

Psalm 133

A Song of Ascents.

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

My interest is piqued by the word “very” in this morning’s text, especially when combined with the word “good.” We’ve read the first creation story in *Genesis* enough times to recognize the import of the phrase *very good*. God creates each part of creation: land and sky and seas, vegetation, morning and evening lights, heavenly lights, people, critters, swimming things, and everything else that fills up the universe. And then God calls all of it *very good*.

This is wonderful, because God affirms each individual part of creation, while at the same time reminding us that the whole is even more delightful than the sum of its parts. And it’s worth stressing that this is the very first thing we hear in our sacred scriptures: we are made in the image of God, each created as good entities, and collectively, our universe is a *very good* entity.

I have a confession. I've never explored the definition of the word *very*. And if you asked me to give you a synonym for the phrase *very good*, my first response would be *great*. But that would not be a *great* answer. Actually, it'd be *poor*.

I was surprised to learn that Merriam-Webster's dictionary offers two definitions of the word *very*: 1) a high degree of something or 2) the precise amount. I love the idea of *very* meaning precise. God has made each one of us the precise amount of good – this speaks to the care and concern God shows for creation, but it also reminds us that we are enough. God made the world, then sat down in a lawn chair, you can decide what the beverage of choice was, surveyed creation, and said, "Wow! Look what I've made. It's SO good, just the right amount of good, and I am SO happy, and proud about it, and I'm SO in love with it. Great doesn't do justice to God's creative work. *Very good* reminds us of God's ruach, the parenting, loving force that breathes life into each of us. *Very good*, indeed!

This morning, the Psalmist exclaims, "How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!"

It is just the right amount of good when kindred – that is all of humanity AND all of creation – live together in unity.

We hear this exclamation on the heels of Holy Week. In the season of Easter ahead, I hear the Psalmist, and the earliest followers of Jesus calling us to do three things in order that we might live together in unity. First, we need to make space at our own tables and in our own hearts for neighbors near and far. Second, we need to be willing to use our tables as a means to break down oppressive systems. And third, we

need to consider that kindred are a super-inclusive term – they include the whole of humanity, and all that fills creation.

How are our tables a part of this process? I think about our Maundy Thursday table, and indeed every Communion table. Jesus gathered the disciples together. I believe a better way to say it is that Jesus gathered together all of the good things he had around him: his friends, and a few dozen wobbly chairs, and a plain but sturdy table, and some day-old bread from the Merita Bakery outlet, and a few bottles of cheap wine, and they huddled in a room with the best rate on Vrbo. And I imagine what Jesus was saying was, “When you gather with the people you love, when you celebrate their humanity, when you commit to relationships that are transformative, those that include a cycle of loving, and hurting, and forgiving, and healing, and loving again; you are doing precisely what is good. You are living together in unity; and every time you do that, I’m gonna be there with you!”

And how might our tables be a means to breaking down oppressive systems? I think about the empty tomb. And even more so, I think about the resilient women who left that place, and eventually, the resilient men, too. Because I think, in advancing the Jesus movement, what these kindred were actually saying to us was this: “The precise amount of good; the life-giving amount of good, occurs when people decide to wheel the Communion table out of the upper room, and roll it right down main street. Because to live with the precise amount of good, is not to advance nor be beholden to systems that choose their dinner guests on the artificial whims of privilege and power. To live with the precise amount of good is to work for communities where there is no quota on dinner guests, and where every extra chair adds to the whole. We’re working for a world where we notice God’s goodness

in everybody, and we allow that goodness to live, and thrive, and partner in collaborative, loving communities.”

Finally, our tables don't just include people. I had Communion with friends from Millbrook at a U-shaped table last week. But this week, I've been having Communion with another family. I spent the better part of Monday afternoon reclaiming my unruly backyard – raking up old leaves, mowing back stubborn weeds, edging overgrown shrubs. I met a few salamanders, and a half-dozen rabbits, and some Carolina Wrens, and a few cardinals, and lots of butterflies, and all kinds of creeping things buried deep within a leafy, mulchy mix. At church, Camille and Jessica told me about a beaver in the labyrinth that turned out to be a muskrat. And go figure, this muskrat's name is Millicent, a favorite of Millbrook Preschool. And Millicent's great grandparents used to live in the garden that once resided nearby! Our preschool staff and preschoolers have communed with these furry friends for years!

I noticed my extended family making their own tables, and I wondered: “How often do we choose to let the natural spaces we occupy offer welcome to our extended kin?” Are seed in the feeder for birds (AND squirrels), and sweet water for the hummingbirds, and a few of this year's tomatoes for the rabbits and chipmunks not also a form of Communion? Will our gardens (crossing my fingers they bear fruit!) become a kind of table, where bees, birds, insects, and other creatures can both find nourishment and give life to new things? What kind of example of radical and inclusive welcome might insect, flower and bird model for each of us?

I believe we have the capacity to create tables, to share our tables with neighbors, and to imagine limitless boundaries in how we define our

table participants. I believe, Millbrook, that we have the capacity for unity.

I also know that when I share these thoughts, I must compete with the harsh realities of our world.

We're no longer shocked, just numbed by headlines of more gun violence, and a deepening environmental concerns, and heartbreaking tales of families fleeing violence from Central and South America, and our country's utterly impotent response to all of these crises. Across the world, there's more of the same – cruelty, futility, and apathy – expanding and simultaneously ignoring the massive needs of neighbors in Palestine, Ukraine, Afghanistan, Syria, and all throughout Africa and Asia. And this is to say nothing of our own backyard – so many micro-aggressions of injustice in every zip code.

And other tables are roped off, too. We have in our faith tradition, a feast, a sacred canon of stories, poems, and wisdom, given, freely and openly, to ALL people. The idea that this divine anthology would be attached to nationalistic songs and documents, cloaked in a flag, snatched as exclusive, and monetized for personal gain is beyond imaginable – it conjures Antiochus Epiphanes. It seems the table of culture is closed as well – how dare the greatest entertainer in the world play a game of Texas Hold 'Em. And how about the feast of history? Is there no room at the table for heritages, traditions, and peoples that tell a story of God beyond our own limited ideas and privileges?

What need do we have of pie-in-the-sky, rah-rah Psalms?

I don't believe the Psalmist, or Jesus, or any prophet new or old, promises us an absence of evil and pain and grief. But I do believe, prophets, both new and old, remind us that we can find strength, and hope, and refuge, AND LIFE in our shared vulnerabilities. When we break bread together, when we share the ups and downs of the human experience, when we choose to notice both the intimacy and vastness of God's creation, we experience those things that are *very good*. We create those things that are lasting, and real, and collaborative. We learn that death is NOT the final word. We create the possibility that radical hospitality, first individually, then communally, finally systemically, can loosen this world's obsession with borders, and titles, and security, and disconnectedness, and hopelessness.

And we keep on. We keep on!

The work of unity is intentional. And hard. And it requires consistency. And patience. And Easter Hope, not just on sunrise of Resurrection Sunday, but every day the sun rises.

Of course, the Psalmist offers us encouragement. This life-sharing, this goodness, this unity-making is in abundance. It flows like oil from Aaron's beard; it is replenished each morning, like Mt. Hermon's dew, the same dew that provided manna in the Exodus. God has ordained life, forevermore.

Friends, may we seek this life – the consortium of the very good – by expanding our tables and reimagining the guests who can fill them. And in so doing, may we know the pleasantries of unity. May it be so, and may it be soon! And may it finally be very good, indeed. Amen.