

## Psalm 42

<sup>1</sup>As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.

<sup>2</sup>My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God?

<sup>3</sup>My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me continually, "Where is your God?"

<sup>4</sup>These things I remember, as I pour out my soul: how I went with the throng, and led them in procession to the house of God, with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival.

<sup>5</sup>Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help

<sup>6</sup>and my God. My soul is cast down within me; therefore I remember you from the land of Jordan and of Hermon, from Mount Mizar.

<sup>7</sup>Deep calls to deep at the thunder of your cataracts; all your waves and your billows have gone over me.

<sup>8</sup>By day the LORD commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life.

<sup>9</sup>I say to God, my rock, "Why have you forgotten me? Why must I walk about mournfully because the enemy oppresses me?"

<sup>10</sup>As with a deadly wound in my body, my adversaries taunt me, while they say to me continually, "Where is your God?"

<sup>11</sup>Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.

## Galatians 3:23-29

<sup>23</sup>Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. <sup>24</sup>Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. <sup>25</sup>But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, <sup>26</sup>for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. <sup>27</sup>As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. <sup>28</sup>There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. <sup>29</sup>And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

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This sounds like Paul's "I Have a Dream" speech.

Doesn't it sound like a great vision not just for the church, but for all of humanity? It is as moving as seeing countries sitting near each other at a World Cup match, or as moving as seeing nations come together to celebrate athletes at the Olympics. Differences set aside for the sake of a competition or dialogue.

In the book "The Gospel According to U2" professor Greg Garrett tells the story of Archbishop Desmond Tutu and his teaching of the African concept ***ubuntu***.

Ubuntu means, Tutu explained, that "a person is a person through other persons. It is not, 'I think, therefore I am.' It is rather, 'I am human because I belong. I participate. I share.'"

A listener at Tutu's speech concluded that this is the most basic element of Christian practice:

"We need each other. I can't be me without you. That is the heart of what Christians mean by being the body of Christ, the church."<sup>1</sup>

The church is not the perfect body of Christ, the most well-deserved grouping of people, nor are we regularly apt to leave judgments behind when situations come up. We are just as likely to jump to conclusions, judge another by their looks or actions, cut someone off in traffic, get frustrated at life's dealings...but we are also called to be better than we might have been in any situation because we have FAITH in Christ.

We learn how to be better because we see how other Christians, in similar circumstances, handle situations and life's problems.

We are the Body of Christ because Christ chooses to show up when we have small Bible studies, when we have our Session meetings, when we gather to travel to

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<sup>1</sup> Greg Garret, *The Gospel According to U2*, pp. 64. Quoting Desmond Tutu and Samuel Lloyd.

a Health Fair even if it wasn't well advertised. Christ chooses to dwell with us and stay with us even if we might decide "it's just too hard being in community...I feel like leaving."

Paul knows that his vision of the church is partly reality, partly a **not yet** achieved prayer for "God's Kingdom Come Quickly, please!"

We have known times of unity – and I don't mean uniformity, where everyone gets along because everyone thinks alike. I mean we have known times of unity, where different people are bound together because it is God who works among us. It is this faith that God will do a new thing and bring us together.

It is Christ, says Corrie Ten Boom, who lifted her hand to greet, in the name of Christ, her persecutor in the Nazi Concentration Camp...offering forgiveness.

It is Christ who works inside us to help us let go of family disputes so we might enjoy life IN COMMUNITY.

It is Christ who brings together those across borders, sharing different stories of life to broaden our perspectives.

If it is true that in Christ there is no longer Jew or Greek...no longer God's chosen and God's unchosen...how shall we live then?

We shall live giving away our faith stories, sharing them with others who may see a good work in us. We shall live not thinking we own the only path to God, but sharing the road with others who journey towards faith, enlightenment, peace, justice and knowledge of God.

If it is true that in Christ there is no longer slave or free...no longer immigrant and native...how shall we live then?

We shall live with a more open mind and heart to fellow strangers. The Bible teaches the followers of God to remember "you were once a stranger in a strange land." We need to remember times when we were new in a new place, among people we didn't

know too well. We need to remember that it is God who brought us away from the home we knew to a new home, where new people existed with different ideas and opinions. And, that we shouldn't fear the new, we should grow and learn and appreciate the diversity God has created.

If it is true that in Christ there is no longer male AND female...no longer a gender gap...how shall we live then?

We shall live as people who appreciate the gifts and talents, no matter what form they come in. In one city a man recently joined a small church and it was found out that he worked as a financial analyst. What committee do you think they wanted to place him on?

The church said "why don't you help us with our book-keeping."

"I do that all week long, I'd rather do what I love in my spare time...bake. I want to use my other talents here."

A woman joined a different church, and what people saw on the outside was a young mother, energetic and caring. They immediately asked her to spend time in the nursery. "Honestly," she said, "I'm a stay at home mom now and what I'd really like to do is take care of your yard maintenance...it gives me some time to just be."

We all need to have our eyes adjusted sometimes from what **we** see to what **God would have us see**.

Are we drawing conclusions based upon past actions? Do we immediately look at someone new and think "Ah, they would be good at this...or that..." without considering how they see their gifts being used for God's kin-dom?

If the concept of *ubuntu* helps us, then it helps us to celebrate the great diversity found within each human being, male and female, given talents once under-appreciated in past centuries.

Men who are being celebrated on this day as fathers, who are more likely to share their feelings with their children, cry when they suffer, and be a safe harbor for them,

offering strength and also emotional support. These are the kinds of gifts which we celebrate not just in women, but in men.

“I belong, I participate, I share.” We do these things because the community is built not by those who think or act or give in the same ways...it is because we do things DIFFERENTLY that the community is enriched, alive, and filled with Christ’s empowering voice which proclaims good news to the poor and the marginalized, the stranger.

If it weren’t for the member who continually asks that we pay attention to people in need, those on the margins, we wouldn’t be Christ’s church.

If it weren’t for the member who says “we need to teach our children about worship,” we wouldn’t be Christ’s church.

If it weren’t for the member who looks at an empty pew and says “where is John today?” We wouldn’t be Christ’s church.

If it weren't for the visitor who walks in and says "I've never heard that song before...I kind of like it," we wouldn't be Christ's church.

If it weren't for the youth who go away in the summer to become a "stranger" themselves, a fish out of water, a Michigander in Chicago-land...we wouldn't be Christ's church.

If it weren't for God, making a commitment to be with us, we wouldn't be the church.

And thank God that we are the church. It is a community formed from belief, tested by experience, shared with people we might not choose to hang out with, and blessed by the gift of the Holy Spirit. This is God's church, a community of people not like-minded, but minded for Christ's mission.

In U2's song "One" they sing:

One life  
With each other  
Sisters  
Brothers  
We're one  
But we're not the same  
We get to carry each other,  
We get to carry each other

Today we will have Shepherd Training. In that training I will emphasize again that when we walk a spiritual journey with someone, and we become close to someone along a journey that may include time when we see their pain, or their frustrations or loss, this is a special time to be with someone.

It doesn't mean we are called to fix that situation, or change someone...it means we are to name the experience and share it in prayer. We comfort during those moments together. We get to "carry one another" we get to share the load for a while, the emotions, the silence and the hopes.

This is what it means to be "one" – to have faith that God is in and throughout it all, no matter the troubles sisters and brothers in Christ face.

One God creates and gives us life...

One Baptism calls us into unity...

One Christ feeds us at the table...

One community holds us accountable to be the body of Christ in the world...

It is both a now and a not yet reality.

Someday when we are all feasting at the table, sharing in God's eternal banquet, we might just be surprised at who we are sharing our meal, our time with. This is the vision, that all the ways we divide, separate and judge one another will no longer be...all will be one in God.

An Episcopal pastor shared how difficult it was to live in community just after their churches had received an announcement that the ordination of a gay Episcopal bishop in New Hampshire had taken place. A "town hall" meeting was scheduled in a northern Georgia town so the church could listen.

As J. William Harkins shares:

A "mélange of feelings created a crucible within which real dialogue would prove difficult, if not impossible. At one point during the conversation when emotions threatened to spiral out of control, a colleague stood and quoted Galatians 3:23-29. He then asked us to consider what was most important about our common faith, in light of our baptismal covenant to "respect the dignity of every human being."

Harkins said he goes back to that moment when the mood changed, when this colleagues reminder helped to restore some of the respect at speaking about a difficult issue, the ordination of someone "different," and then how respect was on the increase after being nudged by scripture to REMEMBER to focus on the people Christ calls us to be...open, loving, respectful, inclusive of those on the margins...the "strangers among us."

We are called to take seriously our baptismal vows, to love one another, strengthen one another, and be open to the guidance God provides for us in our leaders. And

believe me, your leaders here, the Elders, the Deacons, the staff are working to make this place become a fruitful body of Christ. We understand the differences and challenges that come with BEING in community. It takes practice, prayer, and openness, truly living as if we were ONE in Christ Jesus.

We are in a position to take guidance from Christ, who is forever the Head of this church. Paul asks that we have faith and live as ONE, that we are choosing not to be under the guidance of the old ways, a “disciplinarian parent” found within the Jewish law, but, as Harkins reminds, with Christ...who calls us to behave “as if we are free, trustworthy, responsible, faithfully self-differentiated people of God.”<sup>2</sup>

We find great diversity here.

Let us celebrate that, and continue to share our gifts with the world. In the name of our creative, triune God.

Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Feasting on the Word, pp. 164 (J. William Harkins)

