

The Discipline of Community

Psalm 133

This morning we are continuing to look at our first Life Shape. Throughout the year we are going to be considering eight geometric figures, called Life Shapes, that will help us better understand what it is to live as disciples of Jesus Christ.

We are in the middle of considering the Triangle, a figure that helps us to think about the essential relationships that are to be formed by those who are disciples of Jesus.

The upward dimension reminds us of the importance of cultivating a relationship with God. This we call the discipline of solitude. The inward focus reminds us of the importance of cultivating relationships within the body of Christ. This we call the discipline of community. The outward focus reminds us that we are to cultivate relationships within the larger world. This we call ministry. All three are needed within a local fellowship of Christians, and all three are to be developed within the lives of those who want to live as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Last week we thought about the discipline of solitude by looking at Psalm 84. Today we are going to think about the discipline of community by looking at another Psalm, 133.

1 How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!

2 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.

3 It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion. For there the LORD bestows his blessing, even life for evermore

I want to focus on two things: the four ways David defines spiritual community, and the three effects or results of learning how to live together

in unity. First let's look at how David defines community. The first three definitions are in verse 1.

First, he says, "How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity."

That's God's definition of community. The king is saying that God has declared family life to be good. That's an objective reality, a theological statement about community: morally and ethically it's the way to live. He also says it's pleasant. That's the subjective quality of community. It is pleasing, attractive, enjoyable. It feels good. The scriptures know nothing of solitary Christianity. When we are born again, we are born into the fellowship of community. This declaration of goodness that is pleasing comes from the very nature of God himself. He is not reclusive, a hermit, or an old bachelor. He is triune--Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. There is community in the Godhead! And the Church of Jesus Christ is to reflect that same fellowship.

And yet there is a strong temptation to resist the call to community? Philip Slater, a sociologist, wrote a searching study of the North American way of life entitled *Pursuit of Loneliness*, examining how we live together. He says that we all desire and have a need for community. He goes on to give some insights into why we experience isolation instead:

It is easy to produce examples of the many ways in which North Americans attempt to minimize, circumvent, or deny the interdependence upon which all human societies are based. We seek a private house, a private means of transportation, a private garden, a private laundry, and do-it-yourself skills of every kind. An enormous technology seems to have set itself the task of making it unnecessary for one human being ever to ask anything of another in the course of going about his daily business...we seek more and more privacy, and feel more and more alienated and lonely when we get it...our encounters with others tend increasingly to be competitive as a result of the search for privacy. We less and less often meet our fellow man to share and exchange, and more and more often encounter him as an impediment or a nuisance: making the highway crowded when we are rushing somewhere, cluttering and littering the beach or park or wood, pushing in front of us at the supermarket, taking the last parking place, polluting our air and water, building a highway through our house, blocking our view, and so on. Because

we have cut off so much communication with each other we keep bumping into each other, and thus a higher and higher percentage of our interpersonal contacts are abrasive.

He is not writing as a Christian, but as a thoughtful observer of the North American condition. He is describing sinful independence, prideful self-sufficiency, individualism. Christian community is good and pleasant, but I'm tempted to choose isolation because of these things.

Secondly, David defines community as the experience of brothers. The scriptures tell us that when we are born again we become part of a family of brothers and sisters in Christ. No Christian is an only child. Family life speaks of home, of safety and security, of acceptance and equality. In the life of Israel itself, all citizens of the nation were considered brothers and sisters. As a matter of fact, in Deuteronomy 15:3, 15:12, and 25:3, three classes of citizens we wouldn't normally consider to be our equals or in familiar relationship with us are defined as brothers: those who are hopelessly in debt, those who have sold themselves into slavery, and those who are convicted criminals. Israel was commanded to be a spiritual family.

In the same way, we are called into a family today in the church. But why do I resist this call to family life? Living as a family may be necessary and desirable, but it is enormously difficult. It is hard to live like brothers and sisters because brothers and sisters fight. The first biblical story about brothers living together is the story of Cain and Abel. It is a story of murder committed because one of the brothers resented God's acceptance of the other brother's gift. The story of Joseph and his brothers follows a few pages later in Genesis. His brothers envied his place in the family and sold him into slavery. David the king acknowledged estrangement from his own brothers early in his life. In Psalm 69:8 he said, "I am a stranger to my brothers, an alien to my own mother's sons" Even the Lord Jesus was misunderstood by his brothers. The only record we have in the gospel of interaction between Jesus and his brothers is when they tried to drag him away from his messianic work because they were convinced he was out of his mind! That was his relationship to his brothers.

Further, the spiritual reality is that just because we are of the family of faith does not mean that we are "just one big happy family." Our brothers and sisters in Christ are not always nice people. They don't stop sinning the

moment they begin believing in Christ. They don't suddenly become the exciting conversationalists, sensitive listeners, caring companions, and glowing inspirations that we think we need. The truth is that in relation to one another we are often cranky, dull, insensitive, and thin-skinned. In a word, we can be a real drag with one another. But we are brothers and sisters in the process of growing up together into a spiritual family! Christian community includes brothers and sisters, but I'm tempted to reject them because of their imperfections.

Thirdly, David says that Christian community is dwelling together in unity--literally, "living together."

This emphasizes physical togetherness and permanence, collective identity in a place with an unbreakable common life. You don't just check in for a month or two and then decide to wander off. Once you're part of the family you belong to those people. The scriptures give consistent witness to the fundamental need for physical and material relationships. In *Genesis*, creation was not complete until God gave Eve to Adam. Humanity wasn't whole without that community. God never works with individuals in isolation--in intimacy, yes, but not in isolation from the community as a whole. Jesus chose twelve disciples and lived with them in community for three years. In *Acts 2:1* it says, that when the Church was formed by the Spirit of God, there were 120 people "all together" in one place. In *Hebrews 10*, when some early Christians were dropping out of the community and pursuing their own private interests, the writer of this letter urged that they nurture their precious gift of community, "not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the drawing near" (*Hebrews 10:25*).

Fourthly, verses 2 and 3 of *Psalm 133* tell us that community is a gift of God.

2 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.

3 It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion. For there the LORD bestows his blessing, even life for evermore

There is beautiful symbolism in these two verses. Three times the word running down or falling is used: So we have oil poured out from above on the high priest, flowing down from head to foot. And we have dew falling from the heavens onto the high mountains, with enough volume of water to refresh even the lower hills of Zion. Only God can provide an amount of oil and water sufficient to cover so thoroughly. Human beings cannot manufacture or sustain that. Both the oil and the water are gifts imparted from above.

Life for evermore" is eternal life, salvation. God is the giver of that beautiful gift.

In one of the most thoughtful books ever written on *Community Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer emphasizes the truth that Community is a gift.

It is easily forgotten that the fellowship of Christian brethren is a gift of grace, a gift of the Kingdom of God that any day may be taken from us, that the time that still separates us from utter loneliness may be brief indeed. Therefore, let him who until now has had the privilege of living a common Christian life with other Christians praise God's grace from the bottom of his heart. Let him thank God on his knees and declare: It is grace, nothing but grace, that we are allowed to live in community with Christian brethren.

Now, David promises three results that will come if we live in community this way. It will be, first, like oil and secondly, like dew in the morning, and, finally, it will bring eternal life for all kinds of people.

It says, first, (verse 2) that Christian community has the same qualities or effect as the anointing oil used to sanctify Aaron the high priest for his temple service.

This picture comes out of Exodus 28-30. There, instructions are given for the ordination of the priest as he is appointed for service in the temple. The oil that anoints him is called "precious." That word means it has great value; it's costly. There's a recipe given in chapter 30 for the oil. This is what it says:

22 GOD spoke to Moses: 23 "Take the best spices: twelve and a half pounds of liquid myrrh; half that much, six and a quarter pounds, of fragrant cinnamon; six and a quarter

pounds of fragrant cane; 24 twelve and a half pounds of cassia--using the standard Sanctuary weight for all of them--and a gallon of olive oil. 25 Make these into a holy anointing oil, a perfumer's skillful blend. 26 "Use it to anoint the Tent of Meeting, the Chest of The Testimony, 27 the Table and all its utensils, the Lampstand and its utensils, the Altar of Incense, 28 the Altar of Whole-Burnt-Offerings and all its utensils, and the Washbasin and its base. 29 Consecrate them so they'll be soaked in holiness, so that anyone who so much as touches them will become holy. 30 Then anoint Aaron and his sons. Consecrate them as priests to me. 31 Tell the Israelites, "This will be my holy anointing oil throughout your generations.' 32 Don't pour it on ordinary men. Don't copy this mixture to use for yourselves. It's holy; keep it holy. 33 Whoever mixes up anything like it, or puts it on an ordinary person, will be expelled."

This oil must have been wonderfully aromatic, a beautiful fragrance. Throughout the scriptures, oil is a sign of God's presence, a symbol of the Spirit of God at work. Oil has wonderful medicinal properties; it soothes irritation and injury. It also eliminates friction by acting as a lubricant that soothes abrasion. Remember how Philip Slater talked about the abrasiveness of relationships? The Spirit of God can soothe that and heal that. It gives a wonderful quality of warmth and ease to Christian community which contrasts to the icy coldness of the world, to the hard edges of people jostling each other in crowds.

That oil was poured out liberally; we saw how much of it was used on one man. That's why it flowed down his head, over his beard, and onto his high priestly garment, all the way down to the tips of his toes. As the oil flowed down over his chest-piece, inscribed there were the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. It was a powerful symbol of the oil of the Spirit unifying all twelve of those tribes who were so different, drawing them together. God's blessing is not limited to a select few in the community, but it's spread out to all to be shared equally. It's going to unify to a greater and greater measure as we allow the Spirit to work among us.

This is anointing oil. As it was poured out on this man, it set him apart for the special ministry of priesthood. Living in community means seeing the oil flow over the entire body of our brother or sister. We begin to see each other differently--as priests, as God's anointed, able to minister to one another. That profoundly changes relationships. Every one of us in this room, if we're part of the family of God through faith in Jesus, have been anointed by the Spirit of God, and we share a wonderful common life of ministry together. It's what the Reformation called the church back to, "the priesthood of all believers."

Secondly, Christian community has the same qualities and effect as the heavy morning dew on the slopes of Mount Hermon in the Lebanese coastal range.

Mount Hermon is the highest mountain in that part of the world, 9000 feet at the summit. Dew is a symbol for something that is refreshing, renewing, invigorating. That dew is even extended down to the arid slopes of Mount Zion in Judah, only 2500 feet high. Towering mountain peaks and low hills are all blessed equally by the dew of the Lord. Being part of a Christian Community is to be refreshing and invigorating. When we read Paul's letters repeatedly he speaks of how his relationship with fellow believers renews and refreshes him. Here is but one example from Romans 1:

8 I thank God through Jesus for every one of you. That's first. People everywhere keep telling me about your lives of faith, and every time I hear them, I thank him. 9 And God, whom I so love to worship and serve by spreading the good news of his Son--the Message!--knows that every time I think of you 10 in my prayers, which is practically all the time, I ask him to clear the way for me to come and see you. 11 The longer this waiting goes on, the deeper the ache. I so want to be there to deliver God's gift in person and watch you grow stronger right before my eyes! 12 But don't think I'm not expecting to get something out of this, too! You have as much to give me as I do to you.

The third effect of community is that it is where God has chosen to give the blessing of salvation, of "life for evermore."

In Jesus' high priestly prayer in John 17, he said, "This is eternal life, that they know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent." Another wonderful result of authentic Christian community will be evangelism. The primary concern of Jesus' prayer for unity in his church was that the world would believe that God had sent him to be the Savior. He mentioned it three different times. There is no fear in the scriptures that spiritual community will become ingrown and selfish. If that happens, then the church is not functioning as the body for whom Christ died. Christian community is attractive. People will be drawn into relationship with the Lord Jesus because of our relationships and because we tell the truth, because of plain speaking when the world is full of lies. That was the call of the twelve

tribes of Israel: to be "a light to the nations" (Isaiah 42:6). And now it is ours, and the quality of our fellowship will be a powerful attraction.

This psalm declares how good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity. This is because community is one of God's greatest gifts to us where we can find healing, refreshment and a taste of the eternal life that is our in Christ.