

Things that make you go ... Ahhh  
 Reading from the New Testament: 1 John 1:1-4  
 Reading from the Old Testament: Psalm 133

The cliché suggests that variety is the spice of life, but my mother would challenge how far the truth of that trite-ism extends. When, at the age of 14, we moved from one small Missouri town to another, there was a hiccup in the transition plan. Now, I was not privy to the conversations my parents had about the contingencies in the transition plan, nor about where in our new community we would land, but I trust those discussions were ... colorful. For when June arrived, we packed all of our belongings into a warehouse and moved only the minimum necessities toward the meager end of a trailer park three miles outside of town. Somehow, the construction of our house had run into a timing problem, but it would surely be ready for occupation in mere 3...6...9... a year.

So, home would be a single-wide ... um ... "furnished" ... um ... highly experienced rental trailer. I can't say it was well-used because it was obvious it had never been used well. It wasn't well-worn, it was worn out. Let's just say the shag carpet had lost its shag. But, hey, it kept you hot in the summer and cold in the winter, so who could

complain? Variety is the spice of life! Though I'd suggest you never say those words to my mom.

Yet, in an important way, the single-wide life was providential for me because of the generous hospitality of a neighbor who lived over in the affluent side of the trailer park - double-wide with a carport and a storage shed.

I've made no secret of my introversion, so you can imagine the idea of starting high school in a new town brought with it a fair amount of anxiety. When I registered, the school counselor mentioned that his son would be in my class and that his good friend, who would also be in my class, lived near me. Within a couple of days, there was a knock on our trailer door, and lo and behold, there was Donnie who had not hesitated to come and welcome me. It was one of those providential moments, that upon reflection you realize was a significant factor in the direction your life would take. If he hadn't knocked, if I had not answered, I might neither have encountered a number of friends nor experienced any number of formational events that would combine to influence the evolution of my identity. But more on that later.

In the week before school started our moms took turns carting us to football practice. Many of you remember those fully padded August scrimmages. If the linebacker didn't get you the humidity would, and by the end of practice, both would have teamed up to turn you into a crushed grape sitting in a puddle of sweat. Stink. Stank. Stunk. Ride home with the windows open kind of funk.

On the way back to trailer heaven, we'd always make a stop. Donnie's uncle owned a liquor store (I kid you not), and from there we'd retrieve these sixteen-ounce green glass bottles of ice-cold Mountain Dew, the absolute worst thing you can drink when dehydrated after a workout; well, the worst except for everything else sold at the package store.

Now, I've dined in Paris, Geneva, New York, and Istanbul, but let me tell you, in that state of August post-practice desiccation, there is nothing in the world that would have tasted so fine as that yellow carbonated blend of sugar, caffeine, and a dictionary of unpronounceable artificial chemicals. It was one of those things that make you go ... Ahhhh! Make your shoulders shimmy kind of good. You know those things ... the things that make you go ... Ahhhh! That

moment you fall into bed and pull the covers over you at night. Out in the country, away from city lights when you look up at the night sky, an ebony backdrop gorged with billions of celestial candles. The aromas that fill your senses in a ballpark on opening day. The harmonies of a treasured song or heart enveloping hymn. Walking through those sanctuary doors for worship after 13 months of absence. The things that make you go ... Ahhhh!

Our psalm today is part of a collection known as the songs of ascent. To ascend is to climb, right? And the hope of a climb is to reach the summit, which historically has been synonymous with those things that make you go ... Ahhhh! We call it a mountaintop experience. And for Israel, the mountaintop, the definitive experience of Ahhhh, was to be found atop Jerusalem's temple mount as the people gathered before the Lord in worship. Three times a year the people of Israel were required to gather their families and make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem's temple for festival. It was like the old summer camp meeting on steroids, the kind of trip you anticipate and plan for weeks in advance. You look forward to reunions with relatives and friends and maybe feel a tad anxious about such reunions with family and frenemies. And yet,

you are nevertheless amped up about cherished traditions. You are making plans to rendezvous with cousins. You'll gather around the fire at night, laughing, singing, making s'mores.

Folks who've been going for a lifetime talk about the Ahhh they feel, the mountaintop they experience when they pass through the gates of Montreat up in the NC mountains. Presbyterian heaven; the kids in the club program who wind up married to one another years later; the songs and energizers from the conferences; the ice cream cones at the Huckleberry; the quiet evenings listening to the insect symphonies of the night or folk dancing down at the barn; waking to see the sun rising over the mountain. For many, those are the things that make them go ... Ahhh!

The songs of ascent comprised the pilgrimage playlist for Israel's pilgrims. "I lift my eyes to the hills, from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth." "I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord!' ... To it the tribes go up." "As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds his people."

The psalms of ascent fuel the anticipation of the pilgrims and amplify their celebrations with the worshiping community. And so it is that our psalm today declares, "How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!" In any configuration of life together, such harmony is not a given whether we are speaking of fussy 4-year-olds; on again, off again BFFs; teammates; newlyweds; siblings; families on vacation; neighbors; city council; colleagues at work; 21st Century congregations; Congress; or the United Nations. The recent reappearance of sectarian tensions and clashes in Northern Ireland, 23 years after the landmark Good Friday Agreement, underscores the fragile nature of relationships, however they are constituted, sustained, and nurtured.

"How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!" How hard to achieve. How exhausting to sustain. And yet, how precious to experience, enjoy, celebrate!

The psalmist employs two images to exult in the exorbitant grace of healthy relationship. "It is like the precious oil on the head, running down upon the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down over the collar of his robes." Now, for me personally, that doesn't sound like

something that would make me go *Ahhh!* That sounds more like something that would make we go *Eeeuuww!* I don't want anybody pouring some sticky oil over my head, and if one too many drops of cologne can make you smell like the toxic waste dump of a perfume factory, I'm thinking this much scented oil would make me pass out. Yet, I can appreciate the sentiment if I picture something like that cold Mountain Dew after football practice, or that moment you fall into the most comfortable bed on earth after a long day.

The psalmist employs such an image to celebrate what life together can be when centered in, fostered by, and sustained through the Spirit of God. Anointing has always been a symbol to acknowledge, recognize, or call upon the transformational presence of God; to signify the hospitality of God's people, the power behind the love of God for God's people and their love for one another in the presence of God. From the setting apart of Israel's kings; to prayers for a newly born infant; to ordination to service for God's people; to the faithful gathered around the sick in prayer; and from the frugality of a Presbyterian single drop to the exorbitant pour from an alabaster jar by the woman in Bethany over the head of our Lord; in all of these moments, we are reminded of

the essential nature of God's presence in life and life together. How many of you grew up reciting the 23rd Psalm – "You anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows."

While I may be hesitant in regard to the *icky factor* of the oil here, I can appreciate the sentiment of the psalmist. Remember that a good portion of Israel is an arid climate, and the oil soothes the skin like your favorite hand cream in winter, healing skin that is cracked and broken. The psalmist is highlighting the exorbitant presence of God's love that soothes tired spirits and heals the cracks in parched relationships. As it is eloquently expressed in 1 John 4 - "God is love and those who abide in love, abide in God, and God abides in them." There is no greater joy.

Remembering the hospitality of my friend Donnie and what his knock on the door of our gnarly trailer signified --- It was he who welcomed this introvert into his circle of friends, introduced me to coaches and classmates, dragged me to those awkward adolescent social encounters, overcoming my social reticence. It was he who invited me to go with him to the organizational meeting of a youth group that would have a profound impact on my journey of faith and calling in life. And it all started with a knock on the door.



"How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!" Michael Lindvall wrote, "Our basic nature was formed in relationship and is relationship. Our humanness is drastically misunderstood by defining 'person' simply in terms of what goes on inside of us - as if that interior were not shaped by a whole lifetime of 'exterior' relationships. As the Scottish philosopher John MacMurray phrased it: 'I need *you* in order to be myself.'" (Michael Lindvall, *The Christian Life*)

God, how I have missed you these last 13 months. What a joy it is to see faces today. How grateful I am that technology allows us to be together when we remain apart, and even allows us to open the door to new friendships, extending the reach of the community we share in Christ. Oh, how grateful I am that we can begin to be together in this sacred space. How grateful I am that the presence of our Lord and the selfless love of Christ create a kinship among us that cannot be replicated or manufactured or known anywhere else as it is known in the fellowship, the kinship of faith.

"How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity! It is like the precious oil on the head, running down upon the

beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down over the collar of his robes

... For there the Lord ordained his blessing, life forevermore. Amen.