



ECUMENICAL DAY OF WORSHIP

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, September 7, 2008

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Lection - Psalm 133:1-3 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 1) How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity! (v. 2) 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. (v. 3) It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion. For there the Lord ordained his blessing, life forevermore.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Despite the high priestly prayer of Jesus for “oneness” among the ranks of those who followed him, the history of the church is littered with division and schism. Across more than twenty centuries, the worship of the church has changed and evolved. Throughout history, when the church has split and divided, it usually involved a conflict concerning worship, and resulted in some redaction of a worship tradition.

The forms and theology of worship differ significantly among Christian bodies and therefore, are not only a reflection, but often the cause of our disunity. The fundamental fault lines that have delineated points of separation in churches worshipping together have concerned the form of worship, the centrality and significance of communion, the place of proclamation, the use of silence versus speech, and the appropriateness or inappropriateness of icons/images in worship.

An ecumenical day of worship seeks to address this scandal of disunity by bringing different worship traditions back to the place of dialogue, reconciliation, covenant relationships, collaboration and, in some cases, reunion. The word “ecumenical” derives from the Greek, “*oikoumenikos*,” meaning “of or belonging to the (inhabited) earth.”

This term embraces the quest for visible Christian unity, which is undertaken in theological study, in common witness in the world-wide task of mission and evangelism, as well as in *diakonia* and the promotion of justice and peace in the world. Its use in reference to worship is used to connote the desire to transcend differences in doctrine and enable persons to be enhanced, expanded, and even challenged by the theological and liturgical practices of others who share in the worldwide Christian church.

However, the challenge of ecumenical worship is how to preserve the integrity, diversity and authenticity of worship traditions and maximize the do-ability of liturgical acts without evoking offense or reducing these traditions to their lowest common denominator. Remarkably, many Christians are discovering and appreciating styles of worship quite new and alien to their own tradition as they re-appropriate aspects of their Christian heritage.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Psalm 133:1-3

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

The struggle to find and maintain unity in our world and in the church is ongoing and incessant. The political constellation is very different from what it was during the 20th century. The world today is dominated by a concentration of extreme power and wealth in the hands of a few. There are brilliant new technologies emerging alongside millions of people suffering from hunger, disease, and dying from rampant global violence. The environment is threatened with destruction because of a fundamental disrespect for creation.

As I write this commentary, the race for the democratic presidential nomination has forced the nation to face and examine two of its most deeply entrenched demons: racism and sexism. In addition, we have just passed the 40th anniversary of the assassination of our prophet, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., whose work for unity is hallowed. Although some progress has been made, Dr. King’s pronouncement that “Sunday morning is the most segregated hour of the week” still holds true.

However, there are reasons for cautious optimism because, in the Christian community, there is an incredible homogenization of faith traditions underway. The emergence of “Baptist” bishops, Pentecostal Catholics and Episcopalian Protestants who accept Lutherans are indicators of an

ecumenical openness to the faith leanings of others. This openness has not yet been defined, fully explored, nor completed.

These overtures of dialogue and unity appear in stark contrast to the catastrophe of September 11, 2001, the genocide in Darfur, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the potential nuclear proliferation in countries led by men who seem disinterested in peace, all of which illustrate the catastrophic effects of failing to live together in unity.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

Two metaphors bring this brief Psalm to life. It is one of fifteen Psalms in a collection known as “Songs of Ascent” (Psalms 120 - 134). These hymns of praise may have been sung by pilgrims or the companies of Levites assigned to regular periods of service in the temple as they approached the temple courts. The theme of our lection reading is not only the solidarity of the family, but of the entire nation. The security of the nation depended on the singular characteristic of kinship in tribal life. Particularly during the Hellenistic period (circa 330 - 165 BCE), the threat to Hebrew traditions increased greatly as the economy became commercialized, and the entire region came under the political domination of militaristic and secular overlords (Alexander and his successors, the Seleucid dynasty).

Religious pilgrimages to Jerusalem became a significant aspect of the culture of the Jewish Diaspora. The story of the boy Jesus and his parents attending the Passover in Jerusalem exemplified its meaning in Jewish life. (Luke 2:41 - 52) With the restoration of Israel’s national statehood in the latter half of the 20th century, and the availability of air transportation, the importance of this pilgrimage has been revived.

The two metaphors come from very different realms of human experience, but still have much in common. They share the common symbol of pouring, as in an anointing. Verse 2 describes an anointing with precious oil, as Jesus was anointed on two occasions. This practice formed part of the daily hygienic ritual of the rich, and usually involved scented olive oil or a perfumed ointment. This had both cooling and analgesic effects, as well as covering objectionable body odors in the hot climate of the region. It was also widely practiced on festival occasions. It was customary to anoint the heads of important guests at feast (cf. Luke 7:46). The coronation of a new king also included an act of anointing symbolic of the monarch’s role as the servant of Yahweh.

The other metaphor in verse 3 highlights two important sources of water: dew and Mount Hermon. Virtually all fresh water in Israel emanated from Mount Hermon in Lebanon. It is the source of the Jordan River from which Israel drew most of its water for irrigation and public consumption. The metaphors are meant to reference the life-giving blessings of Yahweh, and vividly portray the pilgrims’ praise as they approached the sacred temple precincts. As the copious dew fell on Mount Hermon and descended in fertilizing power on the mountains, so unity is fruitful and productive as it ascends among people.

In addition to the metaphors, the images of Mount Hermon in the north and Mount Zion in the south suggest that the writer had in mind a political reconciliation between the former kingdoms

of Israel and Judah. The basis for this unity would be their shared faith (indicated in the reference to the priesthood of Aaron), a single geographic region (that which included Hermon and Zion), and a common political center (Jerusalem).

Tragically, the southern perspective of unity worked against the creation of a unified people in the post-exile period. It is true that the people of the north and south shared a common religious tradition which focused on the worship of Yahweh, but the priests who functioned in the northern sanctuaries were not recognized as legitimate by the priests in Jerusalem, though both claimed Aaron as their ancestor. The southerners' insistence on Jerusalem as the political center of a new, unified nation was also a point of contention because they had their own sacred cities: Bethel, Shechem, Dan, and especially Samaria.

The psalmist's desire for unity is commendable and undoubtedly sincere. However, his desire for unity was never realized, in large part because inhabitants of the north and south did not envision unity in the same way. We see a similar situation today in Iraq, as Sunnis, Shiites, and Kurds struggle to create a constitution that will be acceptable to all three groups (and to various subgroups within these groups).

On a larger scale, we see in the United Nations an attempt at unity, based on a set of principles such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the idea that international conflicts should be resolved by negotiation and international judgment rather than war. That ideal is far from reality as well. Nevertheless, it does provide the world with an imperfect, yet viable, framework for unity, if nations really take seriously their commitments to human rights and peace.

Unity does not imply one hundred percent agreement on forms of government or economic systems, much less religious practices; but it does require that nations respect first, the basic human rights of all their own citizens, especially those that represent ethnic or religious minorities, and second, the right of neighboring nations to self-determination (within the context of a respect for human rights).

Where people live together in unity, the blessings of God flow to the furthest boundaries of existence. Harmony between people creates positive literal and figurative space, an atmosphere conducive to experiencing God's presence and blessing. Harmony with one another and God leads to an experience of "at-one-ment."

How good and pleasant it is for brothers and sisters to dwell together in unity! As Christians, we are called upon to both pray for and work with citizens of other countries and from different faith traditions, both to imagine and to create a unified world, one in which India and Pakistan, Palestine and Israel, Syria and Lebanon, North and South Korea, Taiwan and China, Russia and Chechnya, and the U.S. and Cuba can dwell together in unity.

Celebration

This text challenges us to strive for unity despite our differences. It appeals to adherents to celebrate what they share in common, rather than emphasize how they are different. Our

celebration is heightened in that God comes down like the dew and the oil to bless and enrich our efforts to fellowship.

The fact that the oil is described as flowing from the “head down” is meant to imply that it is indeed a grace bestowed from above. This passage is full of descriptive details that imply a vertical-horizontal benediction: this oil flows down, this dew comes down.

The incarnational implications for preaching are clear in that Christ, being the ultimate grace, came down to bring us the gift that is meant to saturate our very souls – unity. Indeed, he is the only one who can guarantee that, to quote the text, “this blessing will be forevermore.”

Descriptive Details

Sights: The passage is lavish. Streaming down the collar of what were formal robes is an abundance of oil. That images such as oil and dropping dew are used to typify unity points out how messy/difficult to grasp it is, but also how like oil – it sticks to and saturates our very being; flowing freely and unobstructed into and over every aspect of our lives. And as the dew, it arrives as moisture/the water of life, refreshing us.

III. Other Sermonic Comments

“There is a difference between unity and uniformity. Dwelling together in unity does not mean that we are rubber-stamped into a similar form. The church is not to be involved in cookie cutter Christianity. Christian unity is not brought about by mechanical restrictions and regulations. Christian unity is a heart union of believers ready to work together for the purpose of glorifying God and furthering the work of his kingdom.”

-Raymond E. Brown

The Unity and Diversity in New Testament Ecclesiology

“Unity is the need of the hour.”

-Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

“When it was born in Jerusalem, the church was a fellowship. When it went to Greece, it became a philosophy. When it went to Rome, it became an institution. When it went to Europe, it became a culture. When it went to America it became an enterprise. How the Church needs to return to being a Fellowship again.”

-Lance D. Watson

“The division, the stereotypes, the scapegoating, the ease with which we blame our plight on others - all of this distracts us from the common challenges we face - war and poverty; injustice and inequality. We can no longer afford to build ourselves up by tearing someone else down.”

-Barack Obama, U.S. Senator

Candidate for the Democratic Presidential Nomination

During Vacation Bible School, a class was interrupted when a new student was brought in. The little boy had one arm missing, and the teacher was very nervous that one of the other children

might comment on his handicap and embarrass him. As the class time came to a close, she asked the class to join her in their usual closing ceremony. “Let’s make our churches,” she said. “Here’s the church and here’s the steeple, open the doors and . . .” The awful truth of her own actions struck her. The very thing she had feared that the children would do, she had done. As she stood there speechless, the little girl sitting next to the boy reached over with her left hand and placed it up to his right hand and said, “Here, let’s make the church together.”

- Author Unknown

I heard a story about a visitor to a mental hospital for the criminally insane. The visitor was shocked to see that only 3 guards were supervising more than 100 dangerous inmates. He asked the guide, “Don’t you fear these people will plot an escape and overpower the guards?” “Don’t worry about that,” The guard assured him. “Lunatics never unite.”

- Author Unknown

“Unity, rather than majority is the principle of corporate guidance. More than mere agreement, it is the perception that we have heard the voice of God. We do not seek compromise, but God-given consensus.”

-Richard Foster, Celebration of Discipline

Notes

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