

Sermon: **Living Together in Unity**

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St Giles Presbyterian Church, June 20, 2021)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

“How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!” With such a simple opening statement, Psalm 133 introduces to us the idea of unity and the hope that it brings.

Unity is a worthy goal that humanity is forever seeking, yet never quite attaining. Part of the problem seems to be a general lack of consensus on what unity looks like, or what unity actually is. Let me start by outlining what I think unity is not.

Unity is not lack of infighting. When I was serving in the Ministry / Personnel Committee of the Presbytery of Montreal, the on-going evaluation of ministry candidates is the one aspect of work that I took it to heart. I recall during one re-certification interview, the Committee was following up with a candidate on his effort to foster unity in the congregation he was serving. He explained in a positive manner, saying “Things are better. Various groups have stopped fighting among themselves.” To this I retorted, “Lack of infighting does not mean unity.” Perhaps it was too much to count on a seminary student to de-escalate a potentially divisive situation in a congregation. However my concern was eventually proven right—that lack of infighting was only temporary.

Unity is not unanimity. Absence of contrary voices do not necessary mean agreement—these voices could have been suppressed externally, or censored internally. Totalitarian governments regularly demonstrate sky-high approval rating or voter supports (that is when they are permitted to vote at all), yet that kind of unanimity is often the result of fear and oppression, not of true unity.

Unity is not union. Being together, whether living, dwelling, or bounding together, does not automatically result in unity. Allow me to paint this very graphic metaphor of tying two wild cats together by their tails, hanging them on a rope. Not a pretty sight! (Please don’t try this at home). One could even argue that close proximity may actually increase disunity. The story of David first living in the court of King Saul, in 1 Samuel 18, illustrates precisely the point. The more Saul witnessed the increasing

popularity of David, the more he despised the young man, who would one day replace him as a king. I won't go into more detail of that story, but only to highlight in verse 10 of the passage, "*an evil spirit from God rushed upon Saul, and he raved within his house...*" Here is a disturbing thought: sometime, God could be the cause of disunity, for reasons that God only knows.

If unity is not from a lack of infighting, is not unanimity, and is not union. What then is unity? What does true unity look like?

How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity! The psalmist proceeded to describe that unity with two metaphors, painting imaginaries in our minds. "*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. It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion.*"

This precious oil would be a mixture of expensive oil and four spices of myrrh, cinnamon, calamus and cassia (stipulated in Exodus 30). It would have been expertly combined by skilled perfumer, in multiple stages over a number of months. Aaron is the head of and represents the priestly caste of Israel. This verse describes an occasion of anointing with oil when a priest (or a king) is ordained into divine office. This metaphor points to the joy, elation and celebration of unity within the covenantal community.

The other metaphor utilizes the geography of Israel/Palestine. Mount Hermon is the highest peak in the northern mountain region. It is well watered by rain, snow, and of course dew, making it quite cool and lush. Whereas Zion, also known as the mountain range of Jerusalem, is located at the southern dry and hot region, where rain is scarce and dryness could go on for months. To envision the dew of Hermon falling on Zion, speaks of abundant and surprising blessings from God.

A unity that is ordained by God, that bring unexpected joy and elation. Its abundant blessings are celebrated in a covenantal community, among kindred spirits. Such a unity is as good as life forevermore.

It is toward such a unity that, I believe, the Presbyterian Church in Canada has embarked on the ministry of healing and reconciliation with the Indigenous people of Canada. Following the Confession of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, adopted by the General Assembly in 1994, a fund was set up to actively encourage healing and reconciliation initiatives with Indigenous people and communities. Eventually nine ministries would receive ongoing support through the Presbyterian Sharing,

and they would currently comprise the National Indigenous Ministry Council. I would like to highlight 4 specific ministries through the following short video clips, produced by the national church.

First, the **Cariboo Presbyterian Church** exists as a house church (more like a group of house churches) in a remote village at the edge of the Nazko First Nation reserve in northern British Columbia. Pay attention to how Indigenous spiritualities are incorporated into Christian worship.

Second, the **Saskatoon Native Circle Ministry**, led by Rev. Dr. Stewart Folster. Watch how this ministry is providing prayer, crisis counselling, nourishment, clothing and a weekly worship Circle to people on the margins of society in this rapidly growing city.

Third, through the **Winnipeg Inner-City Mission**, we witness how the church provides transitional housing, training and employment services to Indigenous people who have suffered inter-generational and systemic injustices from not only the Residential Schools and also the 60's Scoop.

Finally, **Kenora Fellowship Centre**, also known as Anamie-wigummig House of Prayer. Among all the good works this fellowship centre is doing, note the delicious looking and fulsome meals it regularly serve up to the hungry mass.

Oh how very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity! In praise and worship of the Triune God.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.