

**Life Together**, April 7, 2024, St. Timothy, Burnaby  
Acts 4.32-35; Psalm 133; 1 John 1.1 — 2.2; John 20.19-31

### *Prayer*

I was listening to the radio the other day, and there was a program on about the challenges of life on the west coast. We have probably heard programs like this a lot in recent days/week/months/years, as we hear about the housing crisis and more recently, about the rising cost of living. It is not restricted to this part of the country, if that is any consolation (though it probably isn't). But this program on the radio was looking at one particular element of the challenges on the west coast: relationships.

You may have heard the reputation greater Vancouver has in the world at large – that it is a place where it is very difficult to form relationships. This is especially true for younger people and single people looking to meet partners, but it is not restricted to that demographic.

The radio program was talking to a young woman who had spent a number of years living in the Vancouver area. She said that she no longer had any high school friends that lived nearby and she no longer had any university friends that lived nearby. For those of us for whom university or high school was a very long way off, this might not resonate in quite the same way – but I think we can probably all sympathize with her concern of people moving away (or, in some cases, moving *on*).

“How good it is for all to live together in unity.”

Just last week, I had two fairly long conversations with people that I didn't know all that well as we were talking about the housing situation in Vancouver. For the second time in a year, my family and I are facing the potential of being evicted from our housing because our landlord is selling the home we live in—and we just moved in six months ago! These two other people I was talking with were worried to hear about our situation because they realized how vulnerable they were to something similar. If they lost their current housing, they didn't know if they could find other suitable housing that they could afford.

That radio program I was listening to asked the question: how many of your friends had moved or considered moving away because of housing prices/cost of living. I won't put that question to all of you gathered here, but for those of you who own your own homes, you should know that those of us who do *not*, and can't see a way of *ever* owning our own homes in this area, the thought of moving to someplace more affordable is a *daily* consideration. Not because it's not beautiful here. Not because we don't *like* it here. But because we're not *stable* here—we're always vulnerable to the whims of a landlord and a real estate market that just seems too good to be true (for those in a position to sell).

For the woman being interviewed, her concern was not as much about housing prices and living expenses as it was on the challenge of finding and maintaining a healthy *community*. Creating and deepening a friendship is hard work—work that most of us are happy to do—but it gets exhausting when those friendships we have developed disappear with friends who move away. After we go through that a few times, it is natural to be a little more hesitant, a little more protective of our time and our hearts as we worry about losing friends again. When new people moving in meet a group of these self-protecting cautious people who are worried about getting hurt again, the cautious people don't seem friendly at all—but standoffish. And it's hard to make friends with someone who you think is standoffish. But it's hard to welcome new people when you think they might just leave you too—and it's hard to be welcoming if you don't feel like it's really *your* place that you're welcoming people to.

“How good it is for all to live together in unity.”

Having a good group of friends is an incredible blessing—and it is a rarity. But it is also an absolute necessity to a good and healthy life.

The psalm says that when people live together in unity it is like oil on Aaron's beard or the dew of Hermon on Jerusalem. That's a powerful metaphor, isn't it?

Is it?

Maybe not for us. That whole image of oil dripping down Aaron's beard onto the collar of his robe is not at all refreshing for me. It makes me think about what kind of pre-wash treatment will be necessary to get those oil stains out.

But it's likely that the “Aaron” part was added later. Just like the Jerusalem part was added later. It was probably originally just about oil on the head and the dew of Hermon. And that might not be much better—until you know that Hermon was famous for its dew in the driest parts of the year. And that oil was a common ointment on people's heads in the hot dry climate of the area. The parts about Aaron and Jerusalem were probably added later to the psalm when pilgrims would sing that psalm as they made their way *to* Jerusalem. Those additions made the psalm more specifically about the area they were headed toward and God's work there.

To understand the metaphor, imagine a really really hot dry day when you've been outside eating the dust of the road in the merciless sun, working hard or even just walking a long distance: there is nothing quite like a cool drink of water. Nothing else cuts through that dirty dryness as effectively and brings our lips and our mouths back to life. The dew of Hermon did that to the land in the hot summers. Without that early morning dew, the land would have remained parched for the entire summer.

And, when your lips are chapped and dry and burning, cracked and stinging and bleeding, there is nothing quite like soothing that cracking painfulness like a lip ointment—something to cover the cracks, stop the bleeding, and seal in whatever moisture is there. *That* was how oil was used—not just on the lips, but poured on the head to sooth scalps and faces that had become dried and cracked and sore from the unrelenting heat and dryness of the desert air.

So, like water for a thirsty ground; like oil on parched and cracked skin, so it is when everyone lives together in unity.

It is not just “nice”. Pleasant. It is *rescuing*. Life-giving. Restorative. Sustaining.

But it is also rare. Unfortunately.

For a while there, during and following the pandemic, the world *thought* that we could manage things all alone. That community was an unnecessary luxury and a danger, what with communicable diseases all around. And, for some time, those illnesses and diseases really did see a drastic decrease (and not just COVID either). We all remember the stories of the many, many people who died of COVID in hospital, unable to see or touch or even speak with their loved ones in their final moments. Such was the fear of the disease.

“How good it is for all to live together in unity [...] It is like fine oil upon the head [...] It is like the dew of Hermon.”

Humanity is re-learning the *necessity* of community. Of living together. Of getting along with one another, even when we don’t agree. It is not just a luxury. It is compulsory.

Without it, our lips are dry and cracked. Our skin is flaky and chaffed. Our fingers are rough and bleeding. We cannot go on.

There have been many models considered for *how* to live in community. People can be quick to point to the early days of the Christian church and propose a kind of Christian commune. I tried to start one myself in my younger days (but it didn’t gain traction at all). There is a meme circulating (on the internet) today that says that the problem the world has is *not* that there are not enough resources to provide for the needs of the world’s poor, but that there are not enough resources to satisfy the desires of the world’s *wealthiest*. This world our God has given us to care for *can* provide for all the people of the world—even now with this enormous population. But *only* if we can find a way to live together in harmony, sharing the resources of the world with *everyone* as they have need. And before we compare ourselves against those early Christians too harshly, it is in the very next chapter that we find out that that approach wasn’t working perfectly for those early Christians either.

“How good it is for all to live together in unity.”

The greatest asset of the *community* of St. Timothy is its ability to live in unity with one another.

In these times of uncertainty as we try to make a way forward for an Anglican presence in the city of Burnaby, let us not forget how *rare* a gift this is, and how *vital* it is to our survival—not just *as* a community, but also as individuals. We cannot live without water in the desert. If our skin is dry then even basic tasks become challenging.

Here, at St. Timothy, we already *have* a community. A community that looks out for the needs of one another, that helps to care for those in need. A community that is quick to welcome newcomers into the fold and seeks to bridge gaps when there are differences of opinion. A community that strives to live in harmony, even when that is difficult. Because that is a community that *survives*. A community that cares for one another and, like those early disciples, looks out for one another.

Jesus' disciples were gathered together in a closed room – because they were *afraid!* But they were there *together*. They had each other's back—even though they had just seen one of their own executed (and feared for their own lives as well). And, when they realized that one of their own had not been there, had missed out on something important, they were quick to bring him into the circle and keep him up to date. They were eager to provide an opportunity for Thomas to get what he had missed, just as soon as it was possible.

In that gathered community, Jesus came and stood among them. And he breathed his Holy Spirit upon them.

Jesus stands in our community as well. Even though we too might be fearful, we too might be concerned about what will happen to *us* in the future. Even though we might not comprehend how we can make it on our own – we are *not* alone. Jesus stands among us. God's Holy Spirit is among us, enlivening our community. Strengthening our bonds and helping us to care for the needs of one another. Helping us to *sustain* one another in our journey.

My friends, “How good it is for all to live together in unity.” Amen.