

### **Psalm 133**

A Song of Ascents.

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.

It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion.

For there the Lord ordained his blessing, life for evermore.

### **“Do We Render to the Common Good Eternal Greatness?”**

**Rev. Charles Schuster**

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A little background on the Psalm, it's Psalm 133. It's a post-exilic psalm, a psalm written as a song, as a part of the worship service for the people of Israel, and you'll see in the psalm a reflection of how the rain hits on one mountain and then another mountain, that is a statement that says, “We look forward to the time that the Israel of the north and the Israel of the south will recognize their unity.” The butterfly effect, where it affects one it affects all, it affects both. That's a clarification. I think it makes this a little more understandable. Psalm 133. “Behold how good and pleasant it is when brothers and sisters dwell in unity. It is like the precious oil upon the head running down upon the beard upon the head of Aaron, turning down on the collar of his robes. It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion. For there the Lord has commanded the blessing, blessing life forevermore.” And that was the day they hoped for.

Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*. What does he think about Christianity? “This doctrine should be looked upon as one of the greatest intellectual discoveries in the history of religions. The essence of Christianity is the appeal to the life of Christ as a revelation of the nature of God and of God's agency in the world. There can be no doubt as to what the elements in that record have evoked a response from all that is best in human nature, the mother, the child, the bare manger, the lowly man, homeless and self-forgetful, with his message of peace and love and sympathy and suffering and agony. The tender words as life ebbed, the final despair, and the whole authority with the authority of a supreme victory. I need not elaborate. Can there be any doubt that the power of Christianity lies in its revelation, in act, of that which Plato divined in theory?”

I haven't always had a good relationship with the bishops, and now that we're getting a new one, I'm going to try to stay away from her as long as possible, as far as I can get. And I haven't had a good relationship with most of the district superintendents either. I said to one of them once, “I want you to know that I've always had issues with authority, and I really don't like bishops or district superintendents.” At that time my district superintendent was a woman, Carrie Benedict Farmer, and she looked at me and said, “I'm interested to know that, and I want you to know that I've never been particularly fond of sixty-year-old white males.” She told the truth, she wasn't. The last bishop I got along with was Mel Wheatley. I remember two things about him. First of all, he put me in the most difficult church I ever served, in Boulder. And secondly, I remember a sermon he preached, that he began with a story. He saw a bumper sticker, it was on a pickup

truck, and it said, "I have decided to follow Jesus." And Bishop Wheatley pondered, "Did you ever wonder where the person ended up who had decided to follow the person who had decided to follow Jesus?"

An intriguing question. In some ways, that is my lot in life. I was a student who studied under two professors who had decided to follow the thinking of Alfred North Whitehead. Both of them followed Whitehead and became process theologians. Both received their doctorates from Harvard, and Whitehead was their mentor. Charles Milligan, one of the most brilliant thinkers I have ever met in my life, taught Philosophy of Religion at Iliff. I told Dr. Milligan a few years ago I'd gotten myself in lots of trouble in the churches I have served because of the ideas he taught us at Iliff. He looked at me and said, "Good, that means I've been doing my job."

Harvey Potoff was a great teacher, and unlike many seminary professors, he had church experience. He served Christ United Methodist Church for seventeen years in Denver before he studied with Whitehead. He loved to be around people, and if you took a class to Dr. Potoff, toward the end of the afternoon or early evening he'd invariably invite you to dinner, which was a learning experience always. The last year he was at Iliff, he and I taught a class together. He spoke about his relationships in the church, and how he maintained those friendships during all the years. I asked him once, "Do you ever think your continued involvement in the lives of people at Christ Church, and the lives of all your students from the past, might create a problem of transference, where you become like an authority, a parent, and they have trouble with that? Maybe even it could perhaps ruin them?" He looked at me and said, "Martin Buber said all life is meeting, and the most important thing in life is relationship." And then he looked through me and he said, "Your question reflects a model of ministry that is clinical and cold. You need to rethink that." I will always be grateful to those two, and will try to remember that being a theologian in residence in a church is supposed to get you in trouble, and ministry must never be cold and clinical.

I am one who decided to follow those who have decided to follow Alfred North Whitehead, and today I reflect with you, what did Whitehead himself follow? What were the influences he followed, and how did they inform his life? I followed those who followed him. You can decide for yourself if you will follow me.

Whitehead's influences included, he followed the logic of his mind. His father was an Anglican priest, and unlike most clergy of that day, his father believed in the importance of reason. And Whitehead became a mathematician, wrote books on mathematics. He followed the logic of his mind because he saw patterns in the world. Wherever he looked, he saw logic and structure. Not clearly, and not absolutely, but logic and structure, he saw it. It was Albert Einstein who said, and Whitehead would have agreed, that the human mind is not capable of grasping the universe, that we are like a child entering a library, different languages, that someone wrote the books, but the child does not know who or how, the child does not understand the languages in which they are written, but a child notes a definite plan in the arrangement of the books. There is a mysterious order. The child does not comprehend it, but only dimly suspects it. We also dimly suspect the order.

I don't think we can look at a starry starry night, and not wonder what is behind it all. We cannot contemplate the birth of a child and be immune to the wonder of creation. We cannot grasp the function of the human body and fail to see the miracle that's so close and within us. We cannot behold the view from the Hubble telescope and be indifferent to what we see. Do we understand it all? Of course not. But there is order, that is cosmic, and a higher law, there is pattern and logic and we can see the logic but we do not altogether understand it.

Children's letters to God reflect a logic of the mind. Donna writes, "Dear God, in school we learned that Thomas Edison made light, but in Sunday School they said that you did it. I'll bet he stole your ideas." Norma writes, "Dear God, did you mean for the giraffe to look like that, or was that an accident?" One person speculated on the subject of creation. "After creating a period of night and day, an angel asked God, "What are we going to do now?" And God said, "Well, I guess we'll just call it a day." It is true that to study the ultimate requires the infinite and we are finite. It is true what Edward Arlington Robinson wrote, that the world is a kind of spiritual kindergarten where bewildered infants try to spell the word God with the wrong blocks. But Whitehead believed that there is order. The birth of creation. He believed that creative order is still at work. "It's a tangible fact," he said, "that the dawn of finite existence, it's a complex system, we don't understand it but we can see it, and God is in it. There is process."

We can only see it dimly but it is there. There is a machinery of motion, there is the logic of the mind and the path to grasp it. The structure of reality is evolving, and God is the binding element in the world, he said. God is in the world, continually creating in us and around us. The creative principle, he said, is everywhere. The Psalmist saw it. The union of Israel and Judah together. In the butterfly effect. It rains on Mount Hermon, it rains on Zion. How good and how very pleasant it is when we live together in unity. It is like the dew of Hermon as it falls on the mountains of Zion, for God has ordained a blessing of life forevermore. There is something compelling about the order of the universe, but it is so distant. It is so far removed from us, and it seems to move in its own will and way, and we are awed by it, but how do we enter into it? We do not altogether comprehend it and we wonder what responsibility we have for it.

Whitehead followed the logic of his mind, and he found God in the subtle order of the evolving universe, but it was not sufficient. In fact, he thought it was sterile and cold. And there was a period in his life when he became agnostic. His formulas didn't add up. It was probably the marriage that opened him up to other things, as it does for most of us. He thought about life, and with the formulas and the distance, he thought it was pretty empty, and their son was killed in the war, at the very end of the war, and Whitehead gave up on reason alone, the logic of the mind. And he began to follow something else. He began to follow the language of the heart. He began to speak less about the cosmic quality of God and began to think about the personal aspect of faith. He began to be suspicious of formulas. He said, "Wherever there is a creed, there is a heretic around, or in the grave." He said, "God is the great companion, the fellow sufferer who understands." He said, "Religion is what we do in our own solitariness." He said, "The power of God is the worship God inspires," and the Christian faith was his expression of

it. The essence of Christianity appealed to him. It's the love of Christ, and there is no doubt as to the elements recorded therein. You see the mother, you see the child, he said, you see the lowly man. You see him homeless and you see him self-forgetful and you hear his message of peace and sympathy, and you see the suffering and the agony, you hear the tender words as his life ebbed, and you know the final despair. But then you see the ultimate supreme victory. "Can there be any doubt about the power of that message?" he said. The language of the heart. And the psalmist speaks, it's like precious oil on the head running on the beard of Aaron, running down over the collar of his robes. It's the language of the heart.

Pearl Bailey was right when she said, "What the world needs now is more love and less paperwork." Von Kincade, she did a loving thing when she pointed out to her husband that her friend Bea had pointed out to her husband to cook and run a vacuum cleaner and sew and do the laundry, because, she said, if anything ever happened to Bea, Frank would be able to care for himself. And then she said to her husband, "What would you do if anything happened to me?" And he considered the possibility for a minute, and he said, "I'd move in with Frank."

After the worship service last Sunday, Lisa Novak, who is one of our singers today in the adult choir, she said she had it figured out. She had this piece of paper, and there were all these little dots on the piece of paper, and they were all interconnected with lines, and she began to explain how it is that we influence people we don't even know. And people have influence on us, and we don't even see them. She went on to say that it's a network, it's a web, and we don't even realize it, but we are all connected. That's process theology. African theologian John Mubutu, he speaks of global spirituality in the Ubuntu principle that says "I am because we are." That's the language of the heart, it's the matrix of life. It's the web. And in that Whitehead found God. The oil on Aaron's head drips on Aaron's collar. We take our sadness and convert it to the gladness of someone else.

Today will mark our last time to have Lou Larsen with us. Lou, we're going to miss you. We're going to miss you a lot. He'll be moving back to Chicago where he came from. A year and a half ago, some time ago, his wife Marge died, and the two of them sang in our choir. It would be honest to say that Lou's grief was hard. He would easily speak of Marge's life and would tell you how he held her hand at the very end. And when the sadness was at its greatest, Lou said the thing that helped him most was when he went back to Chicago and he met with all of his friends back there who had gone through the same thing. He said, They know what I feel, they've experienced what I've experienced." And I asked Lou if he would help us start a grief support group here at the church, and Lou agreed. Here is a man who took his sadness and allowed us to develop a place where people could come and express their sadness. And we meet every Tuesday at four o'clock in the afternoon, and we will meet this week, in honor of the man who was willing to allow his grief to be a catalyst for others to share theirs.

It is the language of the heart. It says we are one together, we are not apart. And we take our low points and unite with each other, and we find in that the love of God. We take our grief and find a gift and give it to someone else who needs it. We take our rage and

apply it to a problem that's what's wrong with the world, to try and make it right. That there are people who are hurting, we become a healer. There are people who are lost, we become a mentor. We let our heartache become a catalyst to cure a hurt wherever we can.

Did you see the 41-year-old Olympic swimmer Dara Torres from the United States on Friday night? Did you see how she refused to swim? A swimmer who refused to swim? Did you notice how she stopped the whole race because the swimmer who was to swim beside her, her bathing suit ripped, and she was putting on a new one, and hadn't gotten into the race? Dara Torres made them wait. "Outside the pool, they are my friends. Inside the pool, they are competitors," she said. That's the language of the heart. It's not zero-based, in which the more you give, the less you have. It is eternity-based. The more you give, the more you have to give. It's infinity-based, it defies gravity. You win because you care, and you get and you give away, and you get more. The language of the heart takes us places we would never go. It opens our eyes to things we would never see. It opens our ears to even the still, small voice.

Whitehead followed the language of his heart. At the end of his life, it all added up. At first the logic of his mind, and then the language of his heart, and finally he followed the luring of his dream. In London, at Trinity College, he had to make a choice. There was a faculty colleague who was going to be fired. Whitehead could have said nothing about this, his job was secure. He disagreed with the administration, and he spoke up, and he too lost his job. Harvard wanted him to come teach theology, at age 63, a job change, a shift in focus. A new direction. A dream fulfilled. He followed his dream.

Let me tell you a story about two mountain boys, hill people, like where I'm from. The two of them, they spotted a bobcat up in the tree and decided to have some fun. One said, "I'm going to climb up in the tree and I'm going to chase him down, and you catch him there and put him in that gunny sack we brought." The other fellow agreed, and so the fellow shinnied up the tree, and when he got close, he started shaking the limb, and the cat came down, and the other fellow grabbed him by the back of the neck and proceeded to try to put him into the burlap sack, and there was a terrible commotion, and there was dust and fur and skin and blood, and the fellow up in the tree said, "What's the matter, you need some help catching that little old bobcat?" The guy below said, "I don't need help catching him, right now what I need help with is turning him loose."

One of the most difficult things about process theology is what we have to turn loose to believe it. We have to turn loose the idea that God is all-powerful, that God is in control, that God does all things for us. We have to turn loose of the idea that we are passive spectators who sit back and let life come to us. We must take responsibility. We must own our role. We are part of the process. Whitehead would call us co-creators with God. "Religion can sink," he said, "into an apathetic task of daily survival. But religion is not meant to be a decent formula with which to embellish a comfortable life. The worship of God is not the rule of safety, it is an adventure of the spirit. It is a flight after the unattainable. The worship of God is the encouragement of the high hope of adventure. It's a commanding vision. It is the adventurous element in the universe," he said. God saves the world, God is the poet of the world in this respect, because God leads the world

with tender patience and with God's vision of beauty and truth and goodness. But we have to respond to the lure of the dream. In the luring of the dream, to render clear to popular understanding. Some degree of eternal greatness incarnate in the passage of temporal fact.

There is a member of our church who told us last December, he said, "I believe we can do some things that reflect eternal greatness here," he said, "because I believe this church is one that understands good is not good enough, and I'm willing to invest \$50,000 in 2008 so this church can do it," and he did. And you see the greatness that's emerging here, the way we have supported the Crossroads Safe House, and the Kids' Closet, and the library, and the adult program, and the choir, and the classes for fifth and sixth graders, the Club 56 program, and all the other things that we are doing that we wouldn't be able to do, we are doing it, we are following the dream at the church, and each one of us. It may be just the wildcat holding onto us we've got to let go of, but there is a dream, there is a luring of the dream, it comes to everyone, and Whitehead calls that God.

Alfred North Whitehead, two professors at Iliff School of Theology, they followed him, I follow them. Whitehead was a mathematician. He wrote books on mathematical principles, he followed the logic of his mind, he followed the language of his heart, he followed the luring of his dream, and he called it God, and it added up. This mathematician, it all added up for him. Process theology, that is higher math, do you follow me?