



Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Richard Baker -
January 28, 2018 Sermon

The Scent of God: Friendship

Scripture Lessons: Leviticus 8:1-5, 10-12; Psalm 133

Why can't we all just get along?

So asked Rodney King in the midst of the riots in Los Angeles back in 1992. And King didn't just ask—he begged, he pleaded, he implored for the violence, the burning, the beatings, and the looting to stop. King issued his plea in an impromptu news conference (you can still find it on YouTube), and for a moment everyone did pause and listen. And then everything went right on as before: the riots continued for three more days.

Psalm 133 has played a similar role in church life: before, during, or after some sure-to-be-contentious church meeting, someone (often the pastor) will read the Psalm—begging, imploring, pleading—“How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!” And the result is pretty much the same: everyone pauses and listens for a moment, and then everything goes right on as before: the conflict continues, we go right on fighting with one another.

Why can't we all just get along?

Well, for lots of reasons—some of them good or at least understandable (more on this later)—but ultimately it comes down to this: we don't really believe, at least believe all the way down, that friendship lies at the heart of the universe, the heart of God, that God is friendship. We don't really believe, at least believe all the way down, that we are commanded to be friends with God with all our heart soul and mind and to be friends to our neighbors as we are to ourselves.

In other words, we don't really understand or appreciate the imagery of Psalm 133.

I choose my words advisedly.

I know that Bible says that we are to **love** the Lord God with all our heart, soul, and mind. and **love** our neighbor as ourselves. I know that the Bible says God **is** love. But given the meanings of the words today, I think “friendship” is the better choice.

I used to teach a course I called “Love and Friendship”—a good way to attract students who wouldn't otherwise dream of taking a philosophy course. On the first day of class, at the bottom of the “Student Information Form” (you know: “name, year, major, etc”), I'd ask: “What do you think the relationship between love and friendship is?”

Little did they know that I planned to use their answers throughout the semester. What I got was revealing: “Friendship is like decaffeinated love.” “Friendship is what you supposedly have after you break up—HA!”

By and large, their answers confirmed what I suspected: they thought of love only as romantic love, friendship as just hanging out, and never even considered what the two might have in common.

My goal was to broaden their conception of love, deepen their appreciation of friendship, and get them to see that the two—although differing in their earthly manifestations—nonetheless have much in common and ultimately come from a common source.

A friend wants what is good for his friend for his friend's own sake—even to the point of laying down his life for the friend. Friends share all things in common; friends share a life, share a world; a friend doubles my joy and halves my sorrows; a friend is a second self, another me, my other half. With a friend I can be who I really am, and my friend can too—be herself **and** be my friend, one with me..

We see perfect friendship in the triunity of God—in the relationship of the three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. A perfect unity and yet also three distinct, individual identities each perfected uniquely in that perfect unity. We often think of the triunity of God as beyond our comprehension. And if you think about it mathematically maybe it is: it's hard to figure out how three can equal one. But if you think about it in terms of the best friendship you've ever had, it's not so hard. Not so hard to know how two (or more—sometimes circles of friends can be the best) how two (or more) can be fully one and still be fully uniquely beautifully two (or more). Not hard at all. A friend is a second (and third) self, another (and another) me. That's the triunity of God: friend, friend, friend; friendship lies at the heart of the universe, the heart of God; God is friendship.

And that friendship comes to us, to our world, in the flesh—in Jesus.

Friends share all things in common: friends share a life, share a world; a friend doubles my joy and halves my sorrows. A friend wants what is good for his friend for his friend's own sake—even to the point of laying down her life for the friend . . . greater love hath no one than this . . . he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. For us. Jesus said: "I do not call you servants any longer, but I call you friends."

And if this is so—then, well, it follows: In Jesus' words: "You are my friends if you do what I command you"; and in Paul's: "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus": we are commanded to be friends with God with all our heart soul and mind and to be friends to our neighbors as we are to ourselves.

Broaden their conception of love, deepen their appreciation of friendship, and get them to see that the two—although differing in their earthly manifestations—nonetheless have much in common and ultimately come from a common source.

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

The problem is that we have trouble believing it, at least all the way down. And for some good reasons.

"We need to move on." For the good of whatever the "we" is in this case—be it the family, the sport, the university, the church, the company, or the country—"we need to move on." That's what those in power say when they want to change the subject, or as we say these days, "change the narrative." In other words, it's what those in power say, when they want to cover up their own role in the wrongdoings. And it can also be a way for those on the sidelines, who aren't as affected (or at least feel that they aren't or just don't care anymore), a way of their saying to those who are affected and who do care, "Well, I know it's hard, but, you know, it's hard to be sure exactly what happened, and whatever happened, the damage is already done, and besides you could be wrong, and you know nobody's going to believe you anyway and they're going to come after you, you know; it's just not worth it. You need to move on." How many times do you think the women who appeared in that Michigan courtroom this past week heard that or something like that—as girls? But to say that or something like that is to promote neither unity nor the greater good; it is to acquiesce to falsehood, lies, and evil. And to acquiesce to evil is to allow it to continue—which it will: 156 women testified in that courtroom in Michigan; 156—how many more do you think didn't?

They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, "Peace, peace," when there is no peace. They acted shamefully, they committed abomination; yet they were not ashamed, they did not know how to blush.

The word of the Lord, from the prophet Jeremiah.

And Jesus said to them: “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.”

Yes, yes, Jesus also said “If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also,” but that has to be one of the most misunderstood and misused phrases in the Bible (although, I grant you, there’s a lot of competition). When Jesus tells us to turn the other cheek he is saying that we should not perpetuate violence, that we should not return violence, hatred, and wrongdoing with more violence, hatred, and wrongdoing. He’s **not** saying that we just have to stand there and take it.

Sometimes the best way to “turn the other cheek” is to get out of range of the person throwing the punches—as far away and as quickly as possible. And sometimes the best way to stop the perpetuation of violence is to restrain the person throwing the punches—at least when it’s possible.

Of course, it’s not always possible; there are times when we do have to stand there and take it. Jesus did. They spat upon him, and beat him; and he stood there, and he took it, and he died on a cross.

And yes, Jesus did say that we are to pick up our cross and follow him. But that does not mean that God wants us—wills for us—to do nothing but suffer until we finally die. A physician may knowingly cause us pain (“now, this may cause some discomfort”), but that is not the physician’s will, nor her ultimate intention. Her will and ultimate intention is life, and health and wholeness—**our** life and health and wholeness. So it is also with God. A friend wants what is good for his friend for his friend’s own sake—even to the point of laying down his life for the friend. God is friendship.

It **is** very good and pleasant for kindred to live together in unity . . . but not at the price of truth and righteousness. Nor are we, as followers of Jesus, required to abandon truth and righteousness for the sake of unity—for others or for ourselves. Because that is not true unity, but only the mere semblance thereof, with the rot of evil underneath.

The Holy Spirit, the third person of the triune God, is the Spirit of **both** unity and truth. In the end, the two are not mutually exclusive, but mutually inclusive. In the end, the two are one. Hence, Paul: “Speak the truth in love.” In the end, when truth and love are one, we will have true peace and we will all get along truly . . . in the end.

In the end . . . but sometimes the end seems a long way away. And in the meantime, it’s tempting to give up: “Well, you know it’s hard but it happens; and you know it’s hard to be sure exactly what happened, and whatever happened, the damage is already done, and besides I could be wrong, and nobody’s going to believe me anyway and they’re going to come after me, you know; it’s just not worth it. I need to move on.”

I have to tell you—sometimes, especially when I watch and read too much of the news, when I survey our current national landscape, especially our fractured political landscape, sometimes, I have to admit, I feel like this.

They act shamefully, they commit abomination; yet they are not ashamed, they do not know how to blush. And I’m sick and tired of it.

And that’s when it’s tempting to quit—to stop believing, at least believing all the way down, that friendship lies at the heart of the universe, the heart of God, that God is friendship, that we are commanded to be friends with God with all our heart soul and mind and to be friends to our neighbors as we are to ourselves

And that’s when it helps to understand and appreciate the imagery of Psalm 133.

In those days, they used oils (which were really a mixture of various oils, as well as aromatic herbs and spices) for anointing. These oils were prized not for their liquidity but for their scent, that is, for their odor. And because they were both costly and highly aromatic, only a few drops were used, a few drops touched lightly to the forehead.

For the anointing of kings and priests—as the holy, chosen ones of God—a special oil was used, which was to be used for no other purpose. In giving Moses the recipe for this oil, God says:

This shall be my holy anointing oil throughout your generations. It shall not be used in any ordinary anointing of the body, and you shall make no other like it in composition; it is holy, and it shall be holy to you. Whoever compounds any like it or whoever puts any of it on an unqualified person shall be cut off from the people.”

It was being anointed with this special oil—not the robes, not the ceremonies, not the sacrifices—that conferred the status of priest or king. This special oil was holy, and it was holy because it conveyed the scent, the odor of the Lord. And thus it made the recipient holy, holy like God. As one scholar puts it:

Since the holy anointing oil represented the scent, personality, and status of the Lord, **every drop** upon an individual's skin brought that individual closer to the Lord. Thus the greater the amount of the Lord's scent one was anointed with, the greater the connection with the Lord.

With all that in mind, listen again to Psalm 133:

*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.*

When we live together in unity—in friendship—that's how very good and pleasant it will be—and holy we will be..

As for dews of Hermon . . . well, it's a similar image of overflowing, overspreading, all-enveloping abundance. Hermon is a mountain, a holy mountain, the highest mountain in Israel, rising to 9200 feet, it was called "abrupt" for the way it rises up out of the landscape. One traveller described first seeing it this way:

It rose immensely above every surrounding object. The purity of the atmosphere caused it to appear near, though it was in reality many miles distant. The snow on its head and sides sparkled under the rays of the sun, as if it had been robed in a vesture of silver. It had none of the appearance of an inert mass of earth and rock, but glowed with life, with strength and majesty.

When we live together in unity—in friendship—that's how very good and pleasant it will be—and holy we will be..

So we don't give up. The Holy Spirit will give us the perseverance and the wisdom—the wisdom to know when to move away, when to restrain, and when to stand there and take it—that we need. And—like the precious oil on the head of Aaron, running down through his beard, running down over his collar and onto his robes, like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion—the Holy Spirit will give us the faith we need to believe, and believe all the way down, that friendship lies at the heart of the universe, the heart of God, that God is friendship.

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

For there the Lord ordained his blessing: life forevermore.

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.