

## Sermon: One Heart and Soul

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, April 7, 2024)

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

In the Reader's Digest, there is this short story illustrating the importance of family unity. It tells of a retraction published in a newspaper, the Star of Cambridge Minnesota, which simply reads, "Isanti County Commissioner Tom Pagel has 100-percent support from his family, not 10 percent, as was stated in last week's article on Pagel's announcement to seek re-election." Imagine how embarrassing that was to announce one's re-election campaign with the support of only 10 percent of one's family. Of course it should read 100 percent, not 10 percent. That extra zero really matters.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, on this first Sunday after Easter, it is customary to set aside this day, as a day of sober reflection. Doubt is usually the topic of this day, as the story of the Doubting Thomas dominates the Gospel reading of the week. However, there is a secondary theme in the Lectionary, that should also receive our attention. I am speaking of the theme of unity.

We start with the passage in Psalm 133, where the psalmist implores the covenantal community to live in unity with a rhetorical question, *'How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!'* The psalmist goes on to use two metaphors to describe such unity: the oil upon the head of Aaron, and the dew upon the mountain of Hermon.

The oil of priestly anointing is perfumed oil of highest quality. It is poured down the head of the individual being anointed, it runs through the beard down over the collar of his robes. The liturgy itself is symbolic of divine blessing upon an individual, in this case Aaron is but an archetype.

Mount Hermon is the highest peak in the northern part of Israel. It is also the wettest. Melt water from its snow-covered top would feed into streams and rivers, and merge to become the Jordan River. In that part of the world that is often arid and dry, Mount Hermon stood alone, providing necessary water so life could flourish. To have dew of this mountain fall upon Mount Zion, the mountain of God, is to symbolize the blessing of God that is surprising and ever flowing.

These are beautiful imageries employed by the psalmist, to be sung by pilgrims as they make their trek up to Jerusalem for their annual pilgrimages. These imageries were to remind them how good it is to have peace and unity in the land. It is also a reminder, a painful reminder of the history of Israel that is often characterized by disobedience and dissension, by divided kingdoms, and of how difficult it is to create and maintain a true and lasting unity.

The passage in Acts 4, takes us to another picture of unity. It took place after the Pentecost, where the Holy Spirit filled the hearts of the apostles, and many others in the early church. We read the entire group of believers were of one heart and soul, and as an expression of that unity, they individually decided to forego private ownership, not out of compulsion but out of one's own willingness. Those who owned lands or houses sold them, and laid the proceeds at the apostles' feet. The apostles, empowered by the Holy Spirit, and by testimonial of the resurrection of the Lord, then in turn distributed those proceeds to each as any had need.

It is, once again, a beautiful picture of unity, for the early church truly believed that the second coming of the Lord Jesus was within their reach, to be realized in their lifetime. These early followers of Jesus were essentially trying to live a communal life that is worthy of the Kingdom of God, a kingdom reality here on earth as it is in heaven. I have to say that, unfortunately, many others had attempted to re-create that communal sharing later, but had often resulted in spectacular failure. Part of the problem is people trying to re-create a form, without a deeper understanding what it is that can truly unite the communities of the Christian faith.

I recall when I was serving in the Ministry and Personnel Committee of the Presbytery of Montreal, a candidate was interviewed. He served in a ministry context that is somewhat unique. Though only a seminary student, he was effectively installed, prematurely might I add, by the outgoing minister of a congregation.

The congregation had been on a longterm decline, as parishioners aged and membership dwindled. It had, however, a clear advantage—a steady and sizeable revenue source from renting its excess facility to a daycare, to the sum of about \$120,000 a year.

This ministry candidate had envisioned to rebuild the church, turning it into an ethnic Cameroonian congregation, for he himself was of Cameroonian background. The plan sort of worked for a while, as many

Cameroon immigrants gravitated toward that congregation under the leadership of that particular candidate.

However, problems began to emerge and became apparent to the Presbytery, problems concerning stewardship. Two main issues, 1) these new members the congregation were not tithing or giving to the church in any way, shape or form; 2) certain leaders of the congregation were instead drawing down from the daycare revenue, they were essentially paying themselves instead of keeping the church in good shape. Making the matter worse, tribal factions began to form within the congregation, that ministry candidate, whom we later learned was actually encouraging such fractioning.

I recall during the interview as the Ministry and Personnel Committee grilled him on what he is doing to foster a spirit of unity within that divided congregation. His response, while trying to downplay the seriousness of disunity, was that “different groups are no longer fighting”. I recall saying to him, “the lack of infighting is not the same as actually having unity!”

This story doesn't have a good ending, because that candidate was eventually de-certified by the Presbytery a year later, and a special team of assessor elders and interim moderator were eventually appointed to go into the congregation, to sort of speaking, right the ship. Last I heard, the congregation is still struggling.

How should a community of faith, that is gathered in the name of Jesus Christ, seek unity? I am of the view that unity without truth is hazardous, it is like trying to tune a piano to that of another piano—a futile exercise. If you ever see how a master tuner tunes a piano, you will quickly realized it is always with a simple tool—a tuning fork that gives out the sound of A, or more precisely at the pitch of 440 Hz. Truth in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, like a tuning fork, sets our heart and soul to that of the resurrected Lord.

This takes us to the final text today, of John 20:19-23, where the resurrected Lord appears before the disciples, locked in an upper room, fearful of others, uncertain as what to make of the news of the raising of Jesus. Then Jesus came and stood among them, and the first words out of him was, “*Peace be with you.*” *After showing them his wounds, Jesus proceeded to send them out by breathing on them, saying, “Receive the Holy Spirit”,* and also empowers them with the power to forgive or the retain sins of other.

Therein lies the lesson for today: the disciples went on to preach this good news of the resurrection. Not just preach it but to live it. Living it by reconciling strained or broken relationships; by forgiving one another, and repenting one's sins before the Lord; by focusing on not one's own desire but the needs of many; by sharing what we have, our time or money; by praying and interceding for others.

When leaders of the Church actively do this, and trusting in the Holy Spirit to do the rest, then unity in Christ becomes not just a potentiality but a lived reality. Then watch and be amazed how God pours down the oil of anointing or rain from Hermon, pouring down on Mount Zion, onto each and every one of us, until all our cups overflow.

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