SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

Jeannie D. Thompson

April 7, 2024

*On the Other Side of Easter* Psalm 133

 Acts 4:32-35

 As we all know, there is harmony and then: there is *harmony*. Here on this first Sunday after Easter, on this Sunday of singing our favorite hymns, the suggested lectionary readings offer us passages from Scripture that point toward the kind of harmony that we all wish human relationships would follow…but rarely do.

 The first reading—which, ironically, we did *not* sing this morning (but should have!)—Psalm 133, scholars believe, was a song that pilgrims would sing as they made their way to Jerusalem to celebrate a number of annual religious festivals, including Passover, the Feast of Weeks, and the Feast of Tabernacles.

What this says is that this is one of the songs the community knew and handed on to their children. Try to imagine what that would have been like. Try to imagine yourself as a child. In fact, try to imagine yourself as a small child travelling with your family—parents, of course, but also siblings, and also uncles, aunts, cousins, even neighbors. You know you are going to the big city of Jerusalem where there will be sights and sounds, food and music the likes of which you have not before experienced. That is exciting all by itself.

Suddenly, though, you hear a voice raised in song. In an instant, all of the adults and the older children around you join in. They are all singing, the whole travelling band. They sing joyfully about the goodness and pleasantness of being together, of living in accord and in solidarity with one another. And as you look around at the faces of your loved ones, you notice that they are smiling as they singing. You smile too, and later, when the group stops for a meal or a rest, you ask about the song, and it is taught to you.

When it is sung again, you sing with the others. Each time you do, you are learning a little more about who you are, and what is important to your family and community. Even more: you are learning what is important to God. Specifically, you may remember how the word for “good” in this song, in Psalm 133, is the same word that is used in the story of the creation of the world. Each time God made some part of creation, way back in Genesis—the separation of water from dry land, the creation of the animals and plants—each time God looked at the divine handiwork, God pronounced it “good.”

Yet, as one scholar has written: *“In the Genesis 2 creation story, however, God declares, “It is* not *good [*lo’ tob*] for the human to be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner”* [Genesis 2:18]*. The word “good” in Psalm 133:1 reminds the reader/hearer of God’s provision of community and relatedness for humanity.”*

So, this brief, simple song is much more than it seems. It is aspirational. It speaks of an ideal that is dear to the heart of your family and your community *because it is dear to the heart of God*.

No matter what else you may learn in life, this ideal will also remain. That is why we still read and hear this psalm with gladness—because we know that this is what God wants for us.

In the United Church of Christ, we also believe it is important to emphasize that this passage speaks of *unity* rather than uniformity. In this Scripture, and in the compassion and the strong desire for justice found in both the Hebrew Bible and the Gospels, we in the UCC find this an important distinction because it allows for a diverse and varied expression of God’s imprint found in the faces and the spirits and the bodies of all human beings—the faces and spirits and the bodies that are familiar to us, but also the ones who are not.

Surely the community in the passage we heard this morning from Acts of the Apostles describes a group of people who are living together with that ideal of harmony, as are we. Which is to say, they and we are living in the aftermath of Christ’s resurrection. Which is to say, they were living with the reality that God’s love could not be stopped—even by the worst of human fear and brutality. This has caused them to live together in a community founded on love, with each other’s welfare as the foundation of their belief and their actions.

The passage says that *“the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul”* [v. 32]. Because of this, they were able to trust and care for one another—even in the most material of ways. That is: they shared all of their resources, even to the point of selling private possessions (even land) so that all of them, together, would have what they needed.

Again, they did not simply assume that all needed the same thing or the same amount. What the passage says is that the combined resources were *“distributed to each as any had need”* [v. 35]. Thereby dismissing the assumption of a uniformity of needs in favor of *seeing* and caring for each person on their own terms. Each person’s needs were expressed, heard, and taken seriously.

At this point, it is important to acknowledge that this is one of the passages that has often made staunch capitalists uncomfortable. The Sermon on the Mount is another. So, what are we going to do?

Let me attempt to answer that by telling you about something I was told about Samoan choirs.

I do not know if this is still true, but about twenty-five years ago I was given a hymnal from the Congregational Church in American Samoa (where my family is from). What I noticed right away is that the book is small. It is small because there is no music in it, just lyrics for all of the hymns.

What I was told is that, rather than learn how to read music, Samoan choir members learn their “voice.” That is: they learn what their vocal range is and how theirs fits in with the other voices around them. They learn how their voice may harmonize with all the others. They learn what harmony sounds like and what it means for each of them, and for all of them together, to achieve harmony. Mostly, it means they have to listen to each other.

On this side of Easter, what we are meant to remember is the song God has been teaching us over-and-over again for millennia which is that first and foremost, God draws us together in covenant with God—all of us together. We are meant to remember that our relationship to one another is not because we are related to one another by blood, but by the love of God. That is what draws and binds us together: the mutual share in the community of God.

Friends, here on the other side of Easter, let us remember that through the love and promises of God we are brought together as one family, as one body. Let us not be satisfied by the drive to uniformity—which is the purely human understanding of community.

Rather, let us affirm our unity as a people who are loved by God and offered the love and a life that is permeated by the sound of God singing about the goodness of what God has made. Let us join in God’s love song, listening for each other’s voice, and for the unity that we may achieve though God’s love. Let it be so. Amen.