Community

as a Crime Scene

8-24-25

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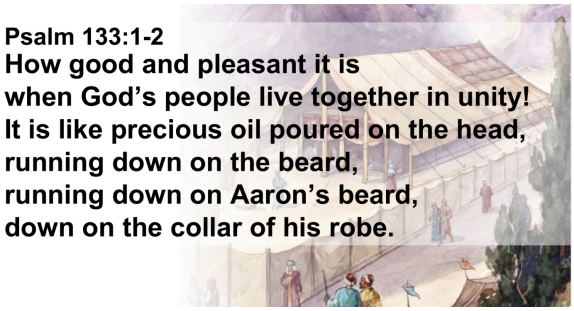
I am a *lay person* who has been at the Village for 20 years; I mostly attend the evening service. This sermon is part of a discipleship conference we had here in 2017. The title of this will make sense later…

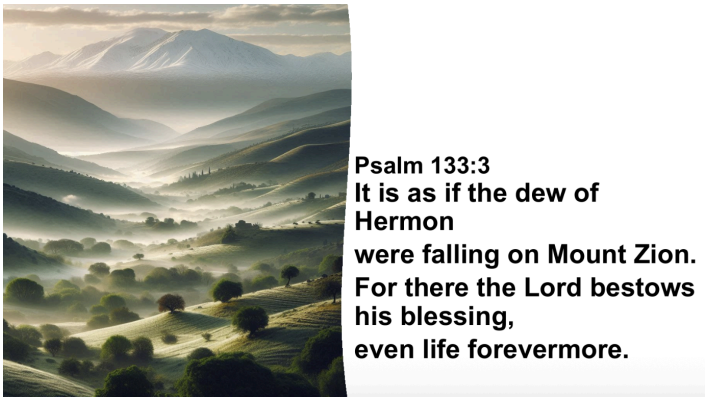
Community is one of our six values here at the Village that we genuinely seem to like (as opposed to the disciplines). Why is community a value here that we enjoy? We are going to explore this in a bit as well.

One of the books that shaped how I view community is *Life Together* By D. Bonhoffer: the book starts with Psalm 133 (which was our Scripture reading today):

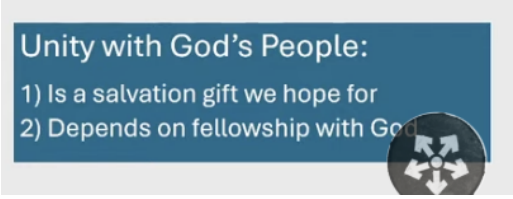


In the Psalm are some palpable, progressively more powerful images: precious oil may not seem pleasant to us but messy, maybe even a laundry emergency. But in biblical times, precious oil was different. This anointing of Aaron as high priest happened while the people were wandering around after leaving their slavery in Egypt. It was hot and probably didn't smell good. This oil was celebratory relief: God makes connection with the Hebrew people for the first time. In the background of the slide, you can see a tabernacle, a tent that the people made for God. God was making a camp with these people and it was a powerful presence of God with his people. The anointing was messy on purpose. It might be compared to a baby's first b-day when we give a baby a cake to eat with his hands and then we step away. This is an intentional mess of faces and frosting: the occasion overrides everything else: this is their ONLY time to have a first birthday!

Living with each other requires fellowship with God.



Mt. Herman is part of an Israeli mountain range similar to the Catalina Mountains in its span and breadth but 2,000 ft. taller. The sea air runs into Mt. Herman then falls down on the valley. The image of God's blessing is like dew falling on everyone: it's a compelling image for us, especially this year with very little rainfall. The intention of this image is to bless God's people, not just now but forever. This might seem like a big step to move from community blessings to eternal life. But for David, this is a natural extension of life together, something we hope for. This image stands out: life together in unity is forever.



If unity in community with God's people is the celebration we ***hope*** for, why do we have a taste of it right now? In this world, it seems that God intends his people to be scattered. Jesus sent his followers out to hostile communities with a deep need for Jesus. You heard from our missionaries last month about parts of the world that have not heard about Jesus and need to hear about it.

Believers, however, are not isolated among enemies: how then do we have this church? Jesus in his ministry healed a great many people, from sickness and all sorts of maladies. But these people eventually died: was Jesus's ministry therefore a waste of time? No, we recognize that what Jesus was doing was proclaiming a power and desire for healing which is an anchor for us as we think about the resurrection of our own lives. With this church and others, we are making this proclamation of healing. The promise of salvation is a good, exciting, and joyful gift and the only way to respond is with gratitude.

The gift: Jesus proclaims he has the power and desire to heal our broken communities

The Response:

- **Gratefully receive**
- **Gratefully participate**

Here is an analogy: As a child of the 90s, I deeply longed for a Sega portable gaming console, actually the first color-screen gaming console. When I received it as a gift, I didn't start criticizing it nor did I lock it away. No…I responded by using it all day every day…I wore it out. This is how we are to be in God's community.

What does it look like to gratefully receive the community God provides? Bonhoffer says it means ***gratefully accepting the community God provides as a reality, not an ideal.*** We easily form ideas of what a community should be like. Although this is not wrong, these ideals can become expectations or demands. One of the ways we can recognize our ideas have become demands is when our ideals clash with reality that our communities are communities of GRACE. Grace is a nice word or concept to calligraphy but the truth is that we don't have grace on beautiful things but ugly things.

In youth sports, something called a "a mercy rule" clicks in when one team is losing so badly that the game is stopped to spare the losing team more embarrassment or humility. This is not something to brag about at the end of the season. You would never hear a team say, "We were really blessed by the mercy rule this past year." But our church is that team: if you replace athleticism with relationship righteousness, we need the mercy rule and grace.

Our church holds grace as a core value: this brings me to the title of this sermon. If you walk into a church that preaches grace, it might put you on guard, like walking into a crime scene with police caution tape because you know on the other side of the tape is something unpleasant. If we have an ideal of what community should be, we will find this crumbles and we become accusers.
But when we acknowledge that this is God's creation that he provides to me, we know we cannot manufacture Christian relationships without God. It's made of relationships that are mediated by Christ. This means Christ is our middleman: I was telling my daughter about this who said this is a **Jesus sandwich:** Jesus in between two sinners.

This brings us back to Psalm 133 which says that unity requires fellowship with God. A Jesus Sandwich is how communities that follow Jesus operate. However, we don't want a middle man: we want direct relationships where we decide what to do based on the effect that this will have on you and me. My service is so I'll be appreciated and I share vulnerability so you will respond with intimacy and fill my loneliness. If I give advice, I try to fix you or the problems. But these direct relationships are brittle and powerless. The thing is, I cannot help a person enough to justify my own brokenness and I can't draw enough out of another person to fill my own emptiness.

- Ephesians 4:3
- Colossians 3:15
- Matthew 25:35-40
- John 13:35
- Ephesian 5:1
- Romans 12:12
- Romans 12:19

Followers of Jesus recognize these as opportunities to bring Jesus in as the bond.

Eph 4:3

Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

We acknowledge our inability to fix things, heal others, fill emptiness, etc. This means we have indirect relationships with Jesus in the middle: we listen not only for opportunities to speak but for opportunities to pray. When I am deciding what to do, I am trusting Jesus will minister to you: the most direct effect we can have on someone is through prayer. This feels a little disappointing: is that all? That's because Jesus is the one who works through one another. It's important when serving, we serve Jesus and others indirectly.

Jesus loves us and we return his love by caring for others.

I am not outwarding affectionate; in fact, people might wonder if I even follow Jesus. But I find comfort in this:

Col 3:15

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful.

This peace is not the peace I have with you: it's the peace I have with Jesus and that you have with Jesus. If we have a relationship mediated by Jesus, I decide what to do for you based on the effect it will have on Jesus. I give up control and believe that Jesus has something good for you and for me. In this relationship, the most direct impact I can have is prayer. This is kind of a let down! We don't want a middleman in our relationships. But we've already acknowledged our own weakness and know we cannot heal ourselves much less others. We instead believe Jesus has this power. We listen for opportunities to pray, not just to speak. We serve each other indirectly but Christ in one another. This is important because not everyone is easy to serve or to be around. Some are ungrateful and cannot offer anything in return. In fact, all of us are difficult to serve on some level.

Matt 25:35-40

For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, **36** I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

37 "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? **38** When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? **39** When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

40 "The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'

Jesus loves us and we can return that love by taking care of each other.

John 13:35

By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

Truth be told, this is a bit of a stumbling block for me because I'm an introvert and I wonder if I measure up to this standard: I'm not outwardly affectionate and people may not even recognize me as a follower of Jesus by how much I'm loving those around me.

Eph 5:1

Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children

We're called to imitate God as a child would do. It reminds me of a story of when my son was 2 years old. He imitated me shoveling but he used a stick, over and over maybe 500 times. He was imitating me and not particularly impressive but at the end of the day, there was a new trench. My son knew we were done: My son joined me wholeheartedly and could sense our accomplishment. This is what people see when they look at our community from the outside: they see an impressive trench and think those people have a lot of help. They may not know Jesus or recognize him but they know someone is here with a pickax and a shovel. We are invited to join God in his work.

Finally, when Jesus mediates our relationships, he also mediates the pain. We are bound to be hurt because we are in a community with broken people. We know Jesus suffered mocking and abuse and a complete lack of understanding of who he was even by those close to him. We can respond to hurt in several ways: by retaliation, we can withdraw, or we can rant in our heads to avoid the pain at a deeper level. But these internal rants are a good signal that something is going on and that we are in pain but not alone.

Rom 12:19

Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord.

Rom 12:12

Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.

Being patient in affliction and faithful in prayer are connected: I don't think we can be patient in affliction without being faithful in prayer. So when we're hurt by someone in our community, the invitation is to bring it to Jesus instead of retaliation. Jesus doesn't necessarily take our pain away but he is in the business of truth and acknowledging what happened. It gives us a chance to ask Jesus what he has for us in the pain. We listen: we give up control to Jesus and to what he has for us. When our relationships are mediated by Jesus, those relationships don't depend on perfect behavior any more: they depend on forgiveness.

Returning to the first observation about enjoying community, this is how our Christian community was intended to operate. This is exciting because when our community listens to us or serves us, we experience Jesus doing the same. This is why community is good and pleasant (going back to Psalm 133).