

My wife's family has a tradition. Every year they get together for a family reunion. A big family reunion. So big that they have trouble keeping track of who is related to whom. And so, to solve this problem, they've assigned colors to each of the branches of the family tree. My wife's family is the purple family. Others are the red or yellow family. And they wear these colors to the family reunion just to keep track of which branch everybody comes from.

That is a big family reunion. But today I want you to imagine an even bigger family reunion. Bigger than any reunion you've ever been to. Bigger than any reunion you could possibly ever attend. A reunion of thousands.

When we think about ancient Israel at the time of their Exodus from Egypt, that's really what we're talking about. A single family. Operating as a family. But consisting of over 600,000 people.

Think about the logistics of that for a moment. How exactly would you manage a family reunion of that size? How would you communicate with all those people? How would you come to any agreement on anything at all?

Well, frankly, you wouldn't. Not as a family, at least. At some point, you'd figure out that this group of people need to be governed more like a small country than a family. And that's exactly what we see God leading Moses to do.

But that introduces a new problem. If you're no longer family, why do you care about being together anymore? What's the point of traveling to Canaan? Of becoming this nation? Of working together? What's the point of being united at all?

Well, that's what our Psalm was about in our introit for today. Psalm 133 is David thanking God for giving the Israelites Aaron. Aaron was the first high priest. And the priesthood is what held Israel together as a single people.

You see, once Israel stopped being a family and started being a nation, they found their unity in their faith. Faith in the one true God who had created them from the dust of the earth. Who had freed them from Egyptian captivity. Who had led them to this Promised Land. And that one true God told them that they needed a priest to bring them God's forgiveness.

So in order to be one of God's people, you needed to live within a pretty short distance of wherever a priest could be found. Which forced them to work together. To be united. To travel in one group. To settle in one geographic region. To obey one king. And, most of all, to worship at one altar. To offer sacrifices at one altar. To hear God's forgiveness from one altar. The priesthood was where Israel found its unity.

And David knew what a blessing that was. *"How good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!"* How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together as a community.

It is as precious as the oil that anointed that very first priest's head. It makes us feel as if the nation were so small, so tightly knit, that the dew falling on Mount Hermon, at the northern end of Israel, was also falling on Mount Zion at the southern end of Israel. Israel's unity is its salvation because the proclamation of salvation that came from the priest was what united it together.

It is a joyful psalm that David gives us. And rightfully so. David was also a great unifier of his people. Under his command, their armies conquered thousands. By his leadership, their faith and worship blossomed like never before. David was everything they had always wanted in a King. David was everything God had always wanted in a king. And under his rule, the people learned exactly how good and pleasant it could be when brothers dwelt in unity.

They also learned how bad it could be when brothers didn't dwell in unity. Because twice during David's reign, the nation was torn apart by rebellion. The first time was shortly after David's anointing. Saul was king at that time. He had been told flat out that he had been disobedient, that God was no longer with him, and that he should step aside for a new king: David.

Saul wasn't going to be pushed aside so easily, though. And he led the army in defeat after defeat. He lost to the Philistines. He lost to David and his men. Thousands of people died because Saul refused to let go of the throne. It wasn't until Jonathon, Saul's own son and David's best friend, died in combat that he was finally left with nothing at all and finally gave up by committing suicide.

Again David saw the terrible cost of division among God's people, this time with his own son, Absalom. Absalom was a hot-head with a temper and an ego to match who had no business ever thinking he could be king. And yet, that's exactly what he thought. He plotted against his father, seeking to take the throne by force. When he finally tried, he drove David into the wilderness, only to find himself betrayed by his own advisor and killed.

In the end, David had seen division within the nation result in the deaths of his best-friend, his mentor, and two of his sons. All because these brothers – these children of Israel – couldn't dwell in unity.

It was a stark lesson for David. But it's also a lesson for us. Sin has consequences. And one of those consequences is division. It's arguing and disagreement and bitterness and discord. Notice where the division in Israel always started. It always started with a sin. Saul and his pride. Absalom and his hatred.

Later in their history it would be Rehoboam and his cruelty. Ahab and his idolatry. Zedekiah and his lying. Over and over again. Sin results in division. Division results in suffering.

Only when Israel has the most righteous kings on the throne do they have some level of peace and prosperity. But those kings are few and far between. And even when they appear, they're not perfect men in a perfect nation. Someone always sins and the cycle starts all over again.

Sin divides us. It divides us from God and His Word. It divides us from the Church and its blessings. Just as the priesthood united the people in the administration of God's salvation, sin divides us from God's salvation. And so it divides us from each other. And the cycles starts all over again.

Which is why we needed a new kind of unity. A unity rooted in a new kind of priest and a new kind of sacrifice. We don't find our unity in the descendants of Aaron and the many sacrifices they made for the atonement of sins, over and over again. We find our unity in Jesus Christ and the one sacrifice he made for the atonement of all sin. A sacrifice that comes to us in the anointing of baptism and the breaking of bread.

Those disciples on the way to Emmaus experienced that unity. They walked that road with not just sadness, but confusion and doubt and foolishness, Jesus says. And this divided them. They didn't believe the words of Jesus, prophesying his resurrection. They didn't believe the women who claimed to have seen angels. They didn't believe the message of those angels. They doubted everyone and everything. And that doubt had shattered their community.

Until Jesus shows up. Until they see Jesus all over the words of Scripture. Until their eyes are opened and they recognize him in the breaking of the bread. And they believe. And they talk to the other disciples. And those disciples have seen Jesus too. And they believe.

And suddenly these brother who were divided and confused and doubting and foolish are dwelling in unity. Because they have something to unite them: Jesus Christ, the anointed one, crucified and risen from the dead. Revealed in Scripture. Revealed in the breaking of the bread.

He is their salvation. He is our salvation. A salvation that unites us despite geography and ethnicity and nationality and all the other things that divide people in this sinful world. We are brothers dwelling in unity. Because we have salvation in our great high priest. Who sacrificed himself to make us one.

Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers in Christ dwell in unity! It is like the precious waters of baptism on the head of Jesus, anointing him as our great high priest. It is like the blood of Christ shed on the cross, which falls to us in His Holy Supper. For there the Lord has commanded the blessing, life forevermore.

And so, when we gather together, we gather as both a Kingdom of God and as family. In a great family reunion. Where there are no tribes. No branches. No family colors to keep track of each other. No, we are just brothers... and sisters. United in baptism. United in faith. United in the resurrection.

Waiting for that day when we will all be united before the Lamb who was slain. For our true unity is not found in the things of this world. It is found in Jesus Christ. Amen.