

Sermon

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Psummer of Psalms: Ascent and Unity

This morning concludes our Psummer of Psalms series. We've talked about psalms of thanksgiving, trust, imprecation, forgiveness and so on, each week looking at a new genre of psalm. Today's psalms of ascent. This actually covers different types of psalms, but predominant themes are praise for going to Jerusalem and worshiping in the temple and expressions of unity within the body of believers.

Our first reading, Psalm 122, likely would have been sung by pilgrims who came to Jerusalem for one of the major religious festivals. There is speculation based on verse 2, "Our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem," that the psalm may have been sung or recited when the pilgrims reached the city gate.

The psalm has a four-fold prayer:

- 1) Peace for those who love Zion (the center of worship and thus a reference to loving Yahweh, their God).
- 2) That the city would be a haven of peace.
- 3) The at the peace of the city would extend to family and friends of the worshipers
- 4) And a promise that for the sake of the temple (Yahweh), they will work for Jerusalem's peace, health, and safety. (Their understanding was that when peace and justice reign in Jerusalem, then all of Israel enjoys God's favor and blessing. When they fail in Zion, then the entire land was in peril.)

In other words, this psalm offers prayer for the faithful, for all whom they encounter in their lives, and for the community at large. When they are well, the nation will be well. It makes me wonder what it will take for us to be well in order for our nation to be healed.

Anybody recognize the words from Psalm 133? They might be familiar from an MCC favorite, "Sharing the Road," which we'll sing later in worship. This psalm is a song about the goodness of the people of Israel living together in unity. Unity is a beautiful and valuable commodity. It is as valuable as the generous and lavish use of precious oils when a new chief priest is anointed. The anointing includes such a quantity of the expensive oil that when it was poured on the priest's head, it would run down his beard and onto his vestments. It was a blessing of him and his office.

Unity is a beautiful and valuable commodity, but it can sometimes be hard to come by. Sometimes we believe that it means that we all have to think alike. But rather, it's a unity that puts the best interest of the community at its heart. It's a unity that prioritizes God's justice, which we know not only from the Hebrew scripture, but from the life of Jesus. It's a justice that requires the first to be last in order for the last to be first.

This psalm's call to unity reminds me of the quote (often attributed to St. Augustine, but its origins are uncertain): "In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity."

Of course, then we can disagree about what is essential and what is non-essential! But we take our clues from our tradition and scripture: to care for the vulnerable and to love—to love God with our whole heart, and our neighbors as ourselves. Sound familiar? We've taken our MCC mission statement from those mandates: To live faithfully and lovingly with God, neighbor, and creation.

We're still learning how to do this. It's a unity that requires we become life-long learners, and sometimes *unlearners* of what we were taught in church or society. It's a unity that leans heavily on grace, because none of us get it right all of the time. Forgiveness is needed. Repentance—that is, turning from the ways we get it wrong to the way of God's shalom—is crucial.

We have the opportunity practice this every day as church. Sometimes we hit the mark; sometimes we don't. And so we ask for forgiveness, accept God's grace, and move on to try again. We come to the table of grace to remember who we are as that one body of Christ, enacting the love, justice, and welcome of God. All belong, none are denied. All are loved, more than we can imagine.

Community of Hope and Advent have created a beautiful example of God's unity as Madison Christian Community, two congregations striving to work together, to practice unity and peace within our walls, so that we can be a witness of peace and unity to the wider community. It was only a vision 50 years ago, a grand experiment. And look where we have come with practicing that over the years! We are a beacon of hope, especially in these troubled times, that another way is possible. It's never easy work, but it is the work to which we and all Christians are called, that we all may be one in the Spirit of Christ.

Let's continue to practice. Let's receive grace, celebrate where we are living that unity, and ask God to re-orient us to love and justice in those times when we lose sight.

Unity is gift of God. May we have open hearts to receive the gift. May we have open hearts to practice. Thanks be to God!