

I

As some of you know, I was raised as an only child. My dad likes to tell people that he and my mom asked God for lots of little ones, but instead God gave them one great big one.

People often ask me if being an only child was a lonely experience, but I didn't find that to be the case. I had lots of friends growing up, and we were fortunate to live close enough to extended family that I was able to build meaningful relationships with my cousins and aunts and uncles. And besides, when we traveled to see that extended family, I always had the entire back seat all to myself.

For most of my wife Amy's childhood, she, too, was the only child in the house. And so for us, for the most part, sibling squabbles and disagreements just weren't a part of our daily lives as kids.

But as the parents of three young sons, we have had something of an education, especially as the pandemic has put us all in much closer proximity to one another in recent months. Our boys really do love each other, and I don't think they squabble any more than any other set of siblings does, but mercy, it sure looks like it's very hard work sometimes to have a brother.

II

And you and both know that it's not just siblings that can twist and shout and do the hokey pokey on our last nerve.

Sometimes, it's very hard work to have a neighbor. Sometimes, it's very hard work to have a colleague. Sometimes, it's

very hard work to have a friend. Sometimes, it's very, very hard work to live in community.

III

And that brings us to our text this morning from the 133rd Psalm. This summer, we've been preaching our way through the Book of Psalms, which, as we've said all along, isn't a book at all in the classical sense, but rather a collection, an anthology of poems and prayers and hymns that was composed and collected over a very long period of time in biblical history.

The psalms are often considered to be the hymnal and the prayer book of our ancestors in faith. It's possible, even quite likely, that as a boy, Jesus learned to sing and pray the rhythms and cadences of the psalms.

And just like the songs in our hymnals, there are different texts and tunes that are appropriate for different occasions. For many of us who grew up singing out of the 1990 Presbyterian Hymnal, it just wouldn't be Christmas Eve if we didn't sing number 60 – Silent Night – by candlelight on December 24. Over time, that particular hymn has worked its way into a particular place in the worship life of most congregations.

So, too, with many of the psalms. In fact, the psalm before us this morning, Psalm 133, was written with a superscript – a notation about its appropriate use. If you look closely at Psalm 133, as well as many of its neighboring psalms, you'll see the superscript – A Song of Ascents.

For our ancestors in faith, the Temple on Mt. Zion in Jerusalem was believed to be the very dwelling place of God on earth. The city of Jerusalem sits along a ridge, and Mt. Zion, on which the Temple was built, is one of the highest points for miles around. And so when you read in the biblical text, “Let us go up to Jerusalem,” or “Let us go up to Mt. Zion,” the writer isn’t talking about going up as in going north, like, we’d go up to Commerce or Clayton. The writer is describing going up in elevation, up to the Temple, up to the highest point.

And so songs of ascents were to songs be sung as the people ascended the Temple mount to worship, something akin to what we would call a processional hymn in our worship life today.

So with that background in mind, listen now for a Word from God from Psalm 133.

A Song of Ascents

How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!

It is like the precious oil on the head, running down upon the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down over the collar of his robes.

It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion. For there the Lord ordained his blessing forevermore.

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

IV

I bet I can guess what you’re thinking, my friend. How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity. Maybe so, but here in these United States, we seem to be fresh out of unity. I promise you, when I laid out this summer sermon series on the psalms, I had no idea that our conversation about Psalm 133 was going to land on the weekend between presidential nominating conventions.

But if you can, I want to invite you to put all that aside for a moment, and let’s narrow our focus down from the national level. And let’s go narrower than the state level. And let’s go narrower than even the regional, or county, or community, or neighborhood level. Let’s narrow our focus down just to you, and the handful of people you might call your kindred. I’m not necessarily talking about aunts and uncles and cousins who may or may not live nearby. I’m not even necessarily talking about blood relatives. I’m talking about the handful of people that make up the tribe you interact with on a daily basis.

I’m talking about the people that live in your house with you, or who share your office, or who live down the hall in your apartment complex or dormitory. I’m talking about the small handful of people you interact with on a daily or near daily basis.

For now, let’s use that very small group of people as our definition of kindred. How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!

I hope, my friend, that you’ve experienced that biblical truth at some

point in your life. I hope you've experienced how good and pleasant it is when you feel part of something larger than yourself, when a group of people comes together becomes so much more than the sum of its parts.

I hope you're experiencing that right now within your own small group with whom you interact with on a daily basis. It truly is good and pleasant when people function together.

But sometimes, kindred don't live together in unity. And you and I know that the antithesis of Psalm 133 is also true – how unpleasant it is when kindred do not live together in unity.

In his book *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, writer Patrick Lencioni argues that most teams, whatever their composition or purpose, fail because they exhibit one or more of five common dysfunctions. And the most common dysfunction of any team is an absence of trust. If kindred don't trust each other, there's no possible way that they'll live together in unity.

So let's come back to that mental picture of your tribe. I want you to visualize those faces for a moment – that small handful of people that you interact with every day. Can you see them in your mind's eye? Can you see their faces?

My friend, here's the truth: God has called *you* to lead that tribe.

God has called you to *lead* them.

And you might say, "But I'm not the boss! I'm not the alpha dog!"

My friend, don't forget that Scripture tells us that our Savior led not from on high, but on his knees, with a washbasin and a towel! Don't forget that even though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but humbled himself, taking the form of a servant!

You don't have to be the boss or the alpha or the number one to lead in the kingdom of God. Anyone can be a leader in the kingdom of God, because anyone can serve.

My friend, the thing your kindred needs from you most is to know that you've got their back, that they can trust you. When groups of humans feel like they can count on one another, even in times of great peril, they can close ranks and accomplish incredible feats together. But when we don't feel like our kindred our back, when we don't feel like the leaders of our tribes have our best interests at heart, we have a tendency to look over our shoulders, and that's often when we get clobbered.

Our nation, our state, our community, our neighborhoods, the larger groups in which we live and move and have our being, have no chance of uniting and functioning if the smallest units within them are coming apart.

So, my friend, what can you, personally, do today to show your little tribe, your kindred, your people, that you've got their backs? What can you do

today to serve them and love them well? What can you do today to model the leadership of Jesus, who leads not with a scepter and crown from on high, but from his knees with a towel and a washtub?

V

The psalmist tells us that when we live together in unity, it's like precious oil running down the beard of Aaron and onto his collar. It's like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains and runs down the valleys.

In the Land of Promise, both oil and water were precious commodities. Oil was used for anointing, and it was expensive. Most of the time, only a small dab was used. But the psalmist says that when we live together in unity, God's extravagant goodness and grace is poured out and it drips down our faces all the way onto our collar. When we seek to serve rather than to be served, it's like the woman who broke the alabaster jar of ointment and washed Jesus' feet, and dried them with her own hair. When we lead our tribes and kindred into unity, it unleashes a spirit of generosity and grace gets into ever crack and crevice.

Water, too, is precious in the Land of Promise. Mount Hermon is one of the highest mountains in land, and it's often shrouded in dew and sometimes capped in snow. The source of the Jordan River is near Mt. Hermon, and the waters that accumulate there roar down the valley and provide life-giving water to all manner of living things as it rushes downstream.

And so here's the thing. When we seek to live in unity in our own tribes, with

our own kindred, when we seek to love and serve them with the love of Jesus, it spills over into other tribes. When our little tribes and kindred live together in the unity and peace of Christ, it spills over into our neighborhoods, and across our counties, and through our state, and out to the nation, and even to the ends of the earth.

We may not feel like we have much power to bring unity in Washington or Atlanta. But we have a whole lot of say over what happens in this place, and in the homes of our tribes and kindred. So may we love and serve our kindred well. May we love and serve them with the tools that Jesus has given us – with his Word, with water, with bread and wine – with towel and wash basin.

For Christ Jesus, even though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Thanks be to God. Amen.