

**Original Unity**  
**August 16, 2020**

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*Texts: Psalm 133, Ephesians 4: 1-6*

I wonder how many of you remember your baptisms? Maybe some who were baptized as adults. My guess is many of us were not much older than sweet Lydia. I've seen photos of my dad holding me when he still had hair atop his head, but I don't remember being there. I can't even remember seeing my dad before he went bald! Yet when we baptize someone into the faith and family of Jesus, we usually ask the congregation to take a moment to recall their own baptism and to reaffirm the promises it represents. Though we may not be able to recall the experience, we are invited to remember what it means. Indeed, remembering our baptisms means remembering that we are each a precious child of God, loved without conditions, embraced as part of this family and this faith! I used to think that people are all smiles during baptisms because the baby is just so adorable. For sure that's part of it and today is no exception. But now I wonder if there's something deeper, a sense that baptism calls to mind and heart reminding us that we are all human, that we are all family, that we all belong, that we are all at home, wherever we are on the journey, and that we are all one, in this thing together!

Our texts today share a common theme. Unity or oneness! The word "one" shows up 7 times in verse 4 or 5 alone. It's a safe bet that Paul or whoever may have written this letter was speaking into a context of deep division at Ephesus. And so, he offers a strong reminder that we are all of one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Creator of all! We get it! Unity is a good thing, something we should aspire to, as a church, as a nation, as a one common humanity. And to think, one baptism makes the list!

Psalm 133 says as much. It's not only good but pleasant when kindred live in unity. What a vision, right? It's so good it almost hurts to think of how removed our country is from it right now. As the Oxford Bible Commentary on Psalm 133 pointed out: "To most people the first line of this psalm is appealing, but to some the second verse may seem grotesque!" I had never thought of it that way but now I can't unsee it. You know the second verse. It's like precious oil on the head! So far so good. It starts out ok. But then like precious oil running down the beard of Aaron, on the beard of Aaron, running down over the collar of his robes. I don't know how I missed this before when we start talking about viscous liquid in some biblically old dude's beard, we can see how the image loses its appeal, starts seeming a little gross and slimy even. Sure, it was probably a sign of pure luxury for the ancient Israelites but to my ears, it sounds like a mess.

And to be the honest, even raising the theme of unity right now, given how widely polarized and politicized this moment is, the very idea of it may not be as appealing as usual. The prospect feels slippery to say the least if not downright messy. Allow me to illustrate. On Monday, I chose these passages and dropped them into a draft liturgy. On Tuesday morning, I see a daily UCC devotional in my inbox from a colleague I know about Psalm 133, and then on Thursday, I get another UCC devotional from another colleague who also knows about Psalm 133. Odd that UCC would send two devotionals on the same passage but both colleagues made good and different points in efforts to answer what I would say was the same very good question. The question is when? When will unity happen? When will that time come, not just in our bubbles of family or friends or in our churches, if we are lucky to find kindred dwelling in unity there, but when more broadly will we be able to sit down and live in unity with the so-called other side!

On Monday, Molly Phinney Baskette wrote "The psalmist said that it is good and pleasant when

kindred can dwell together in unity. But not all things that are pleasant are good – and not all things that are good are pleasant. Don't crave a pleasant peace that comes at the price of justice, just when so much injustice has been exposed and can be addressed. Crave goodness, even if it means postponing unity." Well put, Molly! I mean can we really imagine ourselves even trying to have a good and pleasant time dwelling with overt racists, homophobes or misogynists, or for that matter our non-mask wearing siblings, many of whom are our siblings in Christ, with whom we share that one baptism. Sounds messy to me! Maybe we should hold off on unity, let justice do her thing up first, then...we'll tawk!

On Thursday, Jon Edgerton wrote: "Our country is deeply fractured... We have moved beyond the point where a return to "normal" can be achieved by symbolic gestures or speeches... The divisions among us can only be resolved by real, substantive change. And thank God. Because things must change, and our churches can be part of changing things for the better, with works of justice and mercy! Jon continue: Can you imagine what beautiful, healing work hundreds of thousands of faithful Christians might accomplish? It would be like precious oil poured on the head."

Again, I say right on! I can respect that instinct too and the hopefulness therein! Maybe we don't need to postpone peace if we are making the change and winning!

Somehow, waiting or winning in our quest for unity, I can't help but feel that someone will still be losing and left out. It may be those who have been waiting, waiting, waiting for justice for too damn long. Or it may be those who just aren't ready to see that things must change and whatever so-called "changes for the better" are sure to leave them out the fold, out of the dwelling, out of family.

We're still left with the question of when? When will this good and pleasant unity come? Ask experts at the Kennedy School or the like and they'll see unity comes when either a national or global crisis or new leadership works to bring people together. Gratefully, the Bible has a different answer. The Bible reminds us that its already here! The biblical idea of unity, the kind that the psalmist is talking, the kind from that letter to the Ephesians, is based on an idea of unity that already exists! Imagine that? Imagine if we could see and know and believe in our hearts that we are all of us already kindred, and already one!

Thomas Merton could see it, at least in glimpses at first. Already a Trappist for monk many years, with experiences of solitude that would make our current experiences of isolation seem paltry by comparison, he penned these lines in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*: "In Louisville, at the corner of 4th [now Muhammad Ali Blvd.] and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. . . . This changes nothing in the sense and value of my solitude, for it is, in fact, the function of solitude to make one realize such things with a clarity that would be impossible to one completely immersed in other cares. . . . My solitude, however, is not my own. It is because I am one with them that I owe it to them to be alone, and when I am alone, they are not "they" but my own self. There are no strangers. . . . If only we could see each other that way all the time. . . . But this cannot be seen, only believed and "understood" by a peculiar gift. . . .

Imagine Merton attributing this gift and realization in part to his experience of solitude when he realized he wasn't nor couldn't be alien or alone because he was at one with others! Several years later and after finding powerful connections between Eastern and Western spiritualities, he may have named that gift in his Asian Journals:

"The deepest level of communication is not communication, but communion. It is wordless. It is beyond words. It is beyond speech. It is beyond concept. Not that we discover a new unity, but we discover an old unity. My dear brothers and sisters, we are already one. But we imagine we are not.

And what we have to recover is our original unity. What we have to be, is what we already are.”

Consider that. Can we see, believe and understand this peculiar gift -- of what he calls “old unity!” “Original unity!” Can we imagine that we “what we have to be is what we are already are?” Sister Catherine Nerney puts it this way: “Oneness is less a goal toward which life is pressing, as it is a return to the truth in which we have always been held.”

Now we’re talking! How we will get through this time of great division and divisiveness? We like to think it’s when the good guys win! Just like the Civil War, right? Glad we settled that one, as if our country has known unity ever since! No! We need to go back farther, to probe deeper within ourselves, within and beyond our ancestries and our tribes, within and beyond history’s winner and losers and reclaim a sense of unity and common humanity and oneness with the planet and all creation, a oneness that God has already given us! The old unity. That original unity! While we’re looking back, we can remember, too, who we were at our baptism, not the event, but the meaning of it, that we are each worthy of love by virtue of the fact that we are alive, that we are one body, one Spirit, that we have one faith, one hope, one God who is the source of our original oneness with all humanity and creation.

Next time you are despairing about the divisiveness in your household, community or in this country, and I know it’s a mess out there, see if you can contemplate and recover that our original unity, of oneness, not as some naive Pollyannaish idea but as the fabric of reality! See if changes how your respond to your neighbor, even the one without the mask!

To close, the writer James Finley offers a practice of “Childlike Sincerity” I’d like to leave with you, along with the memory of sweet Lydia’s baptism and that of your own.

Referring to our tendencies to divide our lives and community into dualism - good/bad, right/wrong, winner/loser, Finley writes:

“I cannot make moments of nondual consciousness happen. I can only assume the inner stance that offers the least resistance to be overtaken by the grace of nondual consciousness. Two lovers cannot make moments of oceanic oneness happen, but together they can assume the inner stance that allows them to be overtaken by the oceanic oneness that blesses their life. My spiritual practice is to sit each day in childlike sincerity with an inner stance that offers the least resistance to being overtaken by [that sense of oneness] and by the God-given, godly nature of myself just the way I am. *For [a] contemplative practice, sit in a comfortable position with the simple intention to be in the Presence of God. With playful, childlike sincerity, offer the least resistance to being overtaken by the God-given, godly nature of yourself—just the way you are. Abide for five or ten minutes or more in this state.* [U](#)

We’ll post this sermon online if you’d like to revisit this practice. For now, let us pray, God help us remember our one baptism, to recall that we are already one, to live from that awareness despite the ugly divisions around us and within us. Help us to find rest and hope and reassurance and help us all to return to the truth that what we have to be, we already are!” Amen.