

“Whistling in the Dark”

Psalm 133; I John 1:1-7

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

January 18, 2015 – 2nd Sunday after Epiphany – Rev. Ronald Botts

The psalmist declares: "How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity! It is like precious oil on the head running down upon the beard It is like the dew of Hermon which falls on the mountains of Zion."

Certainly it's good when people live together in unity! The comparison to anointing oil on a beard | or dew on the mountain side might not be images that would come to our minds to express joy. Still, we get the psalmist's intention.

It is good when people live together in unity! Good like... ice cream on a hot day. Good like an unexpected raise at work. Good like a friend who remembers your birthday but, thoughtfully, doesn't mention your age.

Living together in unity is good like... working hard on a school assignment and getting an "A". Good like enjoying a cold beer during the 7th inning stretch. Good like a hug and kiss from your child when you return home.

The psalmist considered some joyful things that he could compare to living united and put them down on his short list. If we were asked to make the same effort, our examples would undoubtedly be different. But the point is clear by whatever comparisons we make: It is good when two people or two hundred or two thousand can live together in a sense of common community. It is good when it can be said that what holds them to each other is stronger than what may divide them.

If harmony together was good in ancient times, it is certainly something equally desirable in today's world. All around us we see struggles and violence which threaten to pull apart the fabric of society. Groups on different sides of an issue are becoming so polarized that they don't even see any common ground to initiate discussion. Ethnic divisions ravage places like Ukraine, Nigeria, and the Sudan. Our legislative chambers are filled with gridlock and hardly operate. Even our neighborhoods are divided.

Division isn't new in the human family. It's as old as the first unsettled argument and as current as the alienating words that someone right now is throwing at another. No time in history, even those we look back on as golden ages, has been free from underlying dissension. We may be plagued by our inability to act as one, though certainly the dream of unity has never been lost. We are still drawn by a hope that tomorrow the ideal of society will somehow become the reality.

Well, if we're not ever going to achieve social cohesiveness maybe we should just give up trying. Some would advocate just that. Why keep on attempting to achieve the impossible? Sometimes we may want to pack up our marbles and refuse to play anymore. In our hardest moments we may even shun the presence of others and enter into a deep cave of self-absorption. We're tempted to seek our equilibrium by getting away from everybody and

everything. Yet, most of us would come to find that we cannot stay in isolation and survive if we're to be balanced and healthy persons.

A simple lesson from nature, however, teaches us how interrelated all creatures really are. If you take a single bee and isolate it from the rest of the hive, but provide it with food and proper circumstances to ordinarily thrive, you might expect the likelihood of long life. Instead, the bee will die within a very short time. It will succumb not to hunger or cold, but rather solitude. This is a way of saying you cannot keep a bee—singular; you can only keep bees—plural.

We can see a bit of the same thing from our own lives. Pluck us away from inclusion and we lose something important. Remove the presence of others, and we begin to shrink. In our congregations we really need each other; membership is more than having your name on the list. Highlands only exists when it realizes its shape and form has nothing to do with our building, but rather relies on the awareness of ourselves as a servant community. Then we have to put it into practice.

On this Christian Unity Sunday it's likewise important to note that, in the wider Church of Jesus Christ we need each other as well; and we need one another no matter what sect or denominational distinction we apply to ourselves. We simply cannot thrive or maybe not even survive without each other.

There is perhaps no greater need right now than for Christian churches worldwide to realize that our strength is in each other as we are united in Christ. We need to discover or rediscover our basic unity, though that is not necessarily uniformity. We can be quite different and still understand ourselves as one together. We can say different words and sing different songs, but still praise God with one voice. We can link hands in service though they be white or brown or black hands.

We can't really get away from the fact that we do need each other. Jesus made that quite evident when he sent his then followers out to be fishers of people. We need each other and that's equally true for denominations, for congregations, or for individuals. The lesson repeats itself in many forms, and sometimes it is very personal.

On a Saturday afternoon in August of 1944 Bishop Hanns Lilje sat in his study in Germany. He was going over the sermon he was to preach the following day in St. John's Church, Berlin. His deep reflections were broken by a doorbell ringing insistently. He answered it and found there were two Gestapo officers on the stoop. It was not a courtesy call. They arrested the well-known bishop and just a few hours later he found himself in a dark cell.

It took all the courage and resolution he had not to be lost to total despair when the cell door was slammed shut behind him. What he did then was instinctive. He fell to his knees and asked God for the needed strength to give him what he would need in order to contend with this ordeal. Not more than a few minutes after acknowledging his own powerlessness to overcome this great adversity, he heard someone whistling.

Through perhaps some tiny crevice in the wall or maybe carried through a heating pipe from a distance came the unmistakable melody of an old hymn, "O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing My Great Redeemer's Praise." When the sound stopped he got up and whistled back

the same tune in the direction from which it seemed to come. Then the song once again repeated itself. Throughout that first long night two unseen and unknown prisoners brought hope to each other as they found themselves a congregation of two bound together by Christ.

Through community with each other here this morning, through fellowship with other believers beyond these walls, we are reminded that we are not forgotten and not alone. Experience shows that we are connected by a common thread that weaves as all together in the larger fabric of life.

Like the German bishop, God's presence is often made visible to us by the presence of another who comes in response to the prayers of our heart. He or she may not even recognize themselves as an instrument of that purpose, but that doesn't alter how the Spirit may choose to work. Perhaps even harder yet for us to believe is the possibility that God may use you or me to reach to another.

John in our other scripture today reminds us that if we walk in the light, we already have fellowship with one another—realized or not. When we know God, we see Lord's imprint upon others that links us together as brothers and sisters. We are one even before we experience it. The connection is already there.

Humanity on its own can do relatively little in regard to its greatest challenges, and that could lead us to despair; but when we dwell in unity, and attest that with God all things are possible, then our strength will be sufficient and our hope can never be lost.

Joined together in that realization, what we **can** do may be just what needs to be done.