

Easter 2  
April 11, 2021

Grace to you and peace from our crucified and risen Lord. God bless you in this Easter season and your renewed hope in the glow of Christ's resurrection. Christ is risen; he is risen indeed.

Some of you are hearing all of the assigned readings for this Sunday, the second Sunday of Easter, and some of you one or two selected readings. What struck me this time, when I looked over the readings, is that all of them touch on the God-pleasing unity among God's people. All of them.

The one that stands out is the psalm. Psalm 133:

How very good and pleasant it is when kindred (when sisters and brothers in the family of God) dwell together in unity! <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion. For there the LORD ordained his blessing, life forevermore.

There is so much talk in the Bible of unity, and how tightly the life of resurrection faith and discipleship weaves us into the communion of saints.

- 1 John 1:7: "if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another."
- Acts 4:32: "Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul."
- Ephesians 4:2-3 "with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, (be) diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace".

Let's take it back to the psalm. Behold, how good and pleasant it is when the sisters and brothers dwell together in unity!

But is it also true to say, "behold, how elusive is this unity"? What goes on in the Body of Christ that causes this child of God to be estranged from that child of God? Sometimes I wonder if some of the children of God get more satisfaction from conflict than from unity.

So much division and fracturing take place in the church – and the truth is, sometimes it is for the sake of good causes, for causes that we believe are just and true. How good and pleasant it is when kindred dwell together in unity, and yet we've always got good reasons for drawing lines – "You're on that side and I'm on this side"; "I'm right and you are wrong, (which so easily slides into) and I won't have anything to do with you." The pandemic, with all the stress COVID-19 has added to our lives, has intensified this inclination toward division and drawing lines. Even in the church. Even in the church.

This is the paradox: We may push hard for unity and along the way, we may push equally as hard a conviction that divides us from each another. This push and that push – both at the same time. And sometimes both for noble reasons.

I am here to tell you that we – you and I – cannot resolve this paradox. This paradox is resolved only in the equally paradoxical death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, because Jesus' death and resurrection relativizes all our pushing and redeems it.

“Behold, how good and pleasant it is when the sisters and brothers dwell together in unity.” Good and pleasant to whom. Good and pleasant to the people of God, maybe; but more importantly, good and pleasant to God.

Those who are lifted up by Jesus' resurrection cherish unity because it is good and pleasant to God.

Someone once asked Martin Luther King, Jr., “How can you love people who don't get along with you?” King's answer was, “I don't love people because I like them or they get along with me; I love them because God loves them. And when one rises to the level of being filled with the transformative love of God penetrating the human heart, then that one loves every person because God loves him or her.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his book entitled *Life Together* – which is all about the unity of church and the unity in community – wrote that when the Christian looks at another person, the Christian looks at that person through Jesus. The Christian sees Jesus between the two of us. This is what makes genuine life together, this is what makes unity happen, true unity.

Bonhoeffer says it better than I can.

Christian brotherhood/sisterhood is not an ideal which we must make real; it is rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate. The more clearly we learn to recognize that the ground and strength and promise of all our fellowship is in Jesus Christ alone, the more serenely shall we think of our fellowship and pray and hope for it.

In my words, Jesus is not rose-colored glasses to make us see in the other person only good, happy stuff. Jesus is the corrective lens that filters out our self-centered designs on that other person and shields us against that person's self-centered designs on us.

Again, from Bonhoeffer:

I have community with others and I shall continue to have it only through Jesus Christ. The more genuine and the deeper our community becomes, the more will everything else between us recede, the more clearly and purely will Jesus Christ and his work become the one and only thing that is vital between us. We have one another only through Christ, but through Christ we do have one another, wholly, and for all eternity.

The Gospel of John draws the disciple into this we-do-have-one-another unity when Jesus speaks of it in John 10 (“there will be one flock, one shepherd”) and when Jesus prays for it in John 17 (“The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one”); and this we-do-have-one-another unity is implied in today's Gospel in John 20.

John 20:26: “A week later his disciples were again in the house, **and Thomas was with them.**” Every time I read this story, I am struck by the fact that on that second

Sunday, Thomas is still with them. Thomas – grappling with his grief – he thinks Jesus is still dead – and grappling with his questions and doubts – is still one of them.

This is expansive unity in that upper room flowing out of resurrection grace.

**Behold, how good and pleasant it is when the sisters and brothers in Christ dwell together in unity.**

What I quoted from Bonhoeffer a minute ago flows from 1 John 3:1 “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are.” So, this is your core identity, God given, you are a child of God.

This means – among other things – that by God you are a child of God first and you are everything else second. Every other identity you have is second, even the good ones. What matters, in the end, is just this: as a child of God, “you are a sinner reconciled to God by the grace of God in Christ Jesus crucified and risen and I am a sinner reconciled to God by the grace of God in Christ Jesus crucified and risen”. Period. End of sentence.

Imagine what could happen for our church, for our communities, for our nation, for our world, if we live ourselves into the unity that the Lord creates by calling us God’s children. Imagine what could happen as the nature of Christian unity draws us together even with those who don’t look like us, who don’t vote like us, and whom we sometimes simply do not understand. Imagine what could happen if when we pray “Our Father” we mean it: Our Father. The most moving introduction I have ever received in church was at the historic Mt. Emory Baptist Church, founded in 1837 as the first church for Negroes in Jacksonville, IL, and Pastor David Steward introduced me as “his brother from a different mother.” It was clear from his skin color and mine that he was not talking biology.

**How very good and pleasant it is when the sisters and brothers dwell together in unity!**

I thank God for you – for our unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. I am grateful to God for the journey we share together thanks to Jesus, our living Lord.

When you feel like your world is spinning apart, God holds out this promise, this hope, for you as a child of God in the household of God:

Behold, how good and pleasant it is when the sisters and brothers dwell together in unity! <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion. For there the LORD ordained your blessing, life forevermore.

Amen

Bishop John Roth  
Central/Southern Illinois Synod

**Acts 4:32-35** Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. <sup>33</sup> With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. <sup>34</sup> There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. <sup>35</sup> They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

**Psalms 133:1-3** How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity! <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion. For there the LORD ordained his blessing, life forevermore.

**1 John 1:1 - 2:2** We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life-- <sup>2</sup> this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us-- <sup>3</sup> we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. <sup>4</sup> We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete. <sup>5</sup> ¶ This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. <sup>6</sup> If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; <sup>7</sup> but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. <sup>8</sup> If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. <sup>9</sup> If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. <sup>10</sup> If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. <sup>NRS</sup> **1 John 2:1** My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; <sup>2</sup> and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

**John 20:19-31** When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." <sup>20</sup> After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. <sup>21</sup> Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." <sup>22</sup> When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. <sup>23</sup> If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." <sup>24</sup> But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. <sup>25</sup> So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." <sup>26</sup> A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." <sup>27</sup> Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." <sup>28</sup> Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" <sup>29</sup> Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." <sup>30</sup> Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. <sup>31</sup> But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.