.” “What about the rest of us?” I always thought when she wore that particular shirt.

We are living in a particularly individualistic time and we have let it form our discourse, our priorities, our consumption and even our faith. But it is incongruous to our reality. In the words of the song that the ensemble sang today we are connected. We share the same world, the same sun, the same oceans. One day we will meet our Maker, till that day we must do what we can to stand by each other, to love each other. It doesn’t mean we have to be the same, think the same but please we do need to love with the same kind of commitment, compassion, understanding and boldness.

Today is World Communion Sunday and Christians around the globe are partaking of Eucharist...together even when separated by geography, time zones and pandemic. In order for communion to mean anything it requires that we come with hearts of love and understanding to a table without edges. We are taking communion with people around the world today who have different views about everything, including the very bread and

the cup. We have brothers and sisters in Christ who believe that when this bread and cup are blessed they become the actual body and blood of Jesus Christ. We are siblings with those that believe that when these elements are blessed the body and blood of Jesus co-mingles with the bread and the wine. Then there are our spiritual ancestors in the Church of the Brethren who did not believe that the bread and the cup became Christ's body and blood but were sacred symbols of Christ's life and death and his call for us to follow in his footsteps of selfless love. Christians over the centuries have argued with each other, derided one another and split over the meaning of this act of communion...over the very symbol Jesus gave us by which to remember him and his call to follow him...this symbol of unity.

On this World Communion Sunday we must set aside our arguments about how Jesus is present in the bread and cup and instead share his presence in our lives. We must join together in the act of remembering and giving thanks...together. *How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity.*

I invite you today to put away all judgment and righteous certainty about politics, work decisions, religion and enter into this act of communion in a spirit of deep love for your brothers and sisters next door and on the other side of the world. In a few minutes you will see Pastor Dawna taking communion by intinction, which simply means that she will dip her bread into the cup and take them together. You will want to have your cracker or bread or communion bread ready along with some kind of beverage. You may take communion with Pastor Dawna by intinction or take the bread and then drink from the cup. No judgment, no righteous certainty here. Take them in the way they hold most meaning and share in the presence of Christ among us. Imagine while you are doing it that you are at a table with no edges and you are surrounded by those that you find difficult. It might be the woman you had a heated conversation with about not wearing a mask or the family member you love but with whom you have completely different political views. It might be a politician or religious figure with whom you are angry. It might be someone with whom you have a broken relationship. Let communion be for you the connective tissue of unity...the sharing in the presence of Christ among us. May this be a true act of communion during these divided times. Allow this to be very sacred space in which Christ is fully here among us. Let the blessing of unity, so very good and pleasant, run down over your head and drip off your chin with abundant love and absolute grace. Amen.