Pilgrim Unity

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[0:00] First of all, I want to thank the Church Committee for entrusting the sacred electing to me.

And I may just explain a bit about this moniker, God of Professor Emeritus. Emeritus in Latin means worn out, unfit for service.
And with that definition, I can live with this honorific title the College has given me. My assignment this morning is to lead us in a meditation of Psalm 133.
And so I invite you to turn with me to the psalm that celebrates the unity of the pilgrims. I must just briefly mention to those who are visitors that the Church is in a series of meditations on the so-called Ascent Psalms.
Fifteen of them, Psalms 120 to 134. The meaning of Ascent is not certain, but the consensus of opinion is that it refers to the pilgrimages that Israel made three times a year to Jerusalem.
[1:24] They made a pilgrimage at barley harvest in early April, at which time they commemorated Passover. Fifty days later, in late May, they made a pilgrimage in connection with the wheat harvest in order to commemorate their being in the Promised Land.

And then finally, they made a pilgrimage in mid-September, early October, in connection with the pressing of the grape and the pressing of the olive, in which they commemorated their time in the wilderness prior to the richness of the land.
And on that occasion, they also had the Yom Kippur, in which they made atonement for the sins for the year. It is thought that these Psalms were sung as they made pilgrimage to that central sanctuary, as it turned out to be, in Jerusalem.
On such an occasion, it was certainly appropriate that they would celebrate their unity, which is the topic of our psalm. You can see it in verse 1, when it says, Behold how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity.
In the Hebrew text, there's an emphatic particle before that unity to show this is the emphasis. It says, Even one. The RSV captures it a bit by an exclamation point at the end of verse 1.
[3:02] That subject of dwelling in unity is the subject of the rest of the psalm. It said, It is like. And in verse 3, It is like.

The psalm has three parts to it. There's an introduction in verse 1, a development of the theme in verses 2 and 3, 3a, and then a conclusion to the theme in 3b.
In typical Semitic fashion, the introduction is a summary of the thought of a psalm, which is the benefits of God's people living together in unity.
He says, Behold how good, which means it's beneficial, it's desirable, and actually it has again, and how pleasant to separate it, which means it's the word for Naomi, how lovely, how fragrant, how beautiful it is.
When this occurs, when brothers dwell in unity. He then compares it by two similes to show how precious it is to develop his theme.
[4:14] And the first, he likens it to the oil that was poured on Aaron's head on the day he was consecrated and set apart to the high priesthood. That is why he puts upon it upon the beard of Aaron, so that we would know it's that very special perfume that was poured upon him on the day of his consecration.

And that consecration, they used four liters of oil, and with a very heavy compound of spices, there was six kilos of liquid myrrh, three kilos of fragrant cane, three kilos of fragrant cinnamon, and six more kilos of acacia.
In English terms, there were 50 pounds of spices in four liters of olive oil. It must have been almost a cream, it would seem to me, with that sort of mixture.

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The point is, it's extremely precious. Actually, the word translated precious in the Hebrew text is the same word as for good, in order that we might make the connection between the summary and its development in verse two.
But this was a very fragrant anointing, and the point of the psalm is it's so copious. You see how he almost makes us feel it running down.
[5:49] He starts upon the head, running down upon the beard, upon the beard of Aaron, running down even to the color of his robe. And the point is, it is so copious that it saturates everything.

Not a hair of his head misses the fragrant spices. It is total. And then he heightens the simile from oil to water, because water is life itself in that land.
It too is emphatic for its copiousness. It is like the dew of Hermon. It's the heaviest dew in that world, just at the base of Hermon is Lake Tahouleh Basin, which is very moist, and the water rising from that almost swamp, rising up to the 10,000 feet of Mount Hermon, turns into a copious, rich dew.
And it pictures it as falling down upon the people of God. It pictures at the end of the psalm life, revives the orchards, revives the fields, makes the flowers sparkle gaily.
It makes it a land of milk and honey. He likens it to dew, because it is so gentle as it falls upon the people. Last week in the meditation on Psalm 126, the changing of fortunes was likened to the torrents coming down of Wadi.
[7:17] It was revolutionary, dramatic, for a moment. But this is constant, gentle, dew, reviving Israel and the people of God as they dwell together in unity.

He draws the meditation to conclusion that all of this is a result of God who commands this blessing. In fact, the key word of the psalm is running down.
It's repeated three times. It's running down upon the beard. It's running down onto the color of the road. And what is said is like the dew of Hermon.
In Hebrew, the verb translated falls on the mountains is the same word, which is running down on Jerusalem. So it pictures this great blessing as coming from God.
It is not something that is engineered by human manipulation, nor by counsels. It is a gift of God to his people. It's automatic. It's natural to this relationship of dwelling in unity.
[8:23] It's ironic and also instructive that I, who am leading the meditation on unity, teach at a Presbyterian seminary where I have to sign a Presbyterian confession of faith.

I attend a Baptist church here in the city. And here I am leading an Anglican congregation. It's quite obvious that our unity transcends our denominational differences.
But at the same time, Dr. Packer, whom I consider the most outstanding systematic theologian, in the world, in my judgment, wrote a very significant article in 1993, in Christianity Today, where he writes, Why I Left, by which he means why I left the World Council of Churches.
Though it was called the World Council of Churches, he could not enjoy unity in that fellowship, and he thought it had no basis for unity, and he had to withdraw from it.
It seems to me, then, that in order for us to discuss intelligently unity, we have to understand who are the people of God. What are the essentials of our unity?
[9:40] I had originally planned, I'll tell you the truth, I chose the psalm in part because it's only three verses, and I tend to be a bit more long-winded, and this is as short as they come. And then I decided I'd have three points on each verse, and I decided that was going to be too long.

And finally, I narrowed it down to one word, brothers. Who are the brothers? And it seems to me that's at the key of the psalm because David is assuming something here that we evidently cannot assume.
And we cannot talk about unity without a clear definition of what we mean by brothers in our psalm. Nor will we experience the benefits of unity.
Nor will we have the desire for unity until we have a clear concept of who are the people of God and what are the essential elements of unity in the people of God.
And as to that, I wish to direct our meditation this morning. The word itself usually refers to a male sibling as in English, but as Dan pointed out in the prayer time with the children, as so also in Hebrew, the word brother can refer to entire clan.
[10:56] It's usually translated brother, unfortunately, without an understanding of that broader nuance, connotation. And then, it refers, and this psalm, according to most of the manuscripts, is by David, and it would refer to the king looking at his kingdom gathered there in Jerusalem.

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it would refer to all 12 tribes of Israel. At least, that would have been the historic interpretation. I think the TNIV offers us, the today's New International Version, offers us the best gloss for, when it translates it, the people of God.
Who are they? Well, first of all, who they are not. There are those who speak of the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man.
And there's certainly some truth to that. We are all of the same blood, ultimately. And in our clinical being, our natural being, our physical beings, it's certainly appropriate for us to talk about the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man.
But it is most inappropriate to use that kind of language for the spiritual relationship of people. In fact, the Bible is insistent that we separate ourselves from the world.
[12:21] Moses would not allow the Israelites to intermarry with the Canaanites because their religion and their God were so other than Israel and their God. Moses commanded them, do not intermarry with the Canaanites.

Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons. Deuteronomy 7.3, one of many passages of which I'm sure you're familiar. Jesus said of his disciples, you are in the world, but you are not of the world.
And he clearly distinguished the church from the world at large. The apostle Paul clearly taught we ought to separate ourselves from the world and unbelievers.
Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial?
What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said, I will live with them and walk among them and I will be their God and they will be my people.
[13:35] Therefore, come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing and I will receive you. I will be a father to you and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty.

2 Corinthians 6, verses 14-18. So we cannot speak of the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man in the context of our religious belonging to one another.
What can we say positively? We are, according to biblical theology, united by four covenants. And I want to just, for the lack of time, just briefly touch upon the four covenants that make us the people of God in unity with God and one another.
These four covenants were both true of the Old Testament saint and the New Testament saint. These four covenants were true of all God's people historically since the time of David at least. These covenants radically separate us and are very different from postmodern thought, which really would say to us that we are all sons of God, that the Spirit of Christ dwells in everybody.
[14:53] That's an ancient heresy in the church in the second century. It was known as Gnosticism. Gnosticism in Greek means knowledge. And the Gnostics had the knowledge, they thought, that the Spirit of God was in everybody.

You have the same idea in postmodern thinking, there's nothing new here at all, where they think they have the truth that the Spirit of Christ is in everyone and they call it the truth, the insight that they have that has revolutionized their lives.
That is ungodly, totally contradictory to biblical thought. One has a relationship with God through four covenants.
If you'll forgive me, I'll read just a brief snippet out of my forthcoming theology. In the Old Testament, an individual does not enter into heavenly company with God and his people lightly or as a matter of right.
Instead, there are barriers inherent in the Israelite religion that take sin into account. The tension between the Lord's holiness and his worshiper's sinfulness is resolved through God's covenants with Israel and his prescribed liturgical sacrifices that de-sin the worshiper.
[16:14] Only covenant faithfulness and heartfelt participation in the liturgy allow participation in worship and in unity with the people of God.

What then is the first covenant? The first covenant is the Abrahamic covenant. Now, I'm going to say something that's going to shock you, but it's the truth. You cannot belong to the people of God unless you are a descendant of Abraham.

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Abraham. I'm sure that for many of us that's shocking, but you must be a descendant of Abraham to be reckoned the people of God.
God said to Abraham, I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come to be your God and the God of your descendants after you.
Moses had to show his acquiescence and acceptance of that election to be the people of God through the ritual of circumcision. You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you.
[17:37] I doubt, I'm not sure if any of us are physical descendants of Abraham. What am I talking about? We are all descendants of Abraham because of our baptism into Jesus Christ, who is the quintessential seed of Abraham.

Paul put it this way, you are all children of God through faith. in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.
There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise.
Galatians chapter 3, verses 26-29. By faith, you are baptized into Christ, and by so much, you have become a descendant of Abraham.
You are the heir of the covenants, as Paul would put it. You are the heir of this Abrahamic everlasting covenant. Just prior to this covenant, God had said to Abraham, I will make you a father of many nations.
[19:02] As Paul wrote to the church at Rome, which had nations from all over the Roman Empire represented there, who had been baptized into Jesus Christ, he said, this is what God was talking about.

I will make you a father of many nations. This past week, I spent two days signing 6,000 letters in a campaign, fundraising campaign, for Regent College in order to expand our library.
It was astounding to me as I signed letter after letter, I recalled so many students, but their names. There were Celtic names, English names, Polish names, Spanish names, Russian names, lots of Chinese, and Korean names.
Every continent on the earth was represented at our college. And I thought to myself, isn't this the father of many nations?
None of us would be here, none of us would be at a college in theology or studying theology were it not for Abraham and his setting himself apart to obey God and we all believe with the faith of Abraham and the God of Abraham.
[20:20] We are elected to this family. Abraham was elected to this family. This doctrine of election bothers a lot of people because we think of the election, well, if he elected me, he excluded someone else.

No. The doctrine of election is not to exclude, it's to include. All clinical life derides from God, but it always passes through physical hands.
All spiritual life derides from God, but it always comes through the witness of the church. None of us has come to Christ apart from someone talking to us and sharing Christ with us in some fashion.
We are chosen, Abraham was chosen to bless the earth, to be a light to the nations. God chose you not to exclude others. God chose you that you might participate in including others and giving them birth because that's how God has designed it.
This is the blessed Abrahamic covenant that binds us together, for we are heirs of that covenant.
The second covenant as a result of that election in the seed of Abraham is the Sinaitic covenant, the Mosaic covenant.
[21:41] Last week, as I attended the service and worship together with you, we celebrated the summary of the commandments, love God with all your heart and love your neighbor as yourself.

We all confessed the Sinaitic covenant. Now, those two commandments are broad and wonderful, but there's something like drive carefully.
It needs definition. What does it mean to drive carefully? Well, it means in the school zone going 20 kilometers per hour, so there's a sign, 20 kilometers per hour.
At an intersection, it means a stop sign to drive carefully. To drive carefully, you take that turn at 30 kilometers per hour, and all along the line, there are signs to help us drive carefully, and that's how the Ten Commandments function.

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This is what we adhere to. We love God, and we specifically love our fellow human beings. How do we show that love? Well, thou shalt not murder, thou shalt not commit adultery, thou shalt not steal, thou shalt not bear false witness, and in those commandments, we confess, we bestow rights upon one another.
[22:53] We bestow the right to life. The word, as many words in Hebrew, were to kill, to bach, to take animal life, nakah, to kill in war, harag, to kill generally.

This Hebrew word, ratzach, means to take innocent life. We refuse to take the innocent life of the unborn. They committed no crime. We refuse to exercise euthanasia, its innocent life.
We oppose suicide. We oppose assisted suicide. All of this is taking innocent life, for it is God who gives life and God who takes life. Now, I'm not saying that we all have to agree on every interpretation, but we agree to the principle, however we wish to apply it.
But it seems to me that's implied in this verb, you shall not take innocent life, and we should oppose it. We not only bestow the right to life on one another, and we also, the word ratzach means you shall not commit manslaughter.
So we as Christians refuse to drive when we can no longer see properly. That's manslaughter. You're jeopardizing the life of somebody else. It seems to me sometimes Christians don't think their way through these things.
[24:08] That's why we shovel our sidewalks. We keep the ice off them. We protect innocent life. Those are all practical bearings of what it means you shall not take innocent life.

We also protect the home. You shall not commit adultery. And the law is full of laws that protect the home. That's why I think it is appropriate for the church to oppose homosexuality and same-sex marriage.
If you cannot apply a principle universally, there's something wrong with it, and you cannot apply that lifestyle universally without annihilating the human race.
It condemns itself. It's parasitic. It has to live off the host of a healthy marriage where people are willing to commit themselves to children and raise children.
The whole lifestyle is self-centered. If somebody says, well, I'm oriented that way, I'd like to tell you I'm oriented toward a terrible temper. I got disciplined pretty severely for it as a child.
[25:09] And when I was saved, I asked Jesus to save me from my temper. When I was a kid, nobody believed the word I said. I was an inveterate liar. God saved me. And even my wife knows I tell the truth now.

We speak the truth. God saved me. I don't go around saying I'm oriented to being a drunk. I'm oriented to killing and hating people. I repent of what's sinful.
It seems to me that is the appropriate response. I not only bestow and protect the home. I protect property you shall not steal.
So, therefore, I'm opposed to corrupt government that takes money from the people in order to keep itself in offices. I'm opposed to politicians who see their offices as positions as prizes they have won rather than positions that they have from which to serve the people.
It is wrong to take $500,000 from heart machines that could save thousands of lives and spend millions of dollars to stay into office. To me, that is stealing from the public and not serving the best interest of the public.
[26:19] You shall not steal. Furthermore, you shall not bear false witness. You shall not lie or bear false witness. At one point, I was on a school board and it was in connection with the church.

And in the church, rumors were flying about a certain, were flying around about a certain, about a principal. And the motion came to the board that we asked for the principal to resign.
I didn't know much about business, but I knew that was wrong. And I said, I would suggest the motion is out of order until the principal is there to defend himself and we have eyewitnesses.
And when we have eyewitnesses, that will corroborate the wrongs that he is alleged have done and he's there to defend himself if he has a defense, we ought not to entertain this motion.
We tabled it. As far as I know, it's still tabled. No witnesses ever came forward. That was back 30 years ago. That principal is still there.
[27:24] That school is flourishing. At the time, it had 200. Now it has 1,500 students under the same principle. We will not sit in our living rooms over cups of coffee and allow ourselves to have not a tremendous sense of humor, which is wonderful, but we will not allow a sense of rumor and gossip.

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That's the Ten Commandments which we confess and hold together and when we obey it, you get unity in the church. The third covenant is the Davidic covenant.
God set forever the house of David over his kingdom. Here's David, God's word to David. Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me. Your throne will be established forever.
You are part of God's people when you acknowledge his king and that king today is Jesus Christ. That's why the New Testament begins with these words.
Matthew 1, 1. A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. We know of no son of David today.
[28:35] The last son of David is the eternal son of David, Jesus Christ, and we bow our knee to him and own him as our Lord, our Savior, our King.

The Jewish leadership at the time of Jesus said no, they would have no king but Caesar. And in that saying of no, they ceased to be the people of God.
Jesus put it this way in the parable of the talents. Therefore, I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit.
And so, they are no longer the people of God, says the New Testament. We are the people of God because we say yes to God's King and bow our knee to him.
The fourth and most important covenant is the New Covenant. These other covenants are all external. The New Covenant is internal. The New Covenant is what takes place in the heart and makes us new creations, regeneration, born again.
[29:47] Here it is. The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them, declares the Lord.

This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my law in their minds, write it on their hearts. I will be their God.
They will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor or a man his brother say, know the Lord, because they will all know me from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord, for I will forgive their weakness and will remember their sins no more.
This covenant is referred to 17 times by the prophets. It is not only called the New Covenant, it's called the Covenant of Peace. It's called the Everlasting Covenant. And in a day, there will be no nominal Christianity.
All will know the Lord. It will go beyond confessions and baptism. It will be reality as it is in the true church today.
[30:58] It is this New Covenant that's absolutely essential. It's this New Covenant that makes the Abrahamic Covenant effective. Paul will say of the Jew, a Jew is not a Jew because he's outwardly circumcised outwardly.

Well, I quote Paul at this point. A man is not a Jew if he's only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No.
A man is a Jew if he is one inwardly. And circumcision is circumcision of the heart by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God.
To continue his oxymoron, if the Jew is not the Jew, the church is not the church because you can have a nominal church. You can have people who are baptized but never baptized in the Spirit.
And that's what this text is demanding of us. It's a different kind of a baptism of which the outward baptism is only a symbol. Without the inward baptism, it's just a shell gate.
[32:01] It's not real. It's the New Covenant that makes the Sinaitic Covenant work. It says, Paul, for what the law was powerless to do and that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering.

And so he condemns sin and sinful man in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit.
Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature does. But those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace.
And so it is not a law. It's inward. It's a natural fruit of a new creation, of a new life that satisfies the Sinaitic Covenant.

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And unless our righteousness is from within, God said, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of God. In other words, the religious Pharisees, and they were very religious, were not part of the kingdom of God because they did not understand the new covenant.
[33:16] And that's why Jesus said to Nicodemus with amazement, you're a teacher in Israel and you don't understand this? Finally, the new covenant makes the Davidic covenant work.

Why is it when Jesus came, he said, repent and believe in Jesus Christ? Christ. What's the connection between repentance and faith? Well, they were to repent of their allegiance to their old priesthood, which was corrupt.
They were to repent of their allegiance to a temple. They were to repent of their allegiance to a Pharisaic form of religion. Turn your back on all of that and come to reality and give your life to me, says Jesus.
It's this that makes the people of God above all else. And so, the new covenant invites us to become the people of God.
And it's by God's grace that it's written on the heart. Jesus taught us, so I say to you, ask and it will be given to you.
[34:22] Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives. He who seeks finds.

And to him who knocks, the door will be opened. Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion?
If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?
And that's what he asks. Are we willing to receive the gift of his Holy Spirit through Jesus Christ, our Lord? Shall we pray?
Lord, we know that a leper of his own volition cannot change his spots. And we of our own wills cannot change our hearts.
[35:24] You must do it. Surely, we are not born of human will into your family, but of your will, as the Apostle John taught us. But whereas our physical birth occurred totally apart from our own wills, our spiritual birth comes about through our wills, you said, if we pray for the Holy Spirit, you will give him to us.

And we so pray, all of us, in Christ's name, amen.

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