

“The Texture of Community”

Psalm 133

<http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=180766329>

There are some things in this world that defy description. For instance, try describing air. Or how about light? How about water?

The classic film, "The Miracle Worker" tells about the fascinating relationship between Ann Sullivan and her pupil, Helen Keller, who is deaf and blind.

Ann discovers that teaching Helen is difficult and frustrating. She is wild and angry and no one seems to be able to communicate with her effectively. They can't figure out how to connect her sense of touch with language to enable communication.

Finally, at her wits end after making many vain attempts to break through to Helen, Ann roughly pulls Helen out to the water pump where she says, "Here, this is water! It has a name!" And she vigorously pumps the handle with one hand and signs the letters, W-A-T-E-R while she holds Helen's hand with the other.

And Helen stands there, still as a statue, letting the water run down her hands. "Wah-Wah," she says, and then motions for more. Ann pumps again, and signs the same letters. "Wah-Wah," she says again. The connection between what she senses and vocabulary has been accomplished. She falls on the ground, "G-R-O-U-N-D," Ann signs the letters. She rings the bell, "B-E-L-L." On and on it goes – Helen now understands her world because words are connected to senses.

Scott Runyon and I were having breakfast the other day. He was telling me about the trip our middle school students recently took to Detroit. In order to prepare the students for the testimonies they shared with us, he had them draw pictures. (Here are some of the pictures they drew).

Scott did this because too often students come back from trips and their parents ask them to summarize the trip and the students say, "I don't know... I guess you had to be there." Scott did this exercise, because, in his words, he wanted them to express what they couldn't convey in words.

The passage we just read attempts to do the same thing.

Psalm 133 is a psalm of ascent, it was meant to be read during festivals or national gatherings at the holiest, most significant location known to Ancient Israelites. People from the North, South, East and West would converge upon Jerusalem and participate in long celebrations and ceremonies that reminded the people of the faithfulness of God and how their identity came from God. This is what they all held in common: they had been saved and rescued by God and they now could all worship God as a unified nation.

In the summer of 1996, my aunt gave me a "standing room only" ticket for a first-round playoff game between the Chicago Bulls and the Charlotte Hornets at the United Center in Chicago. And I remember standing there in the second balcony watching the player introductions – the deafening roar of approval, the unified show of support – it was amazing!

And then one of the ushers told me I had to move to the place designated for "standing room only" ticket holders. She took me to the far corner of the stadium and showed me a ledge behind the very last bleacher where I was to stand.

And I remember her asking me over the deafening roar of the crowd, "Do you understand why you are being placed here?" And I wanted to tell her, "Ma'am, you don't understand. I don't care where I stand. I'm just thrilled to be here!"

There is something about gatherings with a common purpose that just excites us like no other event. It's so powerful that we struggle to put into words. "I can't describe it," we might say. "You've got to be there." But how might one describe community? How might one describe a peaceful, unified gathering of people?

The psalmist does his best by using metaphors, similes and images that get a little lost in the translation.

Unified community is like...

“...precious oil on the head, running down the beard of Aaron, running down over the collar of his robes.”

Like I said, it gets a little lost in translation. Oil dripping down a beard, some guy named Aaron, dew on Mt. “what’s its name,” - it doesn’t really make sense to us.

It doesn’t make sense because this was written by and for someone living in Ancient Palestine, and we live in 21st Century Michigan. So, we have to understand what each of these images mean to the ancient Palestinian, not what they mean to us.

Let’s look at oil. Oil had rich symbolic and practical meaning to a person living in Ancient Palestine. It was a symbol for hospitality because you typically poured it over a person’s head to refresh them after they had been in the heat all day.

I was also a symbol that brought to mind the coronation of a king because when a king was crowned, oil would be poured over their head.

So, when the author says it’s like oil on the head (a lot of oil because it says it goes down over the collar of the robe of Aaron) he is describing the way he feels when he witnesses the community of people. He feels refreshed and invigorated, because he knows something good is on the horizon. He feels refreshed, encouraged, and invigorated because when people come together – something good is going to happen!

But the oil is described as going down the beard of Aaron. The downward motion is important because the author it describes the people coming down to Jerusalem from all over Israel.

It’s kind of like you saying, you’re going “down river,” or if I say I am going down to Texas or down to Illinois.

And Aaron is an important figure in the history of Israel. He was the brother of Moses, a significant leader when they left Egypt and wandered in the wilderness. But, Aaron was also the first priest for Israel. Aaron is a symbol for the relationship between Israel and God.

So, the author is saying, when I witness the unified community of people who come down from all over the country to worship God as the people of God, I experience refreshment, and the excitement of knowing something significant is on the horizon.

“It’s like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion.”

Now, Hermon was a fertile, rich mountain in the North that was known for its dew – they might have been what the Olympic Mountains in Washington State are like to us – wet, beautiful and cool.

Again, it’s a refreshing image, but it’s also an image which describes abundance and blessing. There is no want, no need, no famine and no drought.

So, as he looks at the gathering throng of people who have come together to Jerusalem for one purpose – to celebrate and praise the God they love together. The psalmist says that...

...it’s refreshing like the coolest thing being poured over your head.

It’s exciting like the most momentous announcement you can imagine (“She said yes!” “We’re having a baby!” “I got the job!” “We’re going to do it!”)

And... the author also feels encouraged and fulfilled because those who are there know that the gathering has been blessed. They have everything they need and everything they could every want.

That’s what community is like.

It’s the kind of thing that’s hard to describe. Words don’t do it justice; which is why the author uses words that appeal to the senses – community must be experienced and felt like it has a texture.

Fred Craddock tells the story about a baptism he experienced while serving a small mission church in a small town in Tennessee.

He said, “It was the custom in that church at Easter to have a baptismal service, and it was held at the lake on Easter evening at sundown. After all the candidates had been baptized in the lake, everyone changed into dry clothes and gathered around a fire.

Once we were all around the fire one parishioner always introduced the new people. He gave their names where they lived and their work. The newly baptized people stayed close to the warmth of the fire.

Then the rest of the church members gathered around them in a circle. The next part of the ritual was that each person around the circle gave her or his name and said,

“My name is...and if you ever need somebody to do washing and ironing, call on me.”

“My name is... if you ever need anybody to chop wood, call on me.”

“My name is... if you ever need anybody to babysit, call on me.”

“My name is...if you ever need anybody to repair your house, call on me.”

“My name is...If you ever need anybody to sit with the sick, call on me.”

“My name is...If you ever need a car to go to town, call on me.”

And around the circle we went.

We cooked dinner and ate together. We sang. Then we had a square dance.

Finally...a parishioner named Percy Miller, with thumbs in his bibbed overalls, would stand up and say, “It’s time to go.” And everybody left. He lingered behind, and with his big shoe kicked sand over the dying fire...

He looked at me and said, “You know, folks don’t ever get any closer than this.”

In that community they have a name for what was just experienced... they call it “church.”

You can’t really describe it or put it into words, but you can tell stories about it and you can say what that community is like.

Do you have a story like that? Do you have an experience you can share with others about “church”? About this church?

I have one:

On June 10 Chilson Hills Church congregated at Bishop Lake campground with their tents, pop-up campers and RV’s and hunkered down for a weekend of family camp.

Now, I take pride in my equipment, I actually think most people do. We like pulling out our toys, tools and trinkets to show off the unique way we can fry an egg, shine a light or stay dry.

Well, I woke up on Saturday and was ready to pull out my tools, cook breakfast and be self-sufficient. But before I could even get a pot of water boiling, Jesse Ping was bringing me a cup of coffee and inviting us over for French Toast and sausage.

Clinton Click was already sauntering over to wish us a good morning with a wry smile on his face.

Teri Cutler was offering us water-proofing spray, introducing Debbie and Sammy Lovin to our boisterous neighbors whose tent needed some repair.

All I wanted was to show off and make it on my own with a simple cup of coffee – but you guys wanted to offer me community.

That’s what community is like – it’s offering what you have to help other people – even when they think they can make it on their own. We call it church – but it’s hard to explain.

I’ll give you one more story.

A friend of mine was a pastor in the South side of Irving, TX. Irving is one of those towns that used to be a popular suburb with fine schools and smart looking middle class homes. But now, the South side has been mostly populated by people who are from Mexico. Most of the whites have left town and headed to the newer, better groomed North side. But some, like my friend and the people in his church have stayed – even though they grumble about the dwindling property value.

Well, one Sunday after a worship service, a parishioner approached my friend and started complaining about the declining nature of his neighborhood.

“All these Mexicans come out around 6 o’clock and set up their grills in their front yards and start cooking their chicken and steak. Why can’t they do their grillin’ in the back like normal people,” the man said.

And my friend said to him, “Why don’t you do a little research project this week. Why don’t you find out why they do their grillin’ in the front yard?”

The next week the man came back to my friend after the worship service and said, “Last week, I was taking my garbage out to the front curb and there across the street was this Mexican guy standing behind his grill as his chicken cooked.”

“I looked at the man, smiled and nodded my head. The man nodded back and then picked up a chicken breast with his tongs and held it up in the air. It was an invitation, an offering of hospitality.”

And the man said, “And it was at that moment that I understood why they grill on their front yard. It was an opportunity to build a community.”

That’s what community is like – it’s making hospitality available to everyone – like front yards littered with barbecues so that neighbors can be fed.

That’s what community is like.

Do you have a story like that?

Maybe you should think of one. Maybe you should think back the time when you experienced community, when you experienced church as it was meant to be.

And then, when you think of that story, I want you to commit it to memory and tell everyone you know about it. Don’t keep it a secret. Don’t treasure it for yourself. Share it.

Tell it to your friends and say “That’s what my church is like.” Tell it to your family and say “That is what my church is like.” Tell it to your hair stylist, your co-worker, your teacher, your barista, and your neighbor. Tell them that’s what your church is like.

And then ask them to come along to experience the texture of community.