

“The Significance of the Oily Beard”

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Psalm 133 has been described as *pithy* – brief, forceful, and meaningful in expression. Its concern is the unity of God’s people. Along with “good” the Psalmist could use words such as pleasant, wonderful and precious to describe that unity. In place of people, he could say brethren, kindred, brothers, sisters, relatives, sons, daughters, and so on. So we could read the Psalm this way, “*How good, pleasant, wonderful, and precious it is when brethren, kindred, brothers, sisters, relatives, sons, and daughters, are united.*”

This Psalm was a Psalm of ascent and would have been used as people went on pilgrimages. When Jewish pilgrims sang this psalm as they journeyed to Jerusalem, they did not sing solo or travel alone. They came to the feasts and holy days from many different walks of life, regions, and tribes. No matter how hard the pilgrimage conditions were, the fellowship of God’s people made the journey refreshing. We too are pilgrims who travel together. It’s foolish to try to be a believer in isolation.

The imagery the Psalmist uses expresses the beauty and ideal of this unity. It is that of the “*precious oil on the head, running down upon the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down over the collar of his robes.*” Aaron, the first high priest was descended from the tribe of Levi. Before Moses could anoint him he had to go through elaborate preparations. Many involved sprinkling oil - on the tent, on the bronze altar 7 times, on Aaron’s head and his clothes. The anointing was a very holy event and the psalmist likens this to the unity of God’s people.

The *dew of Hermon* refers to the sacred mountain Hermon east of the Jordan River between Syria and Israel regarded by the Canaanites as a sacred place who inhabited the land before the Israelites.

Snow covers this mountain during most of the year and even in summer patches of it remain. From the Dead Sea 120 miles away one can see the snow-covered peaks. Its glaciers are a major source of the Jordan River that drains into the Dead Sea. The unity of God’s people is like the dew from Hermon – a resource for nourishment necessary and rich.

Our Gospel lesson has two parts. In the first part Jesus had been engaged in debates with the Pharisees who had asked why his disciples did not follow the oral tradition of ceremonially washing their hands before eating. Jesus criticized them for putting the unwritten law above Mosaic Law. They believed the oral law was equal status with Mosaic Law. Jesus believed that moral behavior was important, not food laws.

The disciples pointed out that he had offended the Pharisees by his reply. Jesus pointed out that at times the Pharisees gave priority to the oral law over the biblical Law - of human, rather than divine origin. This debate with both the Pharisees and his disciples probably drained Jesus and he was probably tired when he left that scene to go to another region of the country and get away from the crowds that so frequently pressed upon him.

But a persistent, distressed woman, however, wouldn't let him escape. She chased after him confronting him and asking for his help. She was not just any woman but a Canaanite one, confronts him.

In the time of Jesus, a Canaanite would not have been considered within the circle of ancient Judaism. Canaanites were thought of as people worshiping false gods.

Simply being female was also a strike against her. Women were considered to be the property of their husbands or their fathers and had no status. They were certainly not to speak of such things, especially religious life.

Besides being a woman and a Canaanite, she was also "pushy." [When a man speaks out, he often is considered to be decisive or leader - like. When a woman speaks out, she can be accused of being nagging, annoying or "uppity."] This woman continued to press Jesus so much that his very disciples say, "*Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.*"

At the moment when this woman was in her greatest need, we are faced with the peculiar idea that Jesus does not always respond in a loving and compassionate way. Here his response seemed cold-hearted.

It seems that Jesus was acting out of his own culture - in a way that would have been expected of him as a person, as a male person, of his own time. He said to her in a very dismissive way, "*I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.*" But she wouldn't let it go at that; she knelt before him saying, "*Lord, help me.*" And then this incredible statement from him: "*It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.*" He dismissed her in a way that today seems almost cruel.

Now we might be tempted to try and clean up this story and pretend that, in fact, that Jesus that we know would never say such a thing. But maybe we would be making a grave mistake.

We need to let the integrity of this strange, bizarre story stand on its own. We need to allow this moment to confront us, to say that Jesus, in fact, in this time that he lived as a member of his culture, was acting in a very human way of dismissing someone else- for all of the stereotypes and all of the reasons that we've just mentioned: She was a foreigner; she was different; she was female, and she was pushy.

Did Jesus make a mistake?

If so, he certainly did change his mind because when this woman would not relent and said to him, "*Yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table,*" Jesus answered her, "**Woman, great is your faith.**" Even though Jesus said that he was "*sent only to the lost sheep of Israel*" he ministered to her needs. He ministered to her daughter that was tormented by a demon.

Jesus' love in that moment for her was deepened by the fact that her love transcended all of the barriers that should have kept her away. She was not just a Canaanite, or a woman trying to have her voice heard; she was something else. She was a mother. She was not coming to Christ asking for something for her but for the child she loved. And that depth of love would not be denied. No! Not even by the Son of God.

Like the Canaanite woman and Jesus we know the reality of deep divisions among us and across our societies. We see substantive, reasoned discussion and debate give way to strident, heated exchanges. There are times we raise our voices at friends and even family members or leave a gathering angry with those who disagreed with us. At times our homes, communities and even our churches feel like war zones. The polarization we are experiencing is real.

Ironically, so is our longing to live in community with one another, just as Psalm 133 proclaims. Most of us yearn to redeem the brokenness we experience as individuals, families, communities, nations and as churches. Most of us long for the fulfillment of the biblical vision of shalom where all women and men, all children and youth will have their fullness of humanity restored.

Conflict, disagreement and differences are normal in life. Most of us learn a lot and even experience great growth and revelation about our faith when we encounter conflict.

Conflict can be horrifically destructive, too often tearing individuals, communities, nations and churches apart. But it can also be profoundly productive and can be engaged constructively. The key is to engage conflict well, to make it productive and to use it for building up the body of Christ and the well-being of humanity.

When Jesus finally answered the Canaanite woman, he began a very interesting conversation, a series of fascinating exchanges. He listened carefully to her, just as she listened carefully to him, even though at points the tension between them seems pretty thick. Jesus' replies at first seemed pointed, perhaps even irritated and tense.

But after listening closely and carefully, he seemed to be impressed and responded by saying, "*Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.*" And her daughter was healed instantly."

How well do we listen to each other when we disagree? How well do we listen to members of our family when we have a dispute with them? How well do we listen to our neighbors, or our friends, or even our enemies?

Listening deeply to those who have tough, unpleasant things-or new and different or old and hackneyed things to say to us can be a strange, awkward, but good exercise and a giant leap of faith for those willing to try it. Genuine, careful, heartfelt listening often is.

Winston Churchill, once said that "*Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak. Courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen.*"

David Augsburger, a renowned Mennonite teacher, says that "*Being listened to is so close to being loved that most people cannot tell the difference.*"

The kind of unity described in Psalm 133 - a community of faithful followers on a journey with God to a beloved home-never obliterates differences, disagreement, and conflicts. Unity among believers does not require uniformity, which would not only be boring but also a denial of the rich variety of God's good creation among humans and their communities.

The kind of unity described in Psalm 133 does require, however, that we engage each other and our conflicts over differences to make them productive rather than destructive. Such unity requires that we see conflict as an opportunity to deepen our faith rather than destroy our adversaries, whether they be across the world or across the table in a local church meeting.

When we within the body of Christ choose to listen deeply, we will discover new ways of hearing about each other's encounter of and witness to Christ. Moreover, we will likely learn more about the wonders and mysteries of our own faith when we listen, really listen to others, even those with whom we will never fully agree. Then we will know more fully the unity to which God calls us-a unity so large, a love so expansive, and a mutual encounter so riveting, just like that of Jesus and the Canaanite woman, we find new ways of healing ourselves and our communities.

Let us pray: *God, help us listen deeply. Help us listen in love to those whom we encounter in our families, among our friends, among our adversaries, and all those who seek to teach us, whether we know it or not, how to engage conflict productively. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.*