

“The Joy of Family Peace”
Preached at Home Heights Presbyterian Church
August 14, 2005
The 20th Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year A

When Anne Johnson was ordained in this sanctuary several years ago, I carefully anointed her with oil. The oil I was using was not Wesson oil that you can get for pennies an ounce at Schnuck’s. This was oil that I paid \$5.00 a quarter-ounce for at Cokesbury. I got just a little bit on my thumb and made the sign of a small cross on her forehead. I was careful not to get any on her hair or create a drip that would run into her eyes or down her nose.

How different is that picture from the one painted by Psalm 133. Psalm 133 celebrates the joy of living in peace with those closest to you. In that situation, the psalmist declares such caution and hoarding is inappropriate. Unity between sisters and brothers evokes the image of so much valuable oil that when it is put on the head, it runs down the front ~ onto the beard ~ and it runs down the back ~ onto the very special robes of the high priest.

Psalm 133 is one of the most riotous, exuberantly happy psalms in the Bible!
After stating its theme :

How wonderful it is when kinfolk get along well,
it goes on to give some delightful images of just how wonderful this is. Kinfolk living together without fighting is like the abundance of a scarce commodity poured out in joy upon the most dignified member of the community.

When brothers and sisters live together without hatred, it is like being showered with the life-giving waters where God lives. Our unity is an example of the abundant eternal life God chooses to give us. The extravagance of God leaves us heaving with laughter and joy. After we ~ like Joseph’s brothers ~ get over our astonishment at the sheer wonder of it.

Even though this is the time in the lectionary when the Old and New Testaments are not tied together, the gospel reading carries the seed of the same astonishing extravagance.

This passage from Matthew, which he adapted from the same story in Mark, is unique in the gospels. While from the earliest days of the church, Christians have insisted that Jesus was fully human, nowhere is his humanity more evident than here.

As I mentioned last week, Matthew is not writing a psychological analysis of Jesus and his work. However, there is some amazing psychology going on here. In the end of his encounter with this brazen, pushy, determined foreign woman, Jesus is profoundly and irrevocably changed. He leaves home with one understanding of himself and his ministry and returns with a completely new vision of who he is and what he is about. Because a woman of faith insists that he broaden his outlook.

Jesus goes into the district of Tyre as a good Jewish boy, knowing that God is particularly concerned with God’s relationship with the Jewish people. He returns to the Jews with the world-shattering knowledge that God is particularly concerned with God’s relationship with *all* people ~ regardless of whether they are Jewish or those ancient heathens, the Canaanites. The change could not be more profound ~ even for us. For we

are directly affected by this change, because, unless I'm very mistaken few people in this room were born Jewish. After his encounter in Tyre, Jesus is no longer simply concerned that Jews enjoy the relationship with God which God intends. Leaving Tyre Jesus now understands that his task is to invite *all* peoples into this loving relationship with God ~ and with one another.

At first Jesus didn't realize it, but the Canaanite woman was asking him, "Who are your kinfolk?" The answer, Jesus discovers, is all of God's children are my kin, my sisters and brothers. And my life will be abundantly rich only when I am in good relationship with each of them. Jesus knew Psalm 133. Now he knew that it included more than just the descendants of Abraham ~ Psalm 133 is a description of how life is to be lived with and by all peoples.

I am currently participating in a group which has made real for me the joy that comes from living together in the unity Psalm 133 celebrates. In July I was part of the tenth exchange between the presbytery's Latin America Action Team and Nicaraguans. The on-going and emerging relationship between the churches of Giddings-Lovejoy and the peasant community of Plan Grande Dos is a beautiful demonstration of how just good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity. And I want you here in Home Heights, who have been so supportive of this partnership, to know a little more about the relationship you have helped create.

In the late 90's a group at First Presbyterian of St. Louis, with the leadership of Kelly Allen, began exploring issues in Latin America. At the same time Kathie Sherman, a member at that time of Second Presbyterian, was adopting children from Nicaragua and Bolivia. After Hurricane Mitch in 1998, Kelly and Kathie joined forces to put together a delegation to Central America to construct homes for people who lost everything but their lives in the flooding. Through the Presbyterian Disaster Assistance program in Louisville they were put in contact with Church World Service which was coordinating the construction. Church World Service, in turn, was working with CEPAD, a Nicaraguan organization of Protestant and Pentecostal churches with an excellent track record in working with local Nicaraguan communities. CEPAD is also a mission partner with the PC(USA).

In July 2000 twenty-three members of the Presbytery of Giddings-Lovejoy went to northern Nicaragua and spent five days working on a 21-house building project. While we were there we learned that CEPAD was sponsoring partner relationships between North American churches and communities CEPAD works with. We raised immediately our hands and said, "We want to partner with Plan Grande Dos."

The first year we went to Nicaragua to build houses. For the past five years we have gone to Nicaragua to build relationships. And I'm here to tell you that four days of working on relationships is more exhausting than five days of working on houses! But, oh, is it rewarding!!

One of the things we noticed that very first year was the beauty of the children ~ and there were children everywhere. And they are so responsive to any attention we gave them. But we also noticed something disturbing. Even though there is "free" public education for the first six years, we saw many school-age children at home during the

school day. We asked, “Why?” and were told that their families could not afford to buy the required school uniform and school supplies ~ about \$35 a year for each child. Our American can-do spirit leaped into action and we said, “We’ll pay the \$35.”

CEPAD stepped in and said, “Wait a minute. Before you just write checks, you need to allow the community to decide if they want your handout.” Some of our members were frustrated, but we understood that to simply throw money around was disrespectful of the residents of Plan Grande Dos. It would be paternalistic, treating them like little children who could not provide for themselves. Paternalism is not a basis for an adult relationship. Paternalism does not yield the joy described in Psalm 133.

So, we shared our desire to help educate the children with the Plan Grande Dos leadership. Because of the many communication challenges of working in two languages and a country with very little infrastructure, it took several years to come up with a partnership plan to improve the educational opportunities for the children of Plan Grande Dos. And the final product is very different from what we were able to imagine with our North American categories.

The Plan Grande Dos leadership decided that they were actually more concerned that children completing the sixth grade were unable to afford to attend the five year secondary school. They proposed a scholarship program that would cost about \$330 per pupil for a year of high school ~ which really begins with 7th grade. We replied that we thought we could fund ten scholarships of \$330 each the first year.

Last fall, at the last minute we put together some cards for churches with Alternative Christmas programs and raised about \$7,000 ~ enough money for two years of 10 scholarship at \$330. We sent about \$3500 to Plan Grande Dos in January of this year, in time for the February beginning of their school year.

During our trip this summer we learned more about their scholarship program. Their primary criteria for selecting students is their academic ability ~ need is not as important as the indication from their primary school work that they are interested and able to succeed in high school. Each student must submit a written application and both the student and their parents must sign a form that they will do everything they can to meet the requirements of the program. Twenty students were chosen for the first year. That’s right, twenty. It seems the leadership committee also decided that each family should pay half of the costs. That obviously calls for a deeper commitment on the part of the family and student and it allows more students to participate.

Can you imagine our joy in meeting thirteen of our scholarship students in July? All but one are in their first year ~ seventh grade ~ and most of them are 16 and 17. Only one is 13 ~ our expected age for seventh grade. They are such a fine group of young men and women. They are so eager to learn and so grateful for the small part we ~ you and I ~ are playing.

Let me tell you about Omar. Omar was 10 when we first visited Plan Grande Dos. He was a standout then ~ I think we all took pictures of him. He has a beautiful singing voice and a wonderful smile. We would see him around the hacienda where we ate and slept and at the work site when school let out. Last year, I’m told, Omar was not in Plan Grande Dos. He was no longer in school and his family had moved in search of work. This year he was back, living with his grandmother who was too ill during our visit to leave their house. She did not see Omar much during our visit because he was at the

hacienda soon after we awoke and rarely left until our lights went out at 10. And for three days of the week we were there he was up at 4 to catch his bus to go to high school. When he got home he was back over at the hacienda to help with the bible school we offered those days.

Omar is now a member of the Plan Grande Dos leadership team, representing the scholarship students. During bible school he coordinated other scholarship students to assist us. This was my first time to see the bible school, but the veterans assured me that, because of the work Omar and the scholarship students did, it went much much smoother than in years past. He has extraordinary gifts for leadership and he told another member of our delegation that he would like to be an engineer or an entrepreneur.

One night Omar was with a few of us upstairs in the hacienda preparing for the next day's bible school. He wanted us to know that he was going to school for us. We just melted. And we assured him that we were doing this for him ~ for his future, the future of his community, for our future.

What a gift of God to have the privilege of offering this young man the opportunity of an education. What a joy it is to participate in partnership with his community. For, neither we nor they could do this alone.

How good and pleasant it is
when kindred live together in unity!

Thank you, Home Heights Presbyterian Church, for the many ways you have supported this partnership. Thanks be to God for the joy of partnering with sisters and brothers to live together in unity!

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