

“Like Oil and Dew”

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¹*How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!*

²*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.*

³*It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion. For there the LORD ordained his blessing, life forevermore. (Psalm 133)*

This short psalm is part of a larger grouping of psalms known as the “Songs of Ascent,” or the “Pilgrimage Psalms.” It is believed that these verses were sung or recited as groups of people traveled together toward Jerusalem, walking the hilly path up to the Jewish Temple for a religious festival or celebration. If we wanted to bring this into a more contemporary perspective, we might say Psalm 133 is like a song that would be on the Spotify playlist for a family vacation – something that would have a place in the curated compilation of tunes that help set the mood for our travel as we roll merrily down the holiday road together. *“How very good it is,”* that happy family sings. *“How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!”*

Of course, any family that has ever traveled long distances understand that the good and pleasant parts -- the kindred living together in unity parts – are fragile, and often fleeting. As the comedian Ray Romano once said, “Traveling with kids is like being in a frat party. Nobody sleeps, everything’s broken, and there’s a lot of throwing up.”

But it would be misguided and wrong just to blame the kids, because we adults can be every bit as cranky and difficult when we are traveling... especially when the AC quits working, and we start getting hungry, and then we hit the traffic around Baltimore or DC... and the very last thing we are feeling is kindred love and unity.

One of the things I love about this little psalm is that it does not deny these very human and common difficulties. Note that the psalmist does not say, “Isn’t it great that we always get along? Isn’t it wonderful that we can travel great distances together and never utter a cross word?” No, this is a psalm written by a realist, a well-seasoned traveler who knows what it’s like to be crammed into the backseat of a 1984 Caprice Classic station wagon – you know, the fold-up seat in the way back that faced backwards. This poet knows that, when human beings are traveling together on the roads of life, those times when all the tensions and squabbles fall away, and everyone is content, and everything really is peaceful, gentle, and beautiful – those times are exceedingly rare and precious. *“How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!”*

To drive the point home, the poet employs two memorable metaphors, both of which involve liquid. That makes a lot of sense when we imagine what a pilgrimage to Jerusalem might be like. The warm season in Israel is long, and the days are hot and dry. Much of the terrain around Jerusalem is sandy and rocky, especially to the south, and the wind easily picks up the fine dust of the desert and whips it around. It can be brutal on the skin, which gets parched and brittle in those long walks in the sun.



So, the psalmist's poem employs refreshing metaphors that tired and dusty travelers would really appreciate. The first is oil. When we are loving one another and getting along with one another, the psalmist writes, "*It is like the precious oil on the head, running down upon the beard of Aaron.*" At the end of a long hot day of travel, what could feel better than rubbing cool, aromatic, moisturizing oil on the skin?

The reference is an allusion to the ritual anointing of Aaron as high priest in the book of Exodus, but it invokes a sensory response to which everyone can relate. While the liquid nature of the oil soothes and moisturizes the skin, its aroma can have a calming effect on an entire room. Essential oils are known to boost our mood and "promote feelings of happiness and well-being." Inhaling their scent "can create a sense of calm and clarity, improving concentration, focus, and overall cognitive function."¹

And that is indeed how we feel, isn't it, when we are getting along with one another, appreciating one another, valuing one another. When we have gone through periods of strain and struggle, when we have not been getting on well with those around us, you learn to appreciate the contrasting ease and comfort when things start to click. It is like a soothing balm to the spirit, like a pleasing and gentle aroma has cleansed the room. It makes us want to pause in that blessing and breathe it all in deeply.

The second metaphor has a similar effect. When kindred are living together in unity, when the vibe around us is loving and gentle, it is, the psalmist writes, "*like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion.*" Along the dry, hot, and dusty road to Jerusalem, the image of cool drops of dew on a high, grassy meadow sound so appealing and refreshing. When I was in high school my Scout troop went on a winter camping trip to Mount Mitchell, which is the highest peak east of the Mississippi. It was January, and it was so cold we couldn't get our tent pegs into the frozen ground. But what I remember most about that trip was the spring where we got our water. It was a pipe coming out of the side of the mountain, and the entire area above and below the pipe was covered with white stalactites of frozen water. It was a miracle of God's creation that the water was still flowing from the pipe, and it was the clearest, freshest water I have ever had. And there have been times when I have been out in extreme heat, mowing a lawn or hiking a trail, and my mind turns to that spring up on Mount Mitchell, because its cool and refreshing water was just what I needed in the dry, hot exhaustion I was feeling at that moment.

That is the sensation this psalm seeks to invoke. It speaks to people who have endured struggle, conflict, and intense heat to help them realize how rare and precious it is when times are good and all is right with the world. It is a reminder that, when we are lucky enough to find ourselves in a calm pocket of peace and loving kindness, those are moments to be savored, appreciated, and held onto as long as possible.

Last Saturday night I found myself in one of those moments. I had the pleasure of helping our own Terri Champion host a reading of her new novel, and one of the selections she read at the gathering was my favorite part of the book. The main character Cassie is a student at Our Lady of Perpetual Sorrow Catholic grade school. At the beginning of the school year, a nun who was new to the convent had been given charge of the seventh-grade class. At first glance, Cassie didn't think Sister Ursula looked like a nun. She looked "more like a movie star playing a nun." Even so, she was an old-school, no-nonsense member of her religious order, and she ran a tight ship in her classroom.

¹ "Boost Your Mood: The Magic Of Uplifting Essential Oils," <https://www.purodem.com>, January 27, 2024.

One warm afternoon in late September, after a particularly strenuous recess period, Sister Ursula positioned herself in the classroom doorway in a way so that the girls in the class would be forced to squeeze by her as they entered. After everyone had entered, the nun went to the front of the room, turned, and hissed with obvious annoyance, "Do I have to get in the shower with each and every one of you and show you how to clean yourselves?"

Striding down the aisle between the desks, she continued haughtily. "Sit-down baths are unsanitary, as you are merely soaking in a pool of your own filth." The tension in the room was palpable. Everyone sat perfectly still. The only sound was a single chair pushing back, a set of soft footsteps, and the classroom door opening and quickly closing again. Cassie did not turn around, but she knew who had left the room. Ellen Boyle, who came from a large family that was not well off, had a reputation for not bathing regularly. The rumor was that their house didn't even have running water. Ellen had been assigned to the desk at the back corner of the class, closest to the window, and everyone knew why.

When the door closed, Sister Ursula stopped, turned with a smug smile, and barked a simple order. "Everyone, raise your hand!" When the class complied, she continued. "Now turn your head toward your raised arm and sniff deeply."

Cassie didn't know whether to laugh or cry. But when Sister Ursula held up a can of Right Guard deodorant as a prop, it was clear that the lesson had slipped over the line into a cruel kind of humiliation.

The hygiene humiliation went on for a while, until one of the senior nuns, Sister Michael, knocked on the classroom door and entered without waiting for an invitation. She had her arm around Ellen Boyle. "This child..." Sister Michael began.

"... was instructed to go to the lavatory to wash," Ursula interrupted.

Sister Micheal, undeterred, began again with more anger -- and volume. "This child was standing in the hallway *crying*." Ellen, who was already cowered, shrank into herself even farther.

Sister Ursula, unrepentant, brought her hand to her face to cover her nose and took a step backwards. "Clearly, Ellen," she snooted, "you have not followed instructions." With that, Ellen ran crying out of the room for the second time.

Ursula, who was now left standing alone before Sister Michael, sensed that she was very much in range of the elder nun's arm span. It was clear from Sister Michael's clenched fist that she knew that, too. Shifting out of the line of fire, Ursula defiantly announced to the room, "She is a health hazard."

As the two nuns stared each other down, Sister Michael announced "I am going to borrow Mary Lanza for a short while, Sister." Mary was the only girl in the class who related to poor Ellen Boyle as if she were a normal person. She was Ellen's best friend.

As Mary joined Sister Michael at the door, the nun warmly put her arm around her and led her into the hall. "We will hold off on changing classes for thirty minutes," Sister Michael said through the closing door. "Actually, make it an hour." Higher rank was clearly being pulled. As the door pulled shut, Sister Ursula could hear the parting words. "I will send a boy to let you know when you can send these girls to my class."

After a tense pause, Ursula marched back to her desk, slammed open a drawer, pulled out a can of Lysol, and flamboyantly sprayed the area where Ellen and Sister Michael had stood. "I want you girls to write a list of all the products you use to clean yourself," she

growled. "Tell me how you use it, how many times a day and when. This was an unpleasant occurrence for everyone. Let's not have it happen again."

A hand instantly shot up. "But Sister," one girl said.

"There will be no discussion on this matter," Sister Ursula replied.

Another girl bravely spoke up. "She doesn't have water, Sister."

"That is neither mine nor your problem, Christine," Ursula said haughtily. "All you or I can do for her is set an example. Continue working in silence until one of Sister Michael's boys comes with a message."

I'll pick up here, reading directly from the chapter:

When we went into Sister Michael's classroom seventy-five minutes later, Mary and Ellen were already seated in the center of the room, writing in their notebooks. Ellen had on a clean white blouse and black skirt. Her hair was damp, her face calm and glowing. She was sitting upright, her head gently tilted towards her right shoulder, a hint of a smile on her face as she focused on her notebook, her left hand moving gracefully across the page.

Mary had hooked her hair behind her ears, which were large for her head. This slight adjustment gave her an overall pointy and other-worldly appearance. She seemed a tad older and wiser, as if she had been on a journey or taken part in a ritual of a foreign country. Sister Michael was at the board, whistling and bouncing, diagramming an elaborate sentence from Life magazine. There was a scent of Ivory soap and Breck shampoo in the air.

We entered the room with tentativeness – slowly and mindful of our footing as if we were going to the altar to receive Communion. But this was more than ceremony. There was mysticism in the air! A living circuit of light was coursing between these three females. As I sat down at my desk, I felt a strange fluttering in my ribcage, which I could only identify as a cleansing in my soul brought on by the exposure to the holy joyousness in the room. It was evident that something magical and powerful had transpired. However, what actually did take place was simple: Sister Michael had taken Ellen to the convent for a shower and a change into clean clothes. Mary helped.

But that was never stated or discussed, so we all made up our own version of the event. It was the unknown, the unwritten chapter we filled in with what we surmised and pictured happening – nakedness, water, showering in a sacred place – and everything in between, before the ending, where Ellen was clean and Sister Ursula had soiled her own allure.

How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity! In just three short verses, Psalm 133 recognizes that the world can be a dirty, unpleasant place. There is much about life that is not right, not fair, not easy. But every now and then, in the good world that God created, among people who are broken and flawed, but still somehow bearing the very image of God, we enter into a place that is fragrant, clean, happy, and holy... when we find peace and unity. When that happens, the psalm reminds us to cherish it, hold onto the memory of it, and work, as best we can, to make moments like that... because those moments are like refreshing oil on parched skin... like pure morning dew that makes the whole world feel new. **Amen.**