

Like Oil and Water

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Psalm 133 and Matthew 15:21-28

The 133rd Psalm is one of a group of Psalms in the Bible called Songs of Ascent. They are called Songs of Ascent because it is believed that these Psalms were sung by Israelite pilgrims traveling from their homes to worship in Solomon's Temple; which meant literally ascending up to the city of Jerusalem where the Temple was located. The Ascent Psalms were mostly upbeat and hopeful in tone. They reverberated with praises to God, and helped people feel united, in their joy and purpose. They also tended to be very short, and sometimes a little repetitive, which made them easy to memorize and sing. Good, inspirational traveling music along the long road to Jerusalem.

Yet there is more to this particular Psalm than an entertaining “road trip playlist” for whiling away the hours. It begins with this claim: “How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!” Since families, and even clans, would make this pilgrimage together, there was a literal unity of kinship to sing about and celebrate along the way.

But there is a bigger kind of kinship to celebrate in this Psalm. The Hebrew word for “good” is the same word that recalls God’s assessment of creation in Genesis where God reviewed all that had been created and declared every bit of it to be “good.” What’s being celebrated in this Psalm is a sense of kinship that goes well beyond the bounds of biological family, tribe and nation; beyond all the “unities of familiarity” that also result in barriers that separate ourselves from others who are different from us. This is a hymn of praise to the kinship that we were all created to share with each other, as God’s children. How very good and pleasant it is to experience a unity as God's children that can make even strangers feel like kindred. The Psalmist describes it as being like precious oil on the head, running down upon the beard.

In the ancient Near East, offering water for the cleansing of dusty feet and pouring oil mixed with fragrant spices over the head of a visitor were basic acts of hospitality and welcome. Once, when Jesus was a guest in the home of a Pharisee named Simon, a woman burst into the house and poured precious nard on Jesus’ head. When the other guests murmured their disapproval at what she had done, Jesus said that Simon had not offered him either water for his feet nor oil for his head; but this woman had poured out a copious amount of oil on him. Jesus was pointing out the difference between Simon’s lack of hospitality to his guest (most likely rooted in the Pharisee’s difference of opinion with Jesus) and this woman’s extravagant welcome, even though she was an outsider, who didn’t belong to this household.

Even though verse 2 of the Psalm describes the oil as “precious” the word is actually the same one that in verse 1 is translated as good. Again, there may be an inference that an attitude of hospitality and kinship, even to those who are different, reflects God’s original intention for how we should receive one another. But the Psalm is still more specific. It declares that the blessing of dwelling together in unity is like precious oil running down onto the beard of Aaron, and even over the collar of his robe. Aaron was the brother of Moses. He was anointed with oil when he was chosen by God as the first Jewish High Priest. So, the picture of Aaron being anointed recalls a joyous event in the relationship between the Jewish people and the God they worshiped. Could there be a hint there that the unity to be sought in our relationships with others is related to the unity we have with God?

According to the Psalmist, the unity of kindred souls is also "like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion." Dew is not something that springs to mind as being worthy of celebrating. It might even be a nuisance when walking across your dew-soaked lawn gets your best shoes soaking wet. But when you live in an arid place like Israel, dew is something to get excited about. Water is like life itself. Most water was found by digging a well or by traveling to an oasis. But dew represents the gift of life that comes from God and finds us wherever we are.

Oil and water. These are the things to which the unity of faithful people is compared. But there is also something strange about the Psalmist's choice of images. Because oil and water are two substances that naturally resist unification. In fact, when we want to say that two things don't mix, or two people can't get along, we say that they are like - what? Oil and water.

Oil and water seem to be a more accurate image for the world today, don't you think?! Just substitute for oil and water—Democrats and Republicans. Or Progressives and Conservatives. Or any two groups of people that just don't mix well. Heck, even the fierce Red Sox-Yankees rivalry feels like a love-fest compared to the social animosities of these days in which we find ourselves.

Jesus also lived in an oil and water culture. The Jewish people had a slew of rules and religious regulations that served to keep themselves separate and distinct from neighbors outside their borders and within their communities. They chafed under the foreign rule of the Roman Empire and the erosion of their national identity by the Hellenistic Greek cultural influences that shaped so much of the Mediterranean world. They hoped for a better future when a messiah with a "Make Israel Great Again" ambition would reestablish the good old days of the Kingdoms of David and Solomon.

One day, near the territories of Tyre and Sidon, a Canaanite woman approached Jesus and his disciples with a plea for Jesus to heal her daughter. Jesus did a curious thing. He ignored her. The more he ignored her the louder and longer she cried for him to heal her child. Finally, the disciples spoke up. "Send her away!" They were oil and she was water. Let her find one of her own kind to help her. Her daughter's needs were not their problem. It was then that Jesus spoke. But it was not to send her packing. It says that Jesus answered *them*. In other words, he was speaking to his own people, not the foreigner. He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Which echoed out loud exactly what the disciples were thinking. Jesus should be focused on Jewish problems, not wasting time on meddlesome foreigners.

Both the disciples and the Canaanite woman must have heard his words as a dismissal of her. But the woman, knelt before Jesus and said, "Lord, help me." This time Jesus answered her, pointing out that it would not be right for him to take time and resources away from helping his own people in order to give aid to her sick child. This too, was a sentiment that the disciples would have approved. In a last desperate attempt for help, the woman pointed out that while saving her daughter's life would mean everything to her, it would not take anything away from Jesus' ministry towards his own people.

I have come to believe that this conversation was more for the disciple's sake, than the distraught mother's benefit. Her desperate pleas for help were an appeal to a level of compassion that transcends tribal loyalties and goes straight to the heart of God's merciful nature. A nature, that God's people should recognize as the true measure of "greatness." Jesus, said to her, "Woman, great is your faith!" And he healed her daughter.

In the sermon I preached last week, I noted that in Matthew's Gospel Jesus sometimes referred to his followers as "You of little faith." Not as an insult to them, but as a reminder that they still had a long way to go to a mature faith and understanding of him. Here he holds up a despised foreigner as someone with "great faith." Which leads me to believe that this episode was really about Jesus healing his disciples of their narrow assumptions that his priorities should match their prejudiced traditions.

We often describe church as being like a family, like kindred. After all, Church is a community that is rooted in relationship. Relationship to God. And relationship to each other. Church is God's remedy for the ways we distance ourselves from God and from each other; the way oil separates itself from water.

More often than we might care to admit however, it is the Church that needs to be reminded that following Jesus and clinging to cultural assumptions that the needs of people who are different from us are less legitimate in God's eyes, are like—oil and water.

Like the Psalmist's vision of oil rolling off the beard of Aaron onto the collar of his robe, the church is anointed to bring the peace that only God can give, to a world of violent words and actions. But often churches appear to be more like mirrors of society than reflections of divinity. The Church is most authentically Christian when its members extend to one another, and to others, an invitation to Christ-like kinship that defies the divisiveness that infects our nation and our world. Church is where we are anointed with the precious love that God pours into our lives. It is where we are baptized with the dew of divine acceptance and welcomed into sacred kinship with God and all God's children.

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