“One hundred bottles of beer on the wall, one hundred bottles of beer…”
Everyone of a certain age has either sung it or suffered through it at some time in their lives. It is the dreaded traveling song to pass the time on a long trip. The inventions of the Walkman on through the iPod have caused this tradition to fade, but back in the day, joining in song was one of the ways we passed time on one of those endless family road trips. When I am on a long car trip, I choose to torture my wife by singing along to cheesy soundtracks the likes of “Rent,” “Jesus Christ Superstar,” and “The Rocky Horror Picture Show.” All the lyrics, permanently etched upon my brain, have crowded out less important information like my home phone number and the names of the twelve disciples.

Psalm 133, which Margaret just read, is the second to last of the fifteen psalms of ascent, the traveling music of the pilgrims to Jerusalem. But instead of keeping track of a dwindling beer supply, these brief, easily memorized psalms, allowed those journeying to festal celebrations in Jerusalem a chance to be shaped by their faith tradition.

The structure of the psalm is fairly simple. It opens with a celebration of an experience of family cohesion, “How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!” and concludes with claiming that experience as a blessing from God, “For there the Lord ordained God’s blessing, life forevermore.” In between we are given two visible metaphors upon which to ruminate.

Aaron, Moses’ brother, was the first high priest. The oil running down his beard and collar is a sign of economic prosperity and personal well-being. Using it so extravagantly was a sign of generous hospitality.
The second image of dew symbolizes productivity, and renewal. This productivity is not so much in the sense of human effort but rather an arrival of helpful resources beyond human control, a divine gift if you will. The mountain the dew is found upon, Hermon is located at the northernmost reaches of Joshua’s conquest, in other words, on the boundary of the nation of Israel.

The final line of the psalm, “For there the Lord ordained God’s blessing, life forevermore” speaks to what one scholar calls the divine “creation-blessing.” (Brueggemann, p. 48) This idea that God has fashioned the entire world to provide for us in amazing ways and being placed in the midst of it is a privilege to be cherished.

Sometimes I find biblical texts like these a little difficult to swallow whole. The picture is just a tad too rosy to resemble the real life I see. Sure, I wish our life together as a community was one long Coca-Cola commercial with everybody holding hands and singing songs. But even the writer of this psalm, this song sung by journeying pilgrims, knew better. This is not so much a text of exact description, but a text of proscription as well. This is a text calling us to recognize the unity and its blessings offered to us and to live into the fulfillment of that unity.

So if this text is both celebrating unity and inviting us to participate in it more fully, what does it have to tell us about unity, about true community? First of all, it tells us in what direction true unity leads us. Too often in our culture, unity is built upon being over and against some other group.

We unify in the battle of red versus blue states and states of mind. We are certainly prone to it in the church, and fundamentalism in all faiths has fanned the flames of intolerance in ways that are obvious to us all.

But this text paints a different picture of unity. First we hear of Aaron, the high priest, symbolizing the twelve tribes of Israel. He is the ultimate insider. Then we hear of the dew on Mount Hermon located on the farthest edges of the territory of the tribes. And finally we hear of God’s blessing upon the entire world. Unity in this psalm is a movement continually outward. The unity of a distinct group allows that group to reach out beyond its borders to others. We get an example of

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this in the wedding liturgy during the prayers for the bride and groom when it says, “Make their life together a sign of Christ's love to this sinful and broken world, that unity may overcome estrangement, forgiveness heal guilt, and joy conquer despair. Give them such fulfillment of their mutual love that they may reach out in concern for others.”

Churches that work well together within their walls are often the churches that are capable of accomplishing the most beyond their walls. They build upon their internal bonds together to create bonds with others who come from different places, and experiences than their own.

When I think about this psalm of unity in terms of Brick, I find it to be both descriptive and prescriptive. I believe we have a sweet spirit here together and in many ways enjoy the fruits of healthy community. And I believe we see the fruits of that healthy community. In the many ways we do seek to be present out beyond our walls, from the Women’s Association’s work with the Children’s Storefront school, to the Deacon’s work with the homeless at Jan Hus and everything in between.

And yet I would never for a minute suggest that this is a place that does not have its share of pushes and pulls. Sometimes we are all so busy running in all of our own different directions with a multitude of different committees and task forces and working groups that is amazing to me that we stop and say hello to each other as we pass in the hallway.

And sometimes in our meetings together there are very different opinions about how to be the church together and how to do what we do. There are days when unity seems a distant dream in the midst of all this varied hustle and bustle. There are times when our denomination as a whole struggles with how to be the church together, over issues of sexuality and disbursement of resources and others. Sometimes it can seem like unity in the church can never begin to approach the pretty words of Psalm 133.

But I had an experience last winter that gave me a new understanding of what unity may look like. For the past eighteen years, every December in New York,
Composer Phil Kline has been hosting what he calls a “free outdoor participatory sound sculpture.” What the heck is that? Kline hands out a bunch of boom boxes and MP3 players with a variety of themes of one of his electronic compositions. The idea is for all of the players to play together as we march through the city. He counts down one, two, three, play, and the music begins. This year I joined the adventure starting in Washington Square Park.

When Kline called out play, everybody hit their buttons. Of course simultaneous is a relative thing with groups and it was clear the players were all starting at slightly different times. As well, the person standing next to me hit the wrong button and the first thing I heard were the opening chords to a heavy metal AC/DC song.

But soon we were on the move and making our way through the village on our way to Tompkins Square Park. The music swirled around us as the crowd of aging hipsters and over-the-hill hippies journeyed. As the group ebbed and flowed with traffic lights and different walking paces, the musical piece was on the move itself and constantly changing. At times it was seemingly pointless cacophony and at times it was magical.

As we walked by a bar, a young man on his way in paused to take in the scene. He called out imploringly, “What’s it all about?” Nobody offered him any explanation because I am not sure we had one to give. But if I had a second chance I might have responded, “How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!”

The reality of all human community is that it will always be far from traditionally harmonious. It will certainly never unfold in lock-step fashion. As we continued our march we ran into an older gentleman, who seeing the crowd before him, announced with conviction, “Get out of my way, I am headed for coffee!” There will also most certainly be those who are heading in the exact opposite direction.

When I think about the pushing and pulling within congregations and the pushing and pulling within our denomination, I say thank God we are still all trying to walk in the same direction, each of us with a boom box playing a different variation of the same tune, not quite in synch.

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What may be lost in purity of theological boundaries, or socio-political purpose, or agreement on how communion should be served, we more than make up for in sharing the journey of faithfulness.

So I do not know if we are exactly present together with oil dripping down our beards, sipping dew off of mountains and singing hymns as we work together. But as we each bring our own perspective to the church and each add our own little piece to what Brick is and will be, we are creating what at times may sound like a cacophony – but I bet to God it sounds like the start of a symphony.

*Thanks be to God. Amen.*


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