

In Praise of God

Psalm 133

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It was about five years ago now. Pope Francis was slated to speak to the Communications Team of the Vatican. When he got up to speak, he looked out across the room of about five-hundred faces, and decided to set aside his prepared remarks and speak off the cuff.

Do you know what he said to that five-hundred person team whose job it is to communicate to world on behalf of the Vatican?

He told them that he opposes adjectives. It's true. In that speech that garnered international headlines, Pope Francis told the Communications Team of the Vatican team that he is "allergic" to adjectives, adverbs, and other qualifiers, preferring, instead, "the strength of nouns" (Scott Simon, "The Pope Opposes Adjectives, *NPR*, September 28, 2019).

Imagine with me, if you can, a world without adjectives.

There would no longer be *good* days and *bad* days; just *days*.

"How was your day?"

"It was... day."

There would no longer be *great* football games; just football games. Of course, us Broncos fans have already started to suspect that to be true, even before the pope's pronouncement. There haven't been too many *great* football games for us in the last few years, have there?

And forget *blue* skies, *majestic* mountains, *delicious* meals, *crisp*, *autumn* afternoons, and *sensuous* kisses. There will only be skies... mountains... meals... afternoons... and... (plain, old) kisses. Now, let's be real. Only a man who has taken the vow of chastity would do away with *sensuous* kisses...

So what was the pope thinking? I mean, scripture is replete with adjectives, adverbs, and other qualifiers.

For example, Psalm 133:1: "How *very good* (*an adjective*) and *pleasant* (*an adjective*) it is when kindred live *together in unity* (*an adverbial clause*)" (Psalm 133:1).

Without those qualifiers, Psalm 133:1 would read: "How it is when kindred live."

It just doesn't have the same ring to it, does it? It sounds like we asked Chatbot GPT to write a psalm for us...

So just what was the holy father thinking when he decided to oppose adjectives and adverbs?

He wanted to point out what we Christians do *to one another* with the way we use adjectives.

“She is one of those *charismatic* Christians.”

“That guy. He’s a *progressive* Christian. And you know how they are...”

“First Baptist? They’re one of those *country-club* churches.”

We see what we do. We separate the “real” Christians from the “fake” ones. We separate which churches are authentic and which ones aren’t. We separate which denominations deserve merit and which ones don’t. We separate *ourselves* from *ourselves*.

The pope’s point was that we Christians are prone to use adjectives to *separate* — to divide each other, to parse one another out, to erect walls between each other, to put up boundaries.

Instead of calling Christians “charismatic” or “authentic” or “progressive” or whatever qualifier it is we might use, the pope suggests that we simply call them by their proper name: *Christian*. That church is *Christian*. That person is *Christian*.

And when we do that, we hold up and call out first and foremost, not how we are different, but what we share in common.

You are a follower of Christ. And so is the person next to you.

“How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!” (Psalm 133:1).

Have you noticed the spirit of unity that’s been moving in this body over the last few months? I have. There is a sense — a desire — in this place to want to be together.

I am convinced that if we had hosted a potluck on Easter Sunday six or seven years ago, we would have had six or seven people attend.

Do you know how many people stayed for an Easter potluck this year? I don’t know. I didn’t get a count, but in “pastor math” it looked like a hundred and sixty or a hundred and seventy. I know this: Melissa and Larry prepared over forty pounds of ham and roast, and we ate it *all*.

And this isn’t a slight against our church from six or seven years ago. It is simply me acknowledging with gratitude the current spirit of unity that is pervading our church family — our *kindred*.

Do you know what the psalmist compares it to?

He says that when kindred live in unity like the spirit of unity we are currently experiencing, it is like precious oil, expensive oil, *the good stuff*, being poured down over someone's head, so liberally that it rolls down his beard and over his collar.

Maybe being waterboarded with oil doesn't sound too wonderful to you, but if you lived in the dry, windy, summer heat of the Israeli desert — sand and wind sticking to your skin and drying out your face and chapping your lips — then you might appreciate it more. I regularly fish in the highest elevation desert in North America. I spent one week in the sun and wind of that desert in Wyoming, and my lip was split open before I got home. The desert is hard on human skin.

So in that day and time, to be able to rub something oily into your dry hair and scalp and onto your face and into your beard was a rare pleasure. They didn't have a Sephora to go buy moisturizers at. They had olive oil — and it felt good. And with this image, the psalmist says, that when the kindred live in unity it's like a balm for chapped skin, it's like an anointing. And the great mystery of it is that when it happens, there's more than enough to go around.

Isn't that what we're experiencing, church family? When we're together, it's like a balm for our dry and chapped souls. And there always seems to be enough to go around.

Then, as if he hasn't already made his point, the psalmist says, that when kindred live together in unity, it's like the morning dew from Mount Hermon falling so heavy that it actually rolls down onto Mount Zion, where Jerusalem sits.

To get this image, you have to know that Mount Hermon lies over a hundred miles north of Jerusalem. In that desert climate, the morning dew is what waters the plants and provides drink for the animals that live there and moisture for the parched earth. Only this dew — the one the psalmist imagines — falls so heavily that it waters everything in a hundred-plus mile radius. It rolls down across the land. Its dew becomes a life-giving blessing to others.

And aren't we experiencing *that*, church family?

Last week, we hosted unhoused families — families with children who might otherwise be homeless — through Family Promise for the first time since before the COVID lockdown. Our church building became their home for a week. And our people became their family for a week.

And the report that I received was how much of a blessing it was to those who came and stayed with us *and* to those who came and served. Families who served one night came back later in the week just to spend time with the families staying here. Some came back with toys for the children. Others brought their kids just to spend time

loving on others. And I heard that Kurt Lundstrom even became a soccer goalie for a night.

Do you see what I mean? It's like life-giving dew that rolls down and blesses all those it touches.

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

But we don't just want to be that kind of church for a season, do we? We want to be that kind of church *every* day.

You know, it's interesting. At the most basic level, the psalms can be broken into two primary categories:

The first type are Psalms of Lament: those psalms that are really cries of anguish and rage about the current state of things. It might make us uncomfortable to read these psalms in scripture, but their inclusion in our canon rests on the assumption that God not only cares about my pain, but can also be trusted to do something about it. The truth is, there are times in our lives when lament is the right kind of prayer. It can't always be sunshine and rainbows. Sometimes it's just grey clouds and rain.

The second type are Psalms of Praise: those psalms that praise God for what God has done and what God is doing.

It is good that we praise God for good things God does, but praise is more than something we do *for* God. God is not like Santa in that movie, *Elf*, who needs people to sing Christmas songs to get his sleigh to fly, or like Tinkerbell who needs applause to fly. God isn't so shallow to need our praise to fill his tank.

The truth is that praise does more for *us* than it does for God, because when we praise God it shifts our perspective on the world. The Old Testament scholar, Ellen Davis, says it like this: "We praise God in order to see the world as God does" (*Getting Involved With God*, 34).

And how does God see the world?

"God saw everything he had made, and it was *good*, it was *good*, it was *so very good*. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day" (Gen. 1:31).

We praise God so that we can see the world as God does.

The late, great preacher, Fred Craddock, once wrote a sermon he called "Doxology" – which is just a fancy word meaning "praise of God." And in this sermon, he imagined Doxology as more than a Christian practice, more than something we simply do at church. He imagined Doxology as a *presence*, as a companion that has the power to go with us and enrich all of life.

He tells of inviting Doxology to the family dinner table. His kids were young at the time and they would talk about their day at the supper table. Fred asked his kids, "What was the worst thing that happened today?" His son said, "The school bell rang at 8:30 AM." When he asked, "What was the best thing that happened?" his son said, "The bell rang again at 3:30." And the ice was broken, tongues were loosened, and everyone shared about their day. At the end of supper, Craddock said the whole family agreed that Doxology belonged at the supper table.

"The next day," he said, "Doxology went with me downtown for some routine errands. But somehow they did not seem so routine. We laughed at a child losing a race with an ice cream cone, his busy tongue unable to stop the flow down to his elbow. We studied the face of a down-and-out man staring in a jewelry store window and wondered if he were remembering better days or hoping for better days. We spoke to the banker, standing with thumbs in vest before a large plate-glass window, grinning as one in possession of the keys of the kingdom. We were delighted by women shoppers clutching bundles and their skirts at blustery corners. It was good to have Doxology along.

But I had to make a stop at St. Mary's Hospital to see Betty. Betty was dying with cancer and the gravity of my visit prompted me to leave Doxology in the car. Betty was awake and glad to see me. I awkwardly skirted the subject of death.

'It's all right,' she said. 'I know, and I have worked through it. God has blessed me with a wonderful family, good friends, and much happiness. I am grateful. I do not want to die, but I am not bitter.'"

Craddock said, "Before I left, she was the one who offered the prayer. When I got back to my car, Doxology asked, 'Should I have been there with you?'

'Yes, I'm sorry I did not understand...'

Once in a while we have a seminarian who gives it up. Not suddenly but slowly; zeal cools, faith weakens, appetite for Christian enterprises disappears, the springs dry up, the soul is parched, and you can see it in eyes grown dull and flat.

What happened?

Did evil storm his citadel and take over? No.

Did much study drive him into doubt? No.

Did attractive alternatives to ministry turn his head? No. Nothing quite so dramatic. He simply made the fatal error of assuming that spending so much time talking *about* God was adequate substitute for talking *with* God. He lost his Doxology, and died." (*The Collected Sermons of Fred Craddock*, 295ff).

I hope by now you are starting to see his point.

When we praise God, it does more for us than it does for God. It helps us see the world as God sees it. And when we see the world as God sees it, we start to treat the world as God desires. And when we treat the world as God desires, the world becomes what God always intended.

Now, you don't get to stand where I'm standing, so you'll just have to take my word for it, but what I'm looking at is worth praising God over.

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

Amen.