

“Together”
Sermon on Psalm 133
Rev. Hannah Coe - First Baptist Church Jefferson City, MO
August 23, 2020
WATCH/LISTEN: fbcjc.org/sermon/together

This week our congregation received the news that our Senior Pastor of nearly 24 years, Dr. Doyle Sager, has stage IV lung cancer. While Pastor Doyle and his family are exploring the best options for treatment of Doyle’s cancer, they are simultaneously grieving and trying to cope emotionally and spiritually. Along with them, we are stunned and heartbroken.

Rod, Melissa, and I know that Doyle means so much to so many of you. He has been present with many of you in the lowest and highest moments of your life. For some of you, Doyle is the only Senior Pastor you’ve known as a member of this congregation. For others, Doyle is the only Senior Pastor you’ve known in your lifetime. Pastors reflect back to us understanding, compassion, and a naming of God’s presence in our stories. This weaves our lives together in a way that has great depth and meaning and also depth of pain when there is suffering. Many of us are hurting along with Doyle and his family.

This is also different week for our community. Families and teachers are preparing to start back to school. If we’re honest, we’re collectively holding our breath. Parents have decision fatigue. They are deeply concerned for their children, at this point, not only for their physical wellbeing but also for their mental, emotional, social, and spiritual wellbeing. The virus is taking a toll on all of us.

Educators, like so many of us, are doing the best they can with not great options. They have earnestly prepared to provide safe and engaging education for every child in our community, while at the same time knowing that no matter what they do, there is risk. For every positive outcome, there is negative impact.

In times of stress and trauma, our bodies and minds pull on an emergency reserve of strength referred to as “surge capacity.”¹ This capability serves us well in times of natural disasters. But, in a slow-moving and unrelenting situation like we’ve encountered with the pandemic, we eventually run out of surge capacity and find ourselves feeling restless, unproductive, unable to focus, anxious, and angry. Some of you are trying to lead in a time of constant change. Some of you are weary from limitations, some of us feel angry and anxious, some of us are sad and low. Some of us are wishing all of this would just go away and are really tired of all the noise and all the fuss. Some of us are trying to figure out how to care for sick loved ones, how to grieve how to navigate pregnancy and childbirth in a pandemic. While the pandemic affects all of us differently, it affects us nonetheless and is erupting in our political, financial, and social spheres.

Several months ago, Doyle chose as our sermon text today Psalm 133. I am not sure there are more fitting or relevant words for us to turn to in this time of grief, uncertainty, and fragmentation.

¹ Tara Haelle, “Your ‘Surge Capacity’ is Depleted—It’s Why You Feel Awful,” *Elemental*, accessed August 19, 2020 from <https://elemental.medium.com/your-surge-capacity-is-depleted-it-s-why-you-feel-awful-de285d542f4c>

Psalm 133 is a Psalm of ascents, a hymn traditionally used at the Feast of Tabernacles in the autumn, a religious feast celebrating the provision of God's care for the Israelites during their time in the wilderness.² When we read a Psalm of ascent, it's helpful to picture pilgrims who've traveled from great distances, descending upon the temple in Jerusalem, and praying these words as they ascend the temple steps. In these ancient feast days at the temple, individuals and groups from all corners of the world were transformed into a family, dwelling and feasting together for a time, a physical expression of their covenant with God and with one another.³

The difficult thing for us today is that we are not able to be present with one another in these challenging days as we are accustomed. We long in our hearts to gather physically to worship and study and minister together in the same sanctuary, classroom, meeting room, office space, doctor's office, classroom with those we love and without fear. We long to do the things we're used doing, to hop in the car and go to the store, or the movies, or the playground, or to visit our relatives without worrying about exposing ourselves or someone else to a novel virus. We would like to be with each other without having to think and rethink it.

Often in the Bible, we read words from God, via human agents, to God's created humanity. Yet the words of the psalms are different, reflecting instead the words of humanity to God. The Psalter contains the prayers, songs, joys, griefs, questions, and longings of those who came before us in faith, striving to define and deepen the lived covenant with God and one another.⁴ Written between the lines of Psalm 133 are three thousand years'-worth of stories about building unity. Ancient Israel was not stranger to dis-unity. They fought about worship and a few of them ended up worshiping golden calves. They fought about kings and land and ended up dividing their kingdom in two. Their fights led them to utter defeat at the hands of superpowers. They experienced physical separation, lived as strangers in foreign lands, and endured relentless slow-moving disasters. When we hear these words on unity, we must also hear how much work goes into building and maintaining unity, how truly costly unity is, and hear the wisdom of unity for the sake of survival.

We can be assured that our faith ancestors have stood where we stand and had to adapt their ways of practicing covenant faithfulness. We can be assured that there are some things for Christ-followers that have not changed and are not going to change. In our everyday lives, Christ is still through ordinary, flawed, and inadequate people, through tired moms and dads, weary leaders, anxious and exhausted educators, grieving sons and daughters—through you and me, Christ is building his Church and the gates of hell will not prevail against this work.

Christ's church is not a building. The mission of God is not limited by time or space. Christ's church is an expression of reconciliation, love for neighbor, the intentional, persistent cultivation of wellbeing for all people. The invitation to join this work, to be formed in Christ and through Christ for the sake of the world, has not and will not change. Rather, now more than ever, the church is invited to seek unity in spaces of fragmentation and pain that the world may be healed and refreshed. I wonder how God invites you to intentionally unity with the people in your life?

² Nancy L. deClaissé-Walford, *Introduction to the Psalms: A Song from Ancient Israel* (Chalice Press: St. Louis) 2004. 120

³ Ibid. 120.

⁴ Ibid. 3.

Before Psalm 133 was adapted for use in worship, it was likely a wisdom saying in ancient Israel intended to provide instruction in right-living and right faith.⁵ For the ancient Israelites, unity was a matter of survival. It was essential for extended families to coexist in peace in order to maintain social, religious, and political integrity. The image used in Psalm 133 draws upon the tradition of hospitality that was integral to the fabric of ancient near eastern life. When a guest entered a person's home the host would offer oil from olives, infused with spices and fragrance to refresh and preserve the guest's skin in the harsh dry climate. The practice of hospitality, then, was a way to practice unity, a way to refresh and preserve the integrity of the individual, the home, and the community in harsh and abrasive times.

I believe that the practice of hospitality is essential for us in this season. In many ways we are being invited to step into a kinder more receptive way of being with ourselves and with each other. Faced with many factors that are beyond our control, we are invited to lovingly host our own souls and our fellow companions, to hear our circumstances knocking at the doors of our hearts and to open those doors to embrace what is before us. These days, you may find there are more strangers knocking at the door of your heart than you're used to: guests you'd rather not host like anxiety, anger, or hopelessness. Some of these are guests you'd rather come in and stay like deep joy, connection, and gratitude. How might we experience the sheer grace of refreshment for our souls by embracing the guests of our minds, hearts, and bodies with compassion and tender care?

I wonder who your companions are in this pandemic. Who are the people to whom you are invited to extend hospitality? To open your front porch or your Facetime app for a catch up conversation? To offer gifts of good food, listening ears, caring notes? I wonder how God is making way in your heart and soul to love others more deeply and intentionally. God invites us into the practice of hospitality in order refresh and heal our souls in this time of uncertainty and loss.

Over the last few weeks I've talked with not one or two but several people who are struggling, particularly beginning to experience the effects of the pandemic on their mental health. This week I talked to one of my friends who is going through a particularly difficult time in her life right now. She is a physician, trained as a hospitalist and has cared for many patients and their loved ones as they navigated similarly hard times.

As we came to the end of our conversation, she said "So, I am trying to do what I tell my patients and their families to do: eat healthy, drink water, spend time in the sunshine, be physically active as you are able, reach out to friends, get good sleep."

I want to covenant with you, friends, to offer gracious hospitality to ourselves, to intentionally refill our reserves that have been depleted by the loss and change of the last six months.

May we be assured that, as we attend to our hearts, our minds, our bodies, we will experience God's compassion in ways that refresh and preserve us. Today as we share the Lord's Supper virtually, may we be filled anew with holy imagination and courage to join God's work in new and creative ways.

⁵ Ibid. 121.