



Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

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January 17, 2010

2nd Sunday after Epiphany

Psalm 133-134

Pastor Randy Ott

First Lesson: Exodus 7:14-24

Psalm of the Day: Psalm 133-134

Second Lesson: Ephesians 3:14-21

Gospel: John 2:1-11

Christian Unity Is a Miracle

1. It flows from God
2. It refreshes your faith

Awhile back I was sitting at a basketball game reflecting on the nature of the discomfort of sitting on a wood plank for hours on end. As I was contemplating “bleacher rear end,” I heard the people behind me start yacking away. I didn’t try to, but I had no choice, they were talking a little loud and I overheard what they were saying. They were from a different Christian school and I heard them going on and on and on about how lousy and rotten the teachers are; how they give way too much homework, demand way too much, treat the kids too poorly and on and on and on. Pretty soon I became convinced that their little Johnny or Billy or Susie or whoever it was had never really soiled a diaper or did anything wrong at all in his/her life.

I imagine somewhere along the line you’ve heard stuff like that too, right? People complaining about other people, going on and on about how they are useless or they’re wrong or they’re bad or they’re evil, or they’re this, or they’re that. I thought to myself as I was sitting there, “I sure hope there is no one sitting around them, a relative or someone, who does not have a church home or doesn’t know Christ as their Savior, because after listening to that diatribe, they probably really have no interest in finding more out about Christ if this is how Christians act, if this is how they treat one another, if this is what they think of one another.”

But you say, “Hey Pastor. That isn’t fair. That’s how all people are. We’re sinners. As sinners, at times we say things we shouldn’t and do things we shouldn’t. Everybody does it. It happens at every school. It happens at every church. People are always saying ‘what’s that council thinking, what’s that committee thinking, what are those people thinking.’ That’s just the way it is. We’re all sinners. That happens. Get over it.” If you are going to stand before God’s judgment seat, I hope you have a better defense planned than that.

Yes, we are all sinners. Yes, we all do stupid stuff. I’ve told you that over and over. But if we want to talk about how God reveals his power and reveals himself to be the Savior of the world that opens heaven to filthy rotten slugs like you and me, then one of the things we should begin to realize is the truth of what we just sang in the Psalm and what we just heard in the Psalm. One of the miracles he performs is that he takes a

bunch of filthy rotten sinners like us who are at different places in life, different ages in life, different challenges in life, and he does something amazing. He takes people with a lot of differences and unites them. How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity.

Yes, we can focus on what's different among us, but I'd say to you this morning that our God wants us to focus on what is alike about us, what unites us, the miracle of the unity that God has performed in our hearts that has led each one of us to believe that Jesus is the only Savior for us, the only way our sins could be forgiven, and we believe that about each other as well. What unites us is more powerful than what Satan wants to use to divide us.

That's the truth of these Psalms today and that's what our Lord wants us to focus on. This unity is a miracle, but it comes from God. It's his work. It's what he does. But don't underestimate its importance because this unity strengthens us and refreshes our faith as we continue on our walk that leads to when the time the Lord calls us home.

The two Psalms I just read to you, I told you they come from the last two Psalms of Ascent. I don't know how familiar you are with the Psalms of Ascent. They are Psalms 120-134 in the Book of Psalms. It's believed they were used by the pilgrims as they journeyed to Jerusalem. Three times a year, no matter where you lived in the land of Israel, you were supposed to get up and go to Jerusalem for three festivals. It's kind of interesting if you read all these Psalms together as a unit. Maybe find the time sometime today to do that, 120-134. It starts out with a lament, a plea, and then lifting up to where they are going. They are called Psalms of Ascent because no matter which direction you went to Jerusalem from, Jerusalem was on a hill, you had to go up to Jerusalem. It doesn't matter how you went. You went through many valleys. You crossed many brooks and ravines and various things, but eventually you had to go up to Jerusalem when you got there at the end. So they are talked about as the Psalms of Ascent.

Like I said, these are the last two. So now you can almost picture it in your mind's eye as these people are coming across the countryside of Judea. They are going up to Jerusalem and wherever they look, they can see on the paths. If they are at the top of one of the ravines, they can look down and see paths of pilgrims going to Jerusalem for the same reason they are. And as they are at the bottom, they can look up and see people ahead of them or behind them heading to Jerusalem for the same reason they are. So they say, *"How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!"* (Psalm 133:1).

They came from different places. They were facing different things. They were doing different things in their lives, but the one thing that brought them together was their love for the Lord who had revealed himself and had promised to send a Savior. In obedience to him, they went to Jerusalem these three times a year and they sang these songs. So as they are getting to the end of the trip, they start with this Psalm that talks

about how good it is that here we all are. We are coming together for the same thing. It doesn't matter who we are. We are united.

Think about that in connection with a congregation. There is a lot of sameness to us. In fact, probably three-fourths of you sitting here are related to the other three-fourths of the people sitting here I'm guessing. But there are still a lot of differences, right? There are a lot of things that we think no one else around us can understand what we are going through. Whether it's facing the challenges of being alone, our loved ones are gone and now we are alone and we have to deal with this loneliness even though we are surrounded by people. We have this loneliness. Or maybe it's the challenge or the pressure of making decisions about life and not sure if we're ready to do that; or the challenges of work or relationships or sicknesses and health. I know what some of you have been through. And I know you've been through an awful lot. I can't begin to say that I could understand what you've been through, because I can't. But we've all been through different things, and they are all things that at times we think no one else can understand what we are going through. And maybe they can't. That doesn't really matter. Because as we gather together here, one of the great truths is that there is something that unites us. We don't agree to disagree about what the Bible says. We don't say, "Well you believe this is what the Bible says. I'll believe this is what it says." We have a spirit-worked unity about the Word and about the Sacraments, about our sin and about God's grace. We have this unity of belief that we are united and no matter where we are in our life, we are sitting now rubbing shoulders with people who also believe what we believe. That is a precious thing.

If you want to see the picture that God uses for it, that David uses in Psalm 133, he says, *"It is like precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard, running down on Aaron's beard, down upon the collar of his robes"* (Psalm 133:2). You're probably thinking to yourself, "That doesn't help me understand anything." But think about it. In Jesus' day, not even going back to David's day, in Jesus' day they poured that precious perfume that was real expensive on his feet and they got upset about it. These kinds of oils were expensive. Not everyone had them. I imagine that after you got cleaned up to come here this morning, you probably sprayed yourself with something or splashed something on yourself to make you smell better because you are going to be sitting so close to each other, right? We don't think twice about doing that. You probably had to choose from a whole bunch of stuff to make yourself smell better, right? It wasn't that way back then.

Now think about the situation. Here are a bunch of stinky, sweaty pilgrims walking across the countryside through the sandy trails getting up to Jerusalem. Do you think those pilgrims, as the trails got a little more compact and they got closer to the end of the journey, they started to stink a little bit? They might have gotten a little whiff of each other that probably wasn't pleasant.

But now you get into the Temple. You get into where you are worshipping the Lord and there are these celebrations and the oil that God had set out in his Law exactly how it, this aromatic stuff, was supposed to be made. And when they got close to it, that smell

to them was a reminder of what united them – God. That smell to them was probably a pleasing relief to them from the rest of the stuff they had smelled. But here God's representative to them was a pleasing aroma because he represented God.

When brothers live together in unity, it's this pleasing aroma to each other and to God. When we focus on what unites us instead of focusing on what separates us, it is pleasing to God. However, when our sinful nature wins out and we focus on what divides us or what separates us instead of what unites us, we stink to the Lord. That's basically what it's telling us, right?

When we talk about "they" and "them" instead of "we" and "us" when it comes to congregational life or family life, we stink to God. When we are always saying, "I don't know what that council is deciding or what that committee is doing or what they are thinking. What is wrong with them," it's not a pleasing aroma to God and it's not good and pleasant because we aren't living in our unity. We're living in Satan's wheelhouse in what distinguishes us or separates us.

I hear it from time to time from people about how they say, "It doesn't do any good to say anything at meetings because I said they should do something and they didn't do it." Do you really think as a congregation we are doing everything exactly the way I think it should be done? No. But when we are united in whatever decision we make, we go forward and say, "This is how we decided to serve the Lord and this is the direction we are going until we decide otherwise, and here's a way that I can serve my God and I can help and serve my fellow believers."

When that happens (this flows from God), when he gives us this spirit-worked unity to believe that what unites us, our faith that Jesus is our Savior, is more precious than any petty little differences we have about "you spoke out against what I said we should do, or you did this at school, or you looked at me wrong when we were serving hot lunch together," when we get beyond all that stuff and we see how united we are, that's something to be amazed at because it is true. We are in different situations in life. Yet we are united in Christ.

That unity in Christ is precious because it becomes something that refreshes our faith and blesses us. That's what David talked about when it says, *"It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion. For there the LORD bestows his blessing, even life forevermore"* (Psalm 133:3). Mount Herman was the mountain that led into the tributaries of the Jordan. Eventually it would get to Zion or Jerusalem. It's saying when you live together in unity, it's as though the blessings are coming right down on you with no intermediate or taking awhile to get there.

I believe that to be true with all my heart. As you and I live our faith and strengthen one another with the Gospel and use the tools he has given us that unite us, the Word and Sacrament, it blesses us. It blesses us incredibly.

We probably think of in our lives that we have good, deep friends that we go to in times of need, right? I'll tell you, in a sense, brothers and sisters in Christ are better. Here is

what I mean. As a pastor, I have a lot of friends, but I don't have a lot of deep, close personal friends like many of you might have, right? Deep friends that you can talk to about anything; I have a wife. And I have one guy in Minnesota, and there is maybe one or two here. I can't pour out what's on my heart to people like maybe you have with your friends. But what I do have is a lot of people that talk to me. They will talk to me because I am their pastor, and they say encouraging things and encourage me with the Gospel because I am their pastor. At times it's not something eloquent or something profound. It's something simple; the love of Christ.

I'll tell you, at Christmastime when the cards come and the notes that are in them, at times they bring tears to your eyes when you see these people, who you know what they've been through, and yet they are taking the time to express encouragement and comfort for you just because you are their pastor. Not because they are your close, personal friend, but because they are your brother or sister in Christ. I'll tell you, we've got some people in our congregation that are incredibly gifted in the area of encouraging and being this "dew of Herman that falls down on Mount Zion" when God blesses us through the encouragement that some of these people offer to us.

I don't care if you're the best at it in the congregation, but God has gifted you with the ability to encourage one another in Christ to not get worried about the little petty stuff that Satan wants you to focus on but instead to say thanks for your service, and I sure appreciate what you are doing because there are a lot of you out there that are doing an awful lot.

When we live in that kind of unity where we recognize and value each other's service that is done out of love for Christ, whether it's great or small, I'm telling you God will bless us tremendously and God will use us to be a blessing to our area and to our community.

Then we'll do what Psalm 134 says. Psalm 134 says, "Okay, this is the blessing we have. We are united. Here's how we respond." It's almost as though the people are finally there in the Temple courtyards and they speak to the people that serve in the Temple and the people in the Temple speak back to them. *"Praise the LORD, all you servants of the LORD who minister by night in the house of the LORD"* (Psalm 134:1). It's kind of striking if you stop and think about it. Why in the dickens do they say, "Praise the Lord, all you servants of the Lord who minister by **night** in the house of the Lord"? At night in the house of the Lord they had to keep the lamp stand lit. They could not let that go out. So there you are, all by yourself, everyone else is sleeping and you are lighting the lamp stand, making sure it stays lit. You're all alone. No one else is there.

It's telling you - don't think only about the great and glorious service that is offered to God or to his people. All of the service that is offered to God and his people is an opportunity to praise the Lord even if you're all by yourself.

We do this because we want to thank God who lived for us, and loved us, and died for us to take away our sins first. We want to live in unity and emphasize what unites us

and not what divides us because it's how we praise the Lord, and it's how we praise the Lord when no one else is looking. When no one else can hear us, even if you're not in a bleacher, how you talk and how you think is praise to God.

So those serving say *"Lift up your hands in the sanctuary and praise the LORD"* (Psalm 134:2) back to the people. You also praise the Lord wherever you are in your life. And together, *"May the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth, bless you from Zion"* (Psalm 134:3).

As you and I go forward, this is what we want to do – live together in unity. We want to serve the Lord. We want to praise him. We want to encourage. We want to help one another. And now you are thinking to yourself, "That's a tall order. I am pretty good at seeing what irritates you about me. I'm not really that good at seeing how I can serve you." That's how we all are, right? You'll remember the things someone else has done that irritate you. You won't remember the things they've done to serve you, right?

So where in the world are you going to get the ability to do that? If you've been chewed on for something petty by someone else in the congregation, how are you going to get past that? How are you going to get past that so you can serve the Lord? I'm telling you, there's only one way. Absolutely only one way, and it can't come from you because you aren't that strong. It can't come from me because I'm not that strong. It has to come from something bigger than you or me. I know right now you are thinking "there is not a lot much bigger than you are pastor," but there is.

There is Christ. There is the love he has for you, how he stretched out his arms and died on the cross for you, and for the person next to you, and for the person you love, and for the person you don't really like but you still need to love because that is what God has called you to do. He lived and died for every last one of us. Cordial people and surly people, happy people, sad people, encouraging people and grumpy people; he died for every last one of us.

So if you and I want to find the strength to live together in unity and have this please God and be a blessing to one another, there is only one place in the world where we can find it. That is in Christ alone; in his life and in his death for you. Think about that.