

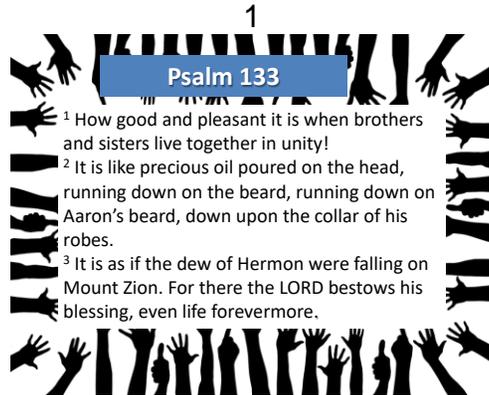
## Sacred practice of community

Psalm 133

By pastor Ken Keyte

February 12th

[Greetings]



### Psalm 133

*A song of ascents. Of David.*

<sup>1</sup> How good and pleasant it is when brothers and sisters live together in unity!

<sup>2</sup> It is like precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard, running down on Aaron's beard, down upon the collar of his robes.

<sup>3</sup> It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion. For there the LORD bestows his blessing, even life forevermore.

Last year I began a *series on the Psalms of Ascent* (the 15 Psalms from 120 to 134) that were sung by the *Hebrew pilgrims* as they journeyed uphill to *Jerusalem* for the annual worship festivals of *Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles*.



We were up to *Psalm 129* just after Christmas.

But I've *jumped ahead* to Psalm 133 today, because this psalm which is all about the *sacred practice of community*- (is I think)- a *very good one* to preach on this Sunday now that we're all back from holidays and long weekends ready to begin (I hope) a *new year together* as the sacred community of *Te Puke Baptist church!*

*Eugene Peterson* has written an *excellent commentary* on these Psalms called *Long Obedience in the Same Direction*- which uses the *long uphill journey to Jerusalem* by the Hebrew pilgrims as a *metaphor of discipleship*.

With each psalm presenting another aspect of how we move forward on the *long journey in the same direction together* toward *Zion* - God's dwelling place.

*Eugene Peterson* begins the chapter on *Psalm 133* like this:

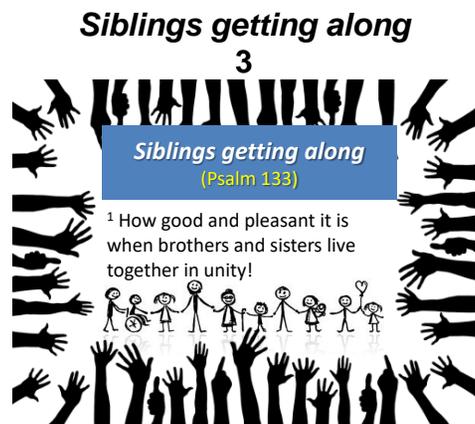
Whether we like it or not, the moment we confess Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour, that is, from the time we become a Christian, we are at the same time a member of the Christian church- even if we do not permit our name to be placed on a church roll, even if we refuse to identify ourselves with a particular congregation and share responsibilities with them, even if we absent ourselves from the worship of a congregation. Our membership in the church is (inseparable) from our faith in Christ. We can be no more a Christian and have nothing to do with the church than we can be a person and not be in a family. Membership

in the church is a basic spiritual fact for those who confess Christ as Lord.

There are Christians, of course, who never put their names down on a membership list; who refuse to respond to the call to worship each Sunday; who say, "*I love God but I hate the church.*" But they are members all the same, whether they like it or not, whether they acknowledge it or not! For God never makes private, secret salvation deals with people. His relationships with us are personal and intimate, yes; but private, no! We are a family in Christ. When we become Christians, we are among brothers and sisters in faith. No Christian is an only child.

So the question is not "Am I going to be part of a community of faith?" but "How am I going to live in this community of faith?"

Psalm 133 presents *three descriptive metaphors* of community: *Siblings; Anointing Oil, and the Dew of Mt Hermon*, from which we can derive *three sacred practices* of how to be a healthy faith community together, within which God bestows his *eternal blessing*.



The first metaphor of *siblings getting along together* is found in the opening line of the Psalm which begins:

<sup>1</sup> How good and pleasant it is when brothers and sisters live together in unity!

Eugene Peterson paraphrases this in *The Message* as:

*How wonderful, how beautiful, when brothers and sisters get along.*

Last week I watched a preview of a *new video series* produced by *Focus on the Family*, called the Family Project. In part of it I watched an interview of a *young boy* (about 10years old) with his *little sister* who was in a wheel chair because she suffered from muscular dystrophy.

I watched some cute scenes of him pushing her around in the wheel chair and them playing board games and having fun together.

When the interviewer asked the young boy what he thought of his sister, the little boys eyes started watering and his voice began trembling as he stammered, "*She means everything to me, I can't imagine what it would be like without her, she's my best friend.*"

His little sister was sitting right beside him when he said it and she looked a bit embarrassed by her brothers tears, but she looked up at him with big eyes full of admiration for her brother, you could sense that she felt exactly the same about her brother.

I felt a *lump in my throat* and a *tear in my eye* by the wonder and beauty of their *brother and sister relationship!*

That's who I thought of, when I read the words:

*"How wonderful, how beautiful when brothers and sisters get along."*

But of course the psalm is applying these words to the brothers and sisters of a *much larger family* than a biological one.

This psalm was *sung by Hebrew pilgrims* on their way to *Jerusalem* to worship God at the temple.

Reading it in *our context* you could say it is sung by *followers of Jesus* on their way to *church!*

So the Psalm sings to us:

*"How wonderful, how beautiful, when brothers and sisters in Christ get along together."*

*"How good and pleasant it is when brothers and sisters in the church live together in unity!"*

The *Hebrew pilgrims* travelled toward *Jerusalem* in large communal groups from their rural villages, to take part in the *worship festivals*, and as they did they *shared a common purpose*, travelling a *common path*, striving toward a *common goal*, that *path* and *purpose* being God.

How much better that must've been than *making the long trip alone!*

Yet if living in community is so *wonderful and beautiful*, so *pleasant and good*, then how come it's often so *difficult*?

Most of us will have experienced what it's like when *brothers and sisters don't get along!*

The Bible is full of examples of *sibling rivalry*.

- *Cain's* jealousy of *Abel's* more favourable offering to God ended in *murder*,
- *Jacob's* coveting of *Esau's* birthright and blessing resulted in *alienation and mistrust*.
- When *Joseph's* brothers envied the *favouritism* of their father for him, they sold him off as a slave to Egypt.
- *Miriam and Aaron* quarreled with their brother *Moses* about his foreign wife.
- *David* argued with his brothers about why *no one* wanted to *fight Goliath*.
- Even *Jesus' brothers* thought he was crazy and tried preventing him from his ministry!
- *Jesus* told a parable about an *older brother* who became so upset with his father for welcoming his prodigal brother back home, that he wouldn't join in the *welcome home party*.

Such stories are there to *warn us* about what often happens when siblings are left to their own devices. *We fight!*

So how do we learn to *get along together*?

*One approach* is to treat *people as problems to be solved* and the community as being made up of *lots individuals with problems* to be solved. But working on issues in isolation from the rest of the community *doesn't usually work* in the long run!

*Another way* of trying to get along together is to turn the church into an *institution* by treating people on the basis of *impersonal functions* rather than as a web of *inter personal relationships*. In the process lumping everyone into various functions for institutional effectiveness, the church becomes less and less a community of people who love and care for each other, and more and more like a *corporate enterprise*.

Neither of these ways is very effective at building the *wonderful, beautiful kind of community* described by Psalm 133 in which *siblings get along!*

Treating people as *isolated problems to solve* versus a *corporate enterprise* - somewhere between these two extremes there is *community*- where each person is taken seriously, learns to trust others, depend on others, and to be compassionate with others- *"how wonderful, how beautiful, when brothers and sisters get along"* like this, says Psalm 133.

Learning how to *get along together*, is therefore the *first sacred practice* of community from the metaphor of *siblings getting along*.

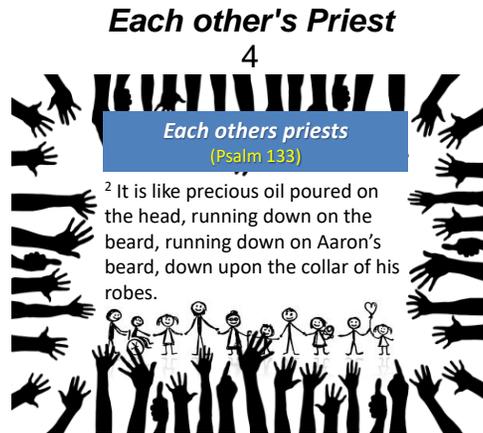
So when did you last *practice getting along in community* with someone you've *avoided*, or *clashed with*, or been *hurt by*, or *struggled to get along with*?

That's what this *first sacred practice of community* involves from Psalm 133.

I wonder if you can think of someone in particular you could deliberately begin getting along with?

On the Sunday of our *AGM* last year, I presented *five emphases* for our church for 2017 (from 2nd Timothy 1:6-7).

The *fourth* one of these emphases is: *unconditional, inclusive love of others*- which is the same thing as being a *community of siblings who get along!*



The *second metaphor for community* is in verse 2. Where it says community is *like precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard, running down on Aaron's beard, down upon the collar of his robes.*

The picture comes from *Exodus 29*, where instructions are given for the *ordination of Aaron* and the other priests, involving anointing his head with oil.

Throughout scripture, oil is used as a *sign of God's presence* and a *symbol of the Holy Spirit*. But in this case the anointing oil is also marking the person as a *priest*.

Living in community together involves seeing the *oil flow over the head, down the face, through the beard, onto the shoulders of the other*- and when I see that in my mind's eye, I know that *my brother, my sister, is my priest*. By seeing each other as *God's anointed one*, our relationships are profoundly affected!

Revelation 1:6 says that *Jesus has made us to be a kingdom and priests serving God*. So it makes a significant difference, *doesn't it*, knowing that the person you're *sitting beside* this morning, or who you'll *have a coffee with* after church, or *serve beside* in a ministry during the week, or *argue a contrary point of view* with at a meeting, or *study the Bible* with at home-group, or *pray with* at a prayer meeting, or *worship beside* in church- has been *anointed by the Holy Spirit* to be *your priest!*

And it makes a significant difference, *doesn't it*, if *they know you've been anointed by the Holy Spirit* to be their priest too!

One of the best books written in the twentieth century on the meaning of *living together as a community of faith* is *Life Together* by *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. The book begins with the first verse of *Psalm 133*.

During the Nazi years just before world war 2 broke out, Bonhoeffer led a *fugitive community of trainee pastors*, whom he lived with in a daily quest to discover for themselves *how to be a faith community together*, the way Jesus meant it to be. It was during these years he wrote *Life Together*.

*Eric Metaxis* has written an excellent biography about him called: *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*. My son Jason is reading my copy of it at present because he's heard the pastor of the church he goes to in Auckland quoting Bonhoeffer so often, that Jason decided he should find out a bit more about him!

In 1939 *Bonhoeffer* accepted an invitation to *Union Theological Seminary in New York*. The move would've spared him the capital offense of *refusing to swear an oath to Hitler and fight in his army*. However on arriving in New York he soon regretted his decision despite persuasion from his friends to remain in the safety of the United States.

In a letter to one of his colleagues back in Germany he wrote.

'I have come to the conclusion that I made a mistake in coming to America. I must live through this difficult period in our national history with the people of Germany. I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people... Christians in Germany will have to face the terrible alternative of either willing the defeat of their nation in order that Christian civilization may survive or willing the victory of their nation and thereby destroying civilization. I know which of these alternatives I must choose but I cannot make that choice from security.'

Bonhoeffer returned to Germany on the last scheduled steamer to cross the Atlantic before war broke out.

There he resumed living as a *community of priests representing Jesus to each other and to their nation*. Which in the end cost him his life!

How are you representing Jesus as *each other's Priest*?

How are you *seeing Jesus in others* in a *community of Priests*?

The *second* of our *five church emphases* for 2017 is *spiritual gift development/relational mentoring*- which is what being a *community of each other's priests* involves.

That's what this *second sacred practice of community* involves being, from Psalm 133.

## Irrigators of potential

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<sup>3</sup> It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion.

The third metaphor for community is from verse 3:

<sup>3</sup> It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion.

*Mount Hermon* is the highest mountain in the region, rising to a height of *3,000 metres* in the *Lebanon range*, north of Israel. Because of its altitude, each new dawn on the high slopes of Mt Hermon is extremely heavy with dew.

The imagery of this alpine dew communicates a *sense of morning freshness, a feeling of fertility, and a clean anticipation of growth and potential*.

*Mt Zion*, in contrast (where the Hebrew pilgrims were heading) has an altitude of only *765m*, and because of its much lower altitude *does not get anything like* the drenching dawn dew of *Mt Hermon*!

But *what if it did*?

Think of the *new life* that would burst forth, the *fresh growth* that would flourish, the *potential* that could be fulfilled *if* the dew of *Mt Hermon* fell on *Mt Zion* their destination!

That's what the psalm is singing about with this *third metaphor* of community.

A community of faith *flourishes* when we view each other with, *expectancy*. Wondering what God will do today in *this one*, or *that*

one. In a community of faith we are constantly finding out *new things* about the *other members* of the community. They are *new persons each morning*, endless in their possibilities. It's *impossible to be bored* in such a community and *impossible* to feel *alienated* among such people.

The dew falling upon Mt Hermon's slopes communicates *fresh expectant newness*, instructing us to be *irrigators of potential* in each other.

I remember a conversation with Jan Franklyn several years ago about our Ocktoberfest gala and I mentioned to her that Raewyn and I had an idea about doing a Fun Run as part of the gala. It was just an idea, we weren't really expecting to do it. We knew it would take quite a lot of work to organise, and we weren't very confident that anyone *in Te Puke* would even *want do a Fun Run!*

But when Jan heard our idea, she said, "*What a great idea! You really should do it! That'd add something new to the gala and bring a different part of the community in- go for it!*" She encouraged.

It was just *the nudge we needed* to get going on organising our *first Ocktoberfest Fun Run*.

And every now and then *Jan* checked in with me to see *we were going* and how it was coming together.

Jan saw the potential in us that we couldn't see in us to get it going- *and we did!*

In Psalm 133 the *heavy dew of Mt Hermon* is an *irrigator of potential* for the dry ground of Mt Zion.

Jan was an *irrigator of potential in me and Raewyn* to bring a *Fun Run* into existence where there'd been nothing like it before. With the help of *Paul Bellamy* and *David Holmes* there's been *eight Ocktoberfest Fun Run's* since then!

How are you being an *irrigator of potential* in others? (like Jan was for us).

That's what the *third sacred practice of community* involves doing from Psalm 133.

The *third* of our *five emphases* for 2017 is *courageousness in sharing the good news*.

We'll certainly need to be a *community of irrigators of potential* in each other if we're to become a more *courageous community* at *sharing the good news!*

## Hint of Heaven

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So the *three metaphors* from Psalm 133 of "*siblings*", "*anointing oil*", and "*the dew of Mt Hermon*" represent a *healthy faith community* as a community of *siblings getting along together*, as *each other's priests*, and as *irrigators of potential in one another*.

Guess what? We all have a fantastic opportunity of *putting all of this into practice* over a *weekend living in community together* at our *church family camp* on the weekend of February 24th to 26th!

I really hope you can be there,  
*No sibling left behind!*

Because when we live in community together *like this*, we experience a *hint of heaven on earth!*

*"For there the LORD bestows his blessing, even life forevermore!"*, sings Psalm 133 in its closing line!