



ELIZABETHTOWN
CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

PRACTICING PEACE, SERVICE AND OPENNESS TO ALL

Jazz Christianity

Psalm 133

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SCRIPTURE PSALM 133
A song of ascents. Of David.

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¹*How good and pleasant it is
when God's people live together in unity!*

²*It is like precious oil poured on the head,
running down on the beard,
running down on Aaron's beard,
down on the collar of his robe.*

³*It is as if the dew of Hermon
were falling on Mount Zion.
For there the Lord bestows his blessing,
even life forevermore.*

Growing up with parents who were musicians was rarely boring. I felt at times that my experience was a bit different from a lot my friends. Music and instruments filled our house day and night. From as early as I can remember, while a lot of my friends weren't even really listening to music or just listening to music that was geared for kids, I was listening to music that was much older and I thought much cooler.

I remember being around 6 years old, sitting in my room with a little grey and blue toy cassette player listening to Motown music from the 60's. I just loved it! One of my favorite groups was the *Temptations*. I remember thinking these guys were so cool in their matching jackets and with their slick moves singing songs like "Aint too proud to beg," "My Girl" and "Get Ready."

Another difference was on weekends while a lot of my friends were playing with toys and video games, going to skating parties and family get-togethers, my family was playing a gig somewhere or going around Philadelphia catching some Jazz group. Eventually as I got older and into playing myself, I would often sit in on piano or organ with many of those groups.

As a kid, I thought it was awesome! Being blessed with parents who were very supportive of my interest in music, they

2 were continually seeking out environments that I could hone my skills as a jazz pianist and organist and work with other musicians. I thought it was great! I also got to stay up a lot later than most of my friends, too.

Jazz music was my particular interest and it was so cool getting to jam with musicians many years older. Because I was so young, many of them really took an interest in mentoring and teaching me. Most of the musicians I encountered as a young kid entering the music scene were very supportive. Some of my most vivid memories from adolescence were sitting at jazz concerts, jam sessions and events with everyone from local musicians to Grammy award winning recording artists.

The best part of this experience was the sense of unity I felt with these other musicians. Music, particularly jazz, was a scene where people of all different ages, genders, backgrounds, sizes, ethnicities, socio-economic levels and stages of life came together for a common purpose—to create great music.

So when I read this psalm, and in particular when I read the line “How very good and pleasant it is when God’s people live together in unity,” I thought about my days growing up as a young jazz musician.

Now the question that really stood out to me after reading this short psalm was, “How can we as followers of Jesus come together in unity when there is so much that divides us?” I also think of the true greatness we could achieve in community if we were able to be more united as followers of Jesus.

As I pondered this question I thought back to those jazz jam sessions I used to attend. Here was an environment where the most diverse group of people would come together in unity and together achieve something great.

The psalmist writes of the beauty of unity. Old Testament Scholar, Adele Berlin, argues that uniting the people of Israel is the main theme of this psalm. When the psalm talks about precious oil poured on the head and running down that this is imagery of an entire people being anointed together.

In the vivid imagery of “the dew of Hermon” falling on Mount Zion. Hermon represents the people of the northern kingdom while Zion represents the center of the southern Kingdom. The psalmist writes of how beautiful it would be to see the people of these kingdoms unite together in harmony.

As a musician and lover of music I can say that it can be a thing of beauty when people come together in unity and harmony to achieve something.

But the major focus in the psalm isn’t just the unity of a particular family or group, but the unity of all of God’s people together. This is the ultimate goodness that God intends—the gathering of God’s larger family—the whole people of God.

St. Augustine attributed the origin of monasteries and their brotherhoods to this psalm. Monasteries were groups of people from different backgrounds, ages and places coming together to live in unity and to focus on doing God’s work.

So I come back to the question, how can we as a people of God come together in unity while there is so much that divides us? What can be gleaned from those experiences I had as a jazz musician?

First of all, we need to think about what Jazz is. Jazz is a creative art form and unlike many other styles of music, you don’t necessarily know what something is going to sound like or even what something should sound like before you endeavor to perform it. You have a general outline of where you are going (what song or songs your going to play) and a basic idea of how your going to get there (the melody and chord structures of the song) but that’s about it. All you have beyond that is your skills, your experience, your ability to work in a team and the inspiration you bring with you at the time. While we can do it on our own, it mostly happens in community.

When we set out to follow Jesus and do God’s work, isn’t it really similar. We set out with things we know we want to do (to care for the least among us, to free the oppressed from

4 the oppressors, to work for peace) and we have some general outlines as to how we're going to get there—(to love God, to love our neighbors, to treat each other with respect as we would like to be treated). We bring to the table our own unique skills, experiences, abilities and passions. And while we can do work on our own, we work mostly in community with others working for the same goals.

Now when we sit in at a jazz jam session, generally someone or a group of people will make the call as to the tune you're gonna do, say "Hey guys, let's play 'Satin Doll,'" or lets play "Girl from Ipanema." There's usually (but not always) a confirmation of the key and feel we're about to play the song in, then it's off we go. You may find yourself with a group of musicians that you personally share little in common with other than your love for the music. You may not even know the names of all the people you are working with but for the duration of that song, you are all working for unity. I remember one particular jam session I sat in on the Hammond B-3 organ in a little hole in the wall jazz club just outside of Philadelphia—there were so many sax players there that night, there must have been 20 of them, all excellent musicians—so many, that they were lined up clear to the men's room ready to jam and give it their all.

And the true beauty of jamming is that while you know the basic idea of what you're doing going in, you never really know how it's all going to come out until you do it. You might play in a different way than you ever thought you would play based on the other people you're working with.

When we set out on a godly endeavor in community, isn't it much the same way? You may not really know all the people you're working with and you may not even know how things are really going to come out in the end, but what's important is that we do take up the endeavor in community with one another.

While it was awesome living in this music world growing up, it was at times a rough transition back to quote that "real world." As I went through school and other social

environments, I came to the unfortunate realization the rest of the world didn't operate like it did in the music world. It seemed that people in most of those environments tended to focus on that which makes us different as opposed to that which unites us.

In school I saw lines of division drawn everywhere—based on age, gender, race, interest, socio-economic status and even the clothes people wore. It was discouraging, disheartening and many times difficult to accept.

Even when discussing music, it seemed lines of division were drawn there, too. In fact, I even noticed how often when asked what type of music people like, they'd often respond with what they don't like first.

In the jazz world, if you worked with people who were really different, even if people didn't speak the same language, there seemed to be a musical language we could all relate to that would unite us in some way. As I got older and was able to experience working with jazz musicians from all around the country, Italy, France and even New Zealand, it was amazing that through all the cultural, language and distance barriers, we were still able to work together to create amazing jazz music. What if as followers of Jesus we could also have this same type of unity?

Being away from the church world for a period in my life, I felt as if I had a similarly difficult transition back into church life. While I just thought church was a place that the body of Christ came together in unity to work for good in the world, I was shocked to see so many lines of division drawn. There was division between conservatives and progressives, those who liked worship a certain way and those who liked worship another way, division between age groups and division on issues like sexuality and the environment.

So how can we as followers of Jesus unite? If I go back, my comparison of diverse musicians coming together in unity for the common purpose of creating music, what makes it work is that there is a common shared focus on what is trying to be

6 accomplished. The diversity becomes a strength not a stumbling block.

It is true that it's not always successful. I've sat in at many jam sessions where things didn't go as expected and not always in a good way. Maybe someone bit off more than they could chew, maybe someone in the group was more concerned about making themselves look good as opposed to working for the common good, or maybe someone just didn't have the skill set needed to help as much as they wanted to. But in the times that it did work—it worked great. The times it did work the focus was on achieving the result.

In jazz, before showing up at a jam session to play, you generally learn a common set of songs usually called “standards” that become the framework for working together. As followers of Jesus don't we have a group of standards we can all rally around such as loving God and loving neighbors, caring for the least among us, freeing the oppressed the oppressors, working for peace and treating others with respect?

What would it look like if we focus more on those things and how we can work for them and focus less on the things that divide us? How can we as the body of Christ seek to use our diversity as an asset?

The good news this psalm is celebrating is the beauty that can come from unity. I challenge you all to think about how you can focus more on unity. How would this look in your environments? Do you spend the time focusing on the things that unite or things that divide? How can we continue to enable church structures to fully use the skills, experience, knowledge and diversity of your church body's to fullest?

If we can come together in unity and bring all our skills, our knowledge, our diversity, our experiences and our shared drive together, just think of greatness we as God's people could achieve. Just think of what that song would sound like.

I invite you to reflect on these thoughts as Josh Duma and I provide some music during a period of reflection. In an effort to simulate this idea of coming together as jazz musicians do,

we're going to be playing a piece we've never played before. In fact, it's not even a song, we'll just be taking a common set of Jazz chord changes in a jazz feel without any rehearsal, melody, or arrangement. We have absolutely no idea how this is going to sound—we bring to the table our own unique skills, experiences, abilities and passions in a desire to work in community with each other to achieve something great.

If we can learn to see our diversity as a strength and still unite together in following Jesus, than all I can say is, "Get Ready, cause here we come!"

