Wouldn’t It Be Nice?

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

April 7, 2024

Texts: Psalm 133 and Acts 4:32-35

As I was reading Psalm 133 this week, lyrics from a Beach Boys’ hit kept running through my head: *Wouldn’t It Be Nice*. *Wouldn’t it be nice* if kindred really did live together in unity as the psalmist suggests? *Wouldn’t it be nice* if brothers and sisters got along with one another? Wouldn’t it be nice if parents didn’t fight, if there were no family tensions when the in-laws came to visit, if everyone could live together in harmony day to day? Psalm 133 celebrates that kind of blessed existence, that kind of beloved community, to use Martin Luther King Jr.’s words. And while the image of precious oil running down the head onto the beard is perhaps not the image we would choose to describe that life together, it is for the psalmist an emphatic exclamation point for what a blessing such a harmonious life together is – when it happens, if it happens. *How good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!* But when they don’t, look out!

Our biblical ancestors bear witness to how bad things can go. Cain kills Abel. People are so violent in Noah’s day that the Lord is ready to scrap the whole human project and start over. Abraham banishes his son Ishmael to the wilderness due to conflict between Hagar and Sarah. Jacob steals Esau’s birthright with the help of his wily mother. Jacob’s father-in-law deceives Jacob into marrying Leah before he can marry Rachel. Then Leah’s sons sell off Rachel’s son Joseph to a passing caravan on its way to Egypt after the obnoxious little twit regales them with dreams suggesting they will bow down to him. King David upends Bathsheba’s family by having her husband Uriah killed so he can marry her. Martha upbraids Mary for not helping in the kitchen. Disciples argue over who will be first in the kingdom of God. The Pharisees annoy everyone. And you begin to wonder whether anybody got along with anyone else across the hundreds of years in the biblical record, even as Jesus is saying: love one another! *How good and pleasant* ***and rare*** *it is when kindred live together in unity!*

But there are such rare moments in the biblical record as well. Jacob reconciles with Esau in a touching moment. Joseph forgives his brothers and is reunited with his father. Moses’ sister Miriam watches over him in his river basket, and his mother nurses him for the princess who rescues him from the river. Ruth stands by her mother-in-law Naomi. Joseph takes Mary and the baby Jesus to safety in Egypt ahead of Herod’s wrath. Andrew brings his brother Simon to Jesus, and together they become disciples. Mary kneels at the foot of the cross, humbly obedient to God and faithful to her son to the end.

The passage from Acts that I read a moment ago offers another such time of harmonious life together. The whole group of believers were of one heart and soul, says Luke. Everything was held in common. There was not a needy person among them, for they all shared all that they had. If anyone had a need, it was met. *How good and pleasant it is when kindred in Christ live together in unity!* But truth be known, those words of Luke were more aspirational than descriptive of reality. They describe an ideal for the early Christian community that was never quite fully realized. Many did share freely and generously for which we hear Paul express great appreciation. But in the first century down to this 21st century, that description of the beloved community in which all share freely and live together in harmony remains a work in progress.

It is a vision for our common life that is rooted in that commandment to love God with all that we are and to love our neighbors as ourselves; it is taking literally that suggestion of Jesus that if anyone has need of a coat, we should not only share ours but also give the shirt off our back. It is a vision of mutual self-sacrifice and servanthood that rejects the “God helps them who help themselves” mentality in favor of “God blesses those who help one another.” And in that respect, it is akin to the vision of the psalmist in Psalm 133.

The psalm is one of the Psalms of Ascents, a song sung by those journeying to Jerusalem on pilgrimage. The *kindred* of which it speaks is not just flesh and blood family, but those who live together under the covenant God established with God’s chosen people. As my seminary professor Jim Mays describes it:

*It is this abundant life, which Israel can receive only in its unity, and only from [God’s] Presence at this place that is the summum bonum (the highest good). The life that the LORD gives his people in their unity is the supreme family value.[[1]](#endnote-1)*

What he is suggesting is that it is only by living together in harmony, by being united in heart and mind, by sharing freely and loving one another, that we can realize the great blessing of being God’s people. It is no wonder then that Luke’s description in Acts would reflect such a beloved community, for that is who we who claim to be disciples of the risen Christ not only aspire to be, but are called to be!

A recent article in *The Presbyterian Outlook* suggests that Martin Luther King Jr.’s vision of the beloved community might be a roadmap for us to address the multitude of conflicts that divide us and keep us from being that blessed community. As the authors describe it:

*King believed the goal of the people of God is to foster the “Beloved Community”.… The Beloved Community is loved not because it is perfect and conflict-free but rather because God loves us and we can extend God’s love to others who think, feel, believe and act differently from us. Indeed, it is our call to extend agape love upon the Beloved Community to work beyond the strain of discord toward peace*.[[2]](#endnote-2)

In King’s own words:

*Our goal is to create a beloved community and this will require a qualitative change in our souls as well as a quantitative change in our lives.*

In his words we hear echoes of that description in Acts of those who were of one heart and soul. What united them – and what should unite us – is following Jesus: living as he calls us to live, loving as he calls us to love, forgiving as he calls us to forgive, and serving as he calls us to serve. In his life he showed us what such living and loving, forgiving and serving look like; he does not call us to do anything he did not do. He calls us not to follow the political, ethnic, racial, and religious polarization of the world, but to offer an alternative – a loving, self-sacrificing, welcoming alternative. If we take seriously that calling to be disciples of Christ, follow his example, and make the Great Commandment the polestar that guides our day-to-day living, we just might grow closer to being that beloved community that King envisioned, that community of believers of which Luke writes, that blessed kindred of which the psalmist sings.

We know that we are not so blessed in our lives today, for we continue to be divided, some would say more divided than ever, as a nation, as a Church (big C), and as a community. Dan Drumheller shared a story in the Facilities meeting last month that illustrates those divisions beautifully:

*One day, a man was walking across a bridge and saw another man standing on the edge, about to jump off. He immediately ran to him and said, “Stop! Don’t do it!” “Well, why shouldn’t I?” he replied. The other said, “Well, there’s so much to live for!” “Like what”? “Well … are you religious or atheist?” “Religious.” “Me too! And are you Christian or Jewish?” “Christian.” “Me too! Are you Catholic or Protestant?” “Protestant.” “Me too! Are you Episcopalian or Baptist?” “Baptist.” “Wow! Me too! Are you Baptist Church of God or Baptist Church of the Lord?” “Baptist Church of God.” “Me too! Are you Original Baptist Church of God, or are you Reformed Baptist Church of God?” “Reformed Baptist Church of God.” “Me too! Are you Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1879, or Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1915?” “Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1915!” To which he said, “Die, heretic!” and pushed him off the bridge.*

We focus too much on what divides us and not enough on what unites us, though here at Covenant I will say, we do better than most on that count. Yet day to day, we see a lot of judging and too little loving in our nation and world, and somehow working together with those with whom we disagree has become a sign of weakness, rather than an example of faithfulness. How then might we bridge that chasm which is dividing us from one another? King suggests we do it by agape love – self-sacrificing love for one another. What might that look like?

The story is told of a monastery on holy Mt. Athos that was struggling to survive. Monks were constantly quarreling and gossiping among themselves until the faithful abbot could stand it no longer. So he left the monastery in the hands of a trusted elder, bid farewell to the monks, and headed off to a thriving monastery whose abbot was particularly wise and discerning. Upon reaching the wise abbot’s humble room, the troubled abbot prayed that God might grant him some great insight about how to resolve the problems in his disgruntled community. Then entering, he explained to the wise abbot in great detail the problems he was experiencing and pleaded for some help in resolving them. The wise abbot listened patiently and then responded, “Your situation sounds grave, but with much sadness I am afraid I must confess that I have no advice or guidance to give you. However, there is one thing I think you should know. At your monastery there lives a saint in your midst, among the monks.” Astonished by this revelation, the abbot returned immediately to his flock and reported these words. And then a strange thing happened. Not knowing who among them might be the saint, the brothers began to look at one another in a new and more loving manner. They began to be kind to one another in ways that the abbot never thought possible, each wondering: “might this be the saint in our midst.” The saint was never revealed, but a miracle did happen. Harmony and love were restored to the life of that community and it thrived once again.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Who knows? Perhaps there is a saint in our midst as well! Or perhaps, if we were to treat one another as saints, to love one another as Jesus calls us to do, to be united in our commitment to follow Jesus – no matter how difficult that might be – then we too might become a beloved community, a holy people, a faithful church. Wouldn’t it be nice if we could do that? Wouldn’t it be nice if kindred lived together in unity here and now, within these walls and beyond, in our nation and world! Wouldn’t it be nice to try and to be so blessed! Amen

1. James L. Mays*, Interpretation: Psalms*, John Knox Press:1994, p.414 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Lesley Ann Earles and Debra J. Mumford, “Navigating Conflicts in Congregations: Reaching the ‘Beloved Community’ Through Agape Love,” *The Presbyterian Outlook*, February 2024, p.16 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. *A Saint in Our Midst*: Excerpts from Father Michal Pappas, compiled by Father Demetrios Serfes, July 1, 2000 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)