

“Behold How Good and Pleasant”

Colossians 3: 12-17; Psalm 133

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The Rev. Dr. Herbert Anderson

First Presbyterian Church

Lake Forest, Illinois

It is a great privilege and joy for the Andersons to be invited back to Lake Forest on the occasion of your sesquicentennial, and for me personally to return to this distinguished pulpit.

The added benefit to all this is witnessing Christine Chakoian’s dynamic pastoral leadership and the high esteem in which she is held by all. It is one of my earnest desires come true. I do miss our mutual friend and my colleague of years past, Millicent Kreischer of blessed memory.

Having been in the pulpit with little regularity for the past eight years I am particularly standing in the need of prayerful inspiration 'and what better place to look for some grace infused inspiration than the Bible. So, to scripture I repaired, hoping to find some text or context for the task at hand. I found it. Now, from my need to God's answer.

Psalm 133 begins: "Behold how good and pleasant it is for brothers and sisters to dwell in unity. Indeed it is. But behold how hard it is also. It's hard because, unlike a political party, church unity is not based on agreement, but on mutual concern. A church is a single, but very diverse community based on the solid ground that when all hearts are one, nothing else has to be one...not clothes, not age, neither sex nor sexual preference...neither race nor mind set.

In fact, a decent church ought to be the grandest mixture of people you ever saw. Actually, the unity of the church is not an ideal to be realized; but rather a reality to be recognized. "Behold how good and pleasant it is for brothers and sister to dwell in unity." We do not choose our family; it is God who has made us one. So in church we have, in the old pietistic phrase, "to let go and

let God" ...let go of our manifest prejudices and manifold insecurities, our feuds and feeble hates, and let God's grace lead us into the freedom and intimacy in which God has ordained us to live. Christianity, my friends, has not .....been tried and found wanting; it has been tried and found difficult, abandoned again and again. Because it is so hard, behold how doubly good and pleasant it is when brothers and sister do dwell in unity.

I'll tell you another reason why it's difficult. Doing an evil thing does not make a person evil. But doing an evil thing and seeing that it is evil. ..calling evil good and believing your own lie...makes for an evil person. And if the essence of evil is disguise, and the cloak of religious piety the best possible disguise, where else would you look for evil people if not in the religious community or the church in particular? Now, this is no new idea of mine. Centuries ago Blaise Pascal wrote, "People never do evil so cheerfully/as when they do it from religious conviction." And didn't our Lord himself warn, "Not all who say Lord, Lord shall enter the Kingdom of heaven?"

If Christian unity is so difficult and the church such a perfect hiding place for evil people we better ask, "Why the church? Why is the physical presence of other Christians such a spiritual necessity?" Well, there is merit in the old comparison of the church to Noah's ark: No one could have stood the stench within were it not for the storm without.

Life is a storm....not now, but at some time or another, most of us have felt our lives to be as the psalmist described his: "My eye is wasted from grief, my soul and body also. I've passed out of mind like one who is dead: I've become like a broken vessel. Have you ever held in your cupped hands a bird with a broken wing? If so, you know that if you open wide your hands, the bird will flutter its wings, fall out and die. And if you close your hands too tightly, the bird will be crushed. Are there not times when all of us need an intimate place...secure, but not crushingly close...where our wounds can heal and

where we can grow? Why is the physical presence of other Christians such a spiritual blessing? Because our culture's got it all wrong; you don't win through competition; you win through love.

Prime time television shows us people driven by personal ambition and consumerism. The message is clear: if you've got the money, honey, do your thing; do it for you and yours. Take your particular segment of life and make of it a world large or small, but make it all your own.

Luckily, we are seldom as selfish as our therapeutic culture urges us to be. But we need the church to help us not be swept up in promotions and financial success, to remind us that we cannot possess our souls by possessing things outside of them, to recall that the only renewable resources are spiritual, that human beings are defined not by what they have, but by who they are, and that we are as we love. For as St. Paul reminds us; "if we fail in love, we fail in all things else."

And that brings us to the heart of our difficulty in this or any other church. Evil people are not the problem; they are far too few. As for personal ambition and consumerism, they are more an effect than a cause of America's shortcomings and those of the church. Henri Nouwen writes: "the agenda of our world ...the issues and items that fill newspapers and newscasts is an agenda of fear and power. It is amazing, yes frightening, to see how easily that agenda becomes ours, to see how the world seduces us into accepting its fearful questions." Nouwen asks us to consider the enormous number of "what if" questions that occupy our minds. What's going to happen if I don't find a spouse, a friend, a job? What if I get sick, or get fired?

What if my marriage doesn't work out? What if terrorists strike again? As Father Nouwen writes, "The trouble with fearful questions is that they never lead to love-filled answers. Fear cannot give birth to love, only to more fear."

So, for a community of faith to become a true church, its members must strain to hear the voice to which we have become all but deaf, the voice that says, "Do not be afraid, have not fear." This voice was heard by Zachariah when Gabriel, the angel of the Lord, appeared to him in the temple and told him that his wife, Elizabeth would bear a son. This voice was heard by Mary when the same angel entered her house at Nazareth and announced that she would conceive and bear a child and name him Jesus. This voice was also heard by the women who came to the tomb and saw that the stone was rolled away. "Do not be afraid, fear not, do not be afraid."

The voice uttering these words sounds all through history as the voice of God's messengers, be they angels or saints. It is the voice that announces a whole new way of being, of being in the house of love, the house of the Lord.

A church is a place where we can think, speak and act in God's way, not in the way of a fear filled world. A church is a home for love, a home for brothers and sisters to dwell in unity, to rest and be healed, to let go their defenses and be free.....free from worries, free from tensions, free to laugh, and yes, free to cry. I said at the beginning that we had to let go and let God's grace lead us into the freedom and intimacy in which God has ordained us to live. Fear destroys intimacy. It distances us from each other, for fear makes us cling to each other which is the death of freedom. Fear has so many doors to let life out. Love alone can recreate life. Only love can create intimacy and freedom too for when all hearts are one nothing else has to be one - not clothes, not age, not sex, race nor mind set.

Look, if we in the church are close to being the grandest mixture of generations and perspectives you ever saw, we're not doing that badly. Today, God is calling out our hearts for review. They are still too full of the fear love is supposed to cast out. God wants our unsundered souls, souls we squeeze so tightly that they shrink to the size of our hands.

Unsundered, our souls are fearful. Surrendered, they fill us with love that only God's grace can provide. Behold, how good and pleasant and absolutely necessary it is for brothers and sisters to dwell in unity. Sisters and brothers, we can quarrel, we can disagree, but we are a family. That's why the physical presence here of every one of us is such a spiritual blessing to all the rest. Look around you now and behold how good and pleasant it is!

Amen