

Once estranged (Psalm 133)

The psalmist compares unity to dew.

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I have heard the first verse of Psalm 133 used most often in one of two contexts. The first is when the preacher is chastising a quarrelsome congregation, as if a shaming scold is just what a community needs when it is mired in conflict. The second is when the leader of a clergy gathering tries to convince us that we are happy about being trapped in a windowless hotel ballroom to hear committee reports.

My friend Jamie Arnold, rabbi of Congregation Beth Evergreen in Evergreen, Colorado, is translating the Psalms. His translation of Psalm 133 begins like this:

Wow. How so! So good and so pleasing it is
to be here-now.
Seeing siblings once estranged, sitting and sabbathing
together again.

His phrase “once estranged” is particularly meaningful for me. I’ve known my share of church conflicts, both interpersonal and congregation wide. There’s no covering over of conflict, no pretending that everything has always been hunky dory. As a United Methodist elder, most of my ministry has occurred in the looming shadow of our deep denominational divide over our former exclusive practices around sexual orientation. Some conflicts have done real damage to communities of faith and individual people. Church members have left the congregation, and some have left faith all together. I’ve also seen the damage of false unity, when decisionmakers acquiesce to the loudest voice in the room and the whole community loses out on the shared work of hammering out a solution that is the best for all.

The psalmist compares unity to dew from Hermon in the North nourishing Mt. Zion in the South. Dew is formed when water vapor in the air cools down at night and turns back into liquid water droplets. It happens when grass and leaves get colder than the air around them. In desert areas, dew provides a vital source of water for plants, insects, and small animals. Some desert plants can absorb the moisture through their leaves. Dew can help plants survive a drought by providing a protective barrier on plant leaves and cooling the plant as the moisture evaporates during the day.

Many years ago, I was a key player in a churchwide conflict focused on one of the church’s ministries. I had been part of a decision that had led to asking a volunteer, beloved by some, to take a step down from leadership. I was clear that it was the right decision for the health of the program. In public meetings I justified my role in making a tough but necessary call. That, after all, is what good leaders do.

But a moment came in a mediated conversation when I finally was able to hear past my being right, to the pain in the other's voice. I had let her down. I had caused injury. I don't remember if I apologized. I do remember my heart being pierced. We had hit the dew point in the midst of conflict, that moment when the heat of my anger was suddenly cooled by a flash of deeper understanding and compassion. It did not matter so much that I was right. What mattered was the hurt I had caused and that I wanted to repair what I could.

That family still left the church. But years later, we reunited at a mission event that I organized. It was good and pleasing to be there, to sit and sabbath together with those from whom I had once been estranged.