

A lot of times, worship at Sardis is hypoallergenic. That is to say, our sense of smell is one we rarely incorporate into our weekly liturgies. Of course, that's not necessarily a bad thing. We live in a world full of products and consumable goods that are not made of organic things, and too often these non-organic things cause really bad side effects for our community members: chemicals, perfumes, oils, and other substances can be life-draining. Therefore hypoallergenic worship has real theological merit – it's a statement of care, concern and accessibility for all of our community members! We also don't have incense. Again, probably not a terrible thing for Sardis, given our sporadic adventures with unruly candle flames.

But hypoallergenic worship may inhibit us from understanding the meaning behind the Psalmist's depiction of precious oil. In ancient Israel, anointing oil was precious because it was both refreshing and sweet-smelling. There's a great TV commercial out right now where a young woman says, "I told my friend, 'Girl, you need to try some Dove!'" The camera pans to a person in a refreshing shower with symmetrical splashes of water and smooth, creamy soap (more symmetrical than I've ever been able to create by the way!!!), and we envision and sense a restorative act. I think all of us, especially during a steamy August, can identify with a cleansing shower, complete with a pleasing, pure body wash (you choose the scent or lack thereof!). The Psalmist is not asking us to think about a soggy beard on an old priest! The Psalmist is conjuring up the image of a generous, sweet, anointing spirit of God. It's the same spirit we seek to sense and recreate with our use of baby oil to anoint our children on dedication days, and to soften the harshness of dusty ashes at the beginning of Lent. So do me a favor, see if you can hang onto this images of sweet-smelling and restorative.

Changing gears...I talk about my lawn now and again, maybe too much for this congregation's liking, but it's a rich source of imagery. I've been working hard on it, and one day soon, I'm really going to enjoy rubbing my bare feet on soft, gentle, green blades of Bermuda grass. A few days ago, I ventured outside in the midday heat, optimistically barefooted, only to feel sharp, brittle, unfriendly, needle-like blades on my soles. Was I walking on pine needles? I was disappointed, but not deflated. Yesterday, with a little less optimism, I ventured out earlier in the morning, barefoot once more, to water a few plants. To my great surprise, the thick morning dew had softened and replenished the lawn, and

the grass gave way to my steps, providing a soft, cool, wet, generous padding for my soles. And the dew was so thick, my tracks hardly depleted it.

The Psalmist tells us about Mt. Hermon's dew. Mt. Hermon straddles the border of Israel and Syria, some distance from Jerusalem, maybe not quite as far as Mt. Mitchell from Charlotte, but still a good ways. The dew, on this highest peak, much like the dew on Mt. Mitchell does for Charlotte, provides water and life for Jerusalem. The Psalmist wants us to again imagine something that is restorative and refreshing, but in this instance is also generous and expansive.

Okay, so I went backward instead of forward with my illustrations, but I hope by now, you can picture or sense things that are sweet-smelling, and restorative, and generous, and expansive, and life-giving.

The Psalmist proclaims: How very sweet-smelling, and restorative, and generous, and expansive, and life-giving it is, when kindred live together in unity.

Kindred are people, sisters and brothers of one nature or accord – I would say people connected by the same substance, that is the Word, or the energy, or the umph, or the DNA of God.

And those kindred live in unity – a condition of harmony: think barbershop quartets; or a pleasing arrangement of parts: think about what each person in this community adds to our whole; or an interweaving of narratives: think about the unique story that God has for each one of us.

How good and pleasant it is when God's people dwell together in unity; not as clones; not as an assimilated culture; not as conformists; not as subordinates; but as collaborators.

I know Charlie Daniels used to sing about his elevation of Brother John's version, but I find wholeness in the give-and-take of all four gospels, not to mention the ones that aren't canonized.

I know the world, especially broadcast and digital media, wants to tailor our sources, bombard us with content that mimics our opinions – even Google knows what I want to ask before I can even finish typing it in!!! But I think we can be

more complete when we explore and engage differences rather than running from them.

And I don't know about you, but what I appreciate the most about our choir is how they take a dozen different voices, and blend them together for one purpose. How generous, how full, how life-giving it is to hear Hilary, Becky, Rick, Susan, Danny, Melissa, Kristin, Ruthye, Debbie, Billie, Jonathan, Jim, Irena, Tim, and others (I hope I haven't omitted anyone!) sing together! I hear one voice, but if I concentrate and watch individuals, I can hear their distinct gifts as well. Their voices, to me, are like oil running off of Aaron's beard and robe, like dew, making its way down to the Catawba and Yadkin Rivers toward the fertile piedmont.

I suppose I am rambling. You'll have to forgive me, I'm in the meetinghouse, and even if is hypoallergenic, all this imagery is engaging my senses. What I'm getting at is this: we often have little trouble seeing the unity of collective differences when we see them in music, or in literature, or in mathematical equations, or a rainbow, or an ecosystem. Somehow, someway, we see the beauty of independent, unique parts working interdependently.

I think the Psalmist is seeking to remind us of God's purpose for community: Communities are composed of unique creatures, all bound together by shared createdness in a loving Creator, expressing themselves in their uniquely created ways. And it's the consortium, the collaboration, the partnering of these varied gifts that makes communities thrive.

Dialogue isn't dangerous, it's generous. Diversity isn't limiting, it's expansive. Unique gifts aren't an acquired taste, they smell sweet to all palates. Interdependence isn't exhausting, it's renewing and refreshing. Community doesn't zap life or remove life, it breeds life.

The Psalmist penned these thoughts in the days of pilgrimage songs. Travelers made their way to the sacred space once more – they came from different places; they spoke with different accents; they had varied skills, and varied stories. But they stepped in unison; they saw the same hills and the same temple on the horizon; they put their faith in the same procurer of love and grace. Maybe it was the sweet-smelling oil; maybe it was ample dew; maybe it was the inertia of the

Life is Good
Bob Stillerman
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Psalm 133



a spiritually
progressive
community
of faith

spirit; maybe it was the power of spontaneous community; maybe it was all of these things. But somehow, somehow, God ordained God's blessing amongst and amidst God's people: Life forevermore!

This morning, I suppose we're on a journey, too, though it's a virtual one. We have different devices, and bandwidths, and temperaments, and some of us may still be in our pajamas. But we seek the sacred One in emerging spaces and places. We bring different tunes, and voices, and stories, and gifts, and perspectives. In such a virtual whirlwind, may God give us the patience, and the strength, and the understanding, and the love to harmonize our differences into community, in order that we too might value God's deepest ordained blessing: Life, forevermore!

May it be so, and may it be soon! Amen!