

## Readings & Sermon

April 7, 2024: Second Sunday of Easter

Pastor Jaime Larson-McLoone

“Practicing Holy Harmony”



*One of the Bible versions I have (see first line, below) replaces the word “unity” with the word “harmony.” And I like that, because sometimes we mistake “unity” for “sameness.” Maybe life together in unity feels like that: beautiful harmonies, washing over our ears and minds and hearts. This season of Easter dares us to try and find out. –Pastor Jaime*

### Psalm 133

How good and how pleasant it is, when kindred live together in unity! It is like fine oil upon the head, flowing down upon the beard, upon the beard of Aaron, flowing down upon the collar of his robe. It is like the dew of Hermon flowing down upon the hills of Zion. For there the LORD has commanded the blessing: life forevermore.

### Second Reading: 1 John 20:19-31

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life - this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us - we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

### **Gospel: John 20:18-31**

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jewish authorities, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

### **Sermon by Pastor Jaime Larson-McLoone “Practicing Holy Harmony”**

How good and how pleasant it is, when kindred live together in unity! How good and pleasant is it? Well, our psalm says it’s like fine olive oil, poured on Aaron’s head, flowing down into his beard and onto the collar of his robe. That’s what it’s like when God’s people live together in unity.

That’s the example you were all thinking of, right?

If you’re an ancient Israelite, maybe that’s what it does feel like. Maybe it feels like the sacredness of that moment when Moses anointed Aaron as high priest. Or the refreshment of oil poured over your dry, dusty hair and skin after a long religious pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Or like morning dew nourishing the land in a dry season.

Or maybe God’s people living in unity is good and pleasant like listening to “Bye Bye Love” or “Wake Up, Little Susie.” One of the Bible versions I have replaces that word “unity” with the word “harmony.” And I like that, because sometimes we mistake “unity” for “sameness.”

How good and how pleasant it is, when God’s people live together in harmony!

Some of you know that I listen to music in the car on Sunday mornings. And I sing along. When I get to Bethel, I usually haven’t talked to anyone yet, so singing in the car gets my voice ready for worship. One of the playlists I like to listen to is called 50s Dance Party Essentials. It’s filled with songs we listened to in the car when I was a kid, songs I know by heart. And last Sunday, “Bye Bye Love” got me

thinking about the Everly Brothers - and harmony, the kind of unity - or harmony - in which God calls us to live.

In 2013, two more modern singers released an Everly Brothers tribute album called “Foreverly.” Not long after that, Phil Everly died, and one of those singers, Norah Jones, said this: “The high harmonies Phil sang were fluid and so beautiful and always sound effortless in a way that just washes over the listener.”

Maybe life together in unity feels like that: beautiful harmonies, washing over our ears and minds and hearts.

This season of Easter dares us to try it and find out. To let the resurrection change us - not just change our understanding of death, but change the way we live. To let the Spirit guide us into the life together that God has intended from the start.

That’s the bold life together that the early church is trying to live out in the book of Acts. They are practicing radical generosity - not holding tightly to their possessions but sharing with those in need. Sometimes, people are even selling homes and property so that they can better care for one another. Our scripture suggests everyone is selling everything they own. But another way of translating that verse is that from time to time people would sell their homes and property.

Either way, this community doesn’t just talk about generosity. They live generously, so that everyone is cared for, so that everyone has enough.

Maybe life together in harmony looks like that: Everyone having enough. Satisfying meals, meaningful work, safe places to live. Maybe life together in harmony feels like no more anxiety about feeding your family. No more worry about medical bills. No aching backs, hunched over in shame.

It seems like an impossible dream, right? But that life together in harmony is the life God intends for us. For all of us.

And that means it’s not impossible. But it’s not easy, either.

For many of us, just singing in harmony is difficult. I can't do it. You'll always hear me singing the melody, just an octave lower. Living in harmony is even harder. For the Everly Brothers, singing in harmony may have sounded effortless. Living in harmony was not. They fought. Publicly. In 1973, Phil smashed his guitar and walked offstage, leaving Don behind to announce they had broken up.

And don't let our lesson from Acts fool you. Living in harmony wasn't effortless for the early church, either.

In the verses right after our lesson, we hear about Barnabas, who sold a field, then gave the money to the apostles to share with the community. And then we hear about Ananias and Sapphira, who also sold some property. They held back some of the proceeds for themselves - but lied to the community and said they'd donated everything.

Later the apostles will have to deal with complaints that those distributing food were favoring the local Hebrew widows over immigrant widows. The early church had to practice living in harmony. And they had help. They had the power of the Holy Spirit - the power of God that raised Jesus from the dead.

We have that same help. That same power is at work in and among us, transforming death to life, transforming our communities into places of great grace, where there is not a needy person among us.

Again, it seems impossible. Maybe not even worth trying.

In the early church and in today's church, some choose to resist the Spirit's transformative power. We reject God's dream of diverse voices singing in harmony, and we choose to all sing the same note.

And we can do that. We can all sing the same notes and still make a beautiful, joyful noise to the Lord. But you know how glorious it sounds on a Sunday morning when there's someone in the congregation who can harmonize with us.

Maybe life together in harmony sounds a little like that. The sound of some of us cooking, some singing, some praying, some visiting the sick, some caring for the poor. The sound of us telling stories, learning from one another's different experiences and worldviews and cultures. All our gifts and contributions and differences joining together to create a rich and layered song.

That early church was made up of all kinds of different people who had been gathered in Jerusalem for the Pentecost festival. Different cultures. Different languages. Different notes in the harmony of life together. All sharing the different gifts they brought to the community, so that everyone might have enough and no part would go unsung.

It's not impossible. But it's not effortless, either. It takes the Spirit's help. And it takes practice. Kind of like singing in a choir takes practice. Maybe it's not that I can't sing harmony. Maybe it's that I haven't tried. I haven't practiced. I choose the melody, because it's easy. And that's an option for all of us. We can all choose easy.

We can choose to live separately from our neighbors, gathering only behind closed doors. We can choose to live and worship and shop and play mostly with people who are mostly like us. That will still give us opportunities to care generously for one another.

But without those different voices, we will miss out on the fullness of life that God intends. We will miss out on the goodness of life in harmony. We will never know just how good and how pleasant it is, when God's people live together in harmony.

The risen Jesus calls us, and his Spirit empowers us, to practice harmony. It isn't always easy. But it is good.

**Pastor Jaime**

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