



Philadelphia
BAPTIST ASSOCIATION



THE PBA 310th ANNUAL MEETING MAY 6, 2017

“So in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.” - Romans 12:5 (niv)

DEVOTIONAL REFLECTIONS

(Psalm 133, Malachi 2, John 15, Romans 12)

For The PBA Community

**ATTENTION PASTORS,
LEADERS & CONGREGANTS:**

Please consider using at least 1 or 2 Devotional Reflections for Sermons, Bible Study, or Discussion at your church prior to the Annual Meeting

*Presented by the PBA Board of Directors and Executive
Minister*

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PBA PRINCIPLE OF ASSOCIATION LECTIONARY RESOURCES

Psalter: Psalm 133

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Devotional Reflection

Psalm 133 is a joyous and extravagant celebration of unity, of the goodness found when people live in communion with one another. Most of us vibrate with hope and yearning when we hear words that express such unity, whether those words are spoken at a wedding, “**And they become one flesh**” (Genesis 2:24) or found in Jesus’ prayer at the Last Supper, “**As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us,[f] so that the world may believe that you have sent me**” (John 17:21), whether witnessed among the first disciples after Pentecost, “**Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul**” (Acts 4:32) or among the gathered witnesses at the end of days, “**...there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands.**” (Revelation 7:9).

Then there are more contemporary words from a modern-day prophet such as Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who dreamed aloud, “*With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.*” The psalmist is celebrating that kind of vision, one where righteousness flows like oil down Aaron’s beard and justice covers all the land, like the dew on Zion’s mountain.

Introducing the Scripture

This psalm is among the shortest in the Hebrew psalter, only 3 verses but rich in imagery and sensory input. The fragrant aroma and viscous slide of oil poured over the hair and down the hoary beard of Aaron, first high priest of Israel. The morning chill and damp of dew on the mountainside, drenching the otherwise desert landscape.

Tradition identifies this psalm as a psalm of ascent, meaning it would have been sung by pilgrims on their way to or from worship at the Temple in Jerusalem, probably for one of the high holidays in the Jewish faith. Like holidays in our culture and tradition, such events would have been occasions for extended family and distant friends to meet after long absences. And it is easy to imagine the joyful shouts of greeting, the warm embrace of loved ones reunited.

Scholars debate over what was intended by the Hebrew word translated as “kindred” by the New Revised Standard Version. (The Hebrew is gender exclusive, “brethren,” but inclusive in its sense.) Was the psalmist originally envisioning family gatherings of biological and legal kinship? Or was a more symbolic meaning intended—that of the children of Israel?

Whatever the original intent, it seems reasonable to conclude that the psalm’s inclusion in the liturgy of ascent indicates it came to have that more encompassing meaning—one of a family of indicative that of the family of God. Certainly Psalm 133 has been used often in Jewish and Christian worship to celebrate unity as the ideal in the family of faith. And anyone who has experienced true communion in that faith family is able to testify to the goodness of such unity and to the blessings of God’s presence found there.

Such experiences may be familiar, but the metaphors offered in the psalm will be a bit more exotic. The first describes the flow of oil used to anoint the high priest—specifically, Aaron, the brother of Moses, who was first descendent of Israel to be anointed to such a high calling. A Jewish man of such age and stature in the community would have had a long and lush beard, flowing down the front of his richly embroidered priestly robes. The oil would have been fragrant, scented with herbs, and a luxuriant moisturizer for skin and hair dried by the desert air. And the anointing itself was a sign that the anointed one had been chosen and set apart by God for a special ministry of intercession and service.

The image of the dew of Mt Hermon, falling on Mt Zion, is a little more obscure— although most modern readers won't realize how obscure because the geography of ancient Palestine is not well known. In fact, scholars have long debated the location of the biblical Mt Zion, which is often used symbolically in any case. But a strict geographic reading of this text would depict a dewfall so heavy that it flowed down the side of Mt Hermon (often snow-capped in the far north) across the wilderness to the traditional site of Mt Zion, at Jerusalem in the south. Even a figurative reading, however, yields an image of precious dew, alleviating the barren land and bringing hope for the return of fertility again.

What a wonderfully dynamic analogy that might illustrate our life together in unity as the Philadelphia Baptist Association—with that spirit of community signifying God's anointing, a divine calling, and a welcome moisturizer for relationships that might, in the past, have grown chapped, cracked, and broken.

And the second metaphor evokes another biblical text, one of social justice and collaborative force, where the dew of our unity might generate righteous like a river and justice like an ever-rushing stream (Amos 5:24).

In the current context of a nation fractured by partisan politics and deep disunity and with God's people seeking assurance of hope for the future, the blessings and goodness of unity—of our union with God and our communion with one another—are a life-giving theme to explore and celebrate together.

Sermon Outline

1. Celebrating the anointing of unity.
2. Anointed for God's pleasure.
3. Anointed for priesthood – intercession and worship.
4. Anointed for the good of the people.

Bible Study Discussion Questions

- About the biblical text, Psalm 133:
 - What do you know about the uses of oil in the ancient world?
 - What do you know about anointing in Scripture?
 - What do the metaphors of oil running down Aaron's beard and dew falling on Mt. Zion mean to you? What significance might they have had for the original readers of the psalm?
 - What metaphors for unity and its blessings might we use if rewriting this psalm today? How do those images relate to our relationship with the PBA and its member churches?
 - What other questions do you have about this Scripture?
- What experiences with "kindred living together in unity" have you had? Describe one.
- In what ways have you found unity difficult to create or maintain—in your circle of family or friends, in our congregation, in the community, in the nation?
- How does our union with God through the Spirit help us cultivate and celebrate unity with others?
- When have you experienced the blessings of God in the presence of human community and communion? What made that experience real to you?



Philadelphia BAPTIST ASSOCIATION



PBA PRINCIPLE OF ASSOCIATION LECTIONARY RESOURCES **Unity Among the People of God** **Based on Malachi 2:10**

© 2017 by Rev. James E. McJunkin Jr.

(Unity Old Testament: Psalm 133:1, Amos 3:3, Ecclesiastes 4:12, Proverbs 27:17)

Devotional Reflection

The prophet Malachi asks three good questions of God's people: (1) Do we not come from the same family (the same parentage)? (2) Are we not created by the same Source (God, our Creator)? And (3) if we answer yes to the first two questions, then why do we turn our backs on the covenant of our forebears and transgress in our relations (break faith) with one another? In other words, we should honor one another, in deepest humility, respecting the common gift of life, and experience God's love for all creation.

The prophet's questions are still relevant for us in the church today, especially as the Philadelphia Baptist Association anticipates our 310th Anniversary.

Are we not adopted into the same family, through kinship with Christ Jesus?

Are we not people created in God's image, with lives inextricably bound with the life of all of creation?

If yes to the first two questions, then don't our lives matter one to another as congregations in relationship, in association, in faithful service to the gospel mission?

Introducing the Scripture

"Do we not all have one Father? Did not one God create us? Why then are we faithless to one another, profaning the covenant of our ancestors?" (Malachi 2:10 NRSV)

The book of Malachi is the last of the Minor Prophets, a collection known as the Twelve in the Hebrew Scriptures. Their designation as "Minor" does not refer to their significance in the biblical canon but to their length in contrast with most of the Major Prophets (such as Isaiah and Jeremiah).

Little is known of the prophetic author; there is no mention of parentage, town of origin, or vocation. The name Malachi means "my messenger" in Hebrew, so the book's opening verse may be translated simply, "An oracle. The word of the LORD to Israel by my messenger"

(1:1). This would be a particularly appropriate title since one of the key themes in the book is a promised messenger to come from God.

Scholars generally agree that the prophet known as Malachi was probably writing after his fellow Minor Prophets, Haggai and Zechariah—and after the rededication of the temple in 516 or 515 BC. By that time, the remnant of Israel had been back in the land for more than a hundred years, and they were looking for the blessings they had expected to receive when they returned from exile. In the face of persistent hardships, even the new temple could not sustain their adherence to the Lord's covenant. The religious fervor of their forebears gave way to apathy for the things of God.

Malachi ministered during a difficult period of time in Israel's history. The nation was suffering from economic depression and agricultural

problems. From the prophet's perspective, however, the people's most serious problem was spiritual. He preached against rampant corruption among the priesthood and a spiritual lethargy among the people.

Malachi came along at a time when the people were struggling to believe that God loved them. Not only was the nation failing to prosper (which was believed to be an indication of God's pleasure and affection), but they felt like their prayers were being ignored by God (2:13; 3:14-15). The people focused on their unfortunate circumstances and refused to account for their own sinful deeds. Through Malachi, the Lord told the people that they had fallen short of their covenant with God and their covenant with one another.

In Malachi 2:10, the prophet's questions put their shortcomings in the context of their relationships with one another. Part of pleasing

Bible Study Discussion Questions

- How does this biblical text point to the humility we share as created beings?
- What might it mean to be connected with all creation?
- How do you celebrate life in the natural world? How do you experience a sense of connection with all of creation?
- How do you express or experience a spiritual connection with Planet Earth?
- What does Scripture teach about God's love for all life and the gifts given to each of us?
- Why do you think we rarely share the abundance of the earth on equal terms as fellow human beings?
- What relationships might this time of reflection be leading you to repair?

God and honoring the covenant is about dealing honorably with others in God's household—and by extension, with the creation that God has made our shared home.

Consider this essential insight (which foreshadows Jesus' assertion that "Love the Lord your God" is in the same spirit as "Love your neighbor") in sermon, small-group discussion, or devotional reflection. How might its powerful truth invite, inspire, encourage, and challenge your church to renew a commitment to our life together as an association of congregations, united in the Body of Christ for the work of a shared mission?

Sermon Outline

1. Created by one God
2. Shared humility as created beings
3. Given the gift of life on equal terms
4. Called as one people in Christ
5. The importance of tending to the bonds of relationship in Christ within and beyond the local church.



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PBA PRINCIPLE OF ASSOCIATION LECTIONARY RESOURCES

Gospel Lesson: John 15:1-17 (especially vv. 1-5)

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Devotional Reflection

John 15 is all about connections. As part of Jesus' teachings at the Last Supper, it was part of Jesus' effort to strengthen his connection to his followers before he went to the cross. With one of the seven I AM statements in the Fourth Gospel, it makes a significant connection between Jesus and the holy name of God revealed to Moses, **"I AM who I AM" (Exodus 3:14)**. Its plant analogy illustrates organic connections found in creation, the grapevine with its elaborate system of tendrils and branches. The metaphor itself, with its Old Testament roots, provides another connection—between Jesus and the nation of Israel. And of course, the point of the metaphor compares Jesus' connection with his followers to the essential connection between vine and branches, which survive only when connected to the vine.

God is the vinegrower. Jesus is the true vine. And God's people, Christ's disciples, are the branches that the Lord is counting on to bear fruit in the world. "Abide in me," Jesus urged his first disciples. He says the same to us now. In other words, stick close and stay connected. Or, as Jesus himself said a few verses later, **"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.... I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another."** (John 15:12, 16-17)

Introducing the Scripture

Since the second century the Fourth Gospel, traditionally known as the Gospel According to John, has been attributed to the authorship of John, one of the Twelve and a son of Zebedee. The Gospel itself attributes its authorship to the anonymous beloved disciple (see **John 13:23; 19:35; 21:24**).

Tradition and modern scholarship agree that the Fourth Gospel was written much later in a tradition quite distinct from the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), probably between 85–95 CE. The Fourth Gospel features many sayings and stories that are unique, not found in the other three Gospels, and the narrative is framed around

seven miraculous signs (pointing to Jesus' identity as Son of God) and seven complementary "I am" sayings (identifying Jesus with the holy name of God, **"I AM who I AM,"** revealed in **Exodus 3:14**). One of those sayings is found in this passage.

This text is part of the Fourth Gospel's lengthy description of Jesus' words to his disciples in the upper room before his arrest and crucifixion (**John 14–17**). In **John 15:1**, Jesus declared, **"I am the true vine"** (reiterated in **v. 5**). Unlike the other "I am" sayings, which place the complementary sign and saying in close textual proximity, the sign that best complements the **"true vine"** claim seems to be the first sign of Jesus' ministry,

when he turned water into wine (the fruit of the vine) (**John 2:1-2**). So, in a sense, this “I am” saying and its illustrative sign create a pair of bookends in Jesus’ life and ministry—being his first sign and his last saying.

Beyond including one of Jesus’ “I am” sayings, **John 15** prominently features another trademark of this Gospel: frequent use of the Greek word *ménō*. Of the 40 times that Greek term appears in the Fourth Gospel, *twelve* of them occur in this passage!

Most often translated as “**abide**” or “remain,” *ménō* means “to be held or kept continually,” in a sense that encompasses both time and space. In this Scripture, Jesus urged his disciples to abide in him, as branches “abide” in the vine and as Jesus himself abides in his Heavenly Father. It is a powerful metaphor that depicts not only the organic connection between Jesus and his disciples, but also the vital connections that exist among the people of God themselves. If any branch becomes severed from the vine, that branch and all the life that hangs upon it will wither and die.

The analogy of the vine is a significant one throughout the Hebrew Scriptures (see **Psalms 80:8-16; Isaiah 5:1-7; 27:2-6; Jeremiah 2:21; Ezekiel 15:1-6**). The early church (which was predominantly Jewish through the late first century) would have been very familiar with passages such as these, where God is depicted as planter or owner of a vineyard, which represented the nation of Israel. Jesus used that classic metaphor for God in **John 15:1**, “...my Father is the **vinegrower**.”

According to this analogy, Jesus is a true (faithful and fruitful) vine in the tradition of Israel. We who follow Jesus’ teachings are branches—tender, flexible tendrils that grow from his vine. What a wonderfully dynamic analogy that illustrates our life together as the

Philadelphia Baptist Association—each tendril (congregation) connected to the branch (PBA), which is an outgrowth of the larger vine, which is the Body of Christ.

The tendrils of a grapevine feel their way along, always connected to the vine as they stretch along the trellis or stone, curling around whatever they find, spreading through the vineyard. Soon as member congregations, we are indistinguishably entwined, clinging strongly and becoming entangled with other vines, branches, and tendrils until the vineyard, which is our mission field, becomes a living body of vibrant leaves with heavy clusters of ripe fruit.

In the current context of a nation deeply divided and a world desperately in need, the theme of abiding—Christ with us, us with Christ, and each of us with one another—is a compelling and relevant idea to explore. In the context of Jesus’ final teachings on the night when he was about to be betrayed, arrested, tried, and handed over for execution, that message must have been a poignant one for Jesus to communicate. Facing a significant transition (and trauma), Jesus emphasized that it was still possible for the disciples to abide in him—to know the assurance of his permanence and presence in their lives and to provide an image of themselves as part of a larger whole, united in a shared identity as disciples of Christ and people of God.

Sermon Outline

1. Created to bear fruit.
2. Cleansed by Christ’s commands.
3. Connected in Christ.
4. Called to love one another [in congregation and in association].

Bible Study Discussion Questions

- About the biblical text, John 15:1-17 (esp. vv. 1-5):
 - What does the phrase “Abide in me as I abide in you” (v. 4) mean to you?
 - What do you know about grapevines (or any vines) and how they grow?
 - How might you relate the metaphor of the vine and branches to the church and its members? How might it relate to our congregation and the Philadelphia Baptist Association? (vv. 4-5)
 - What other questions do you have about this Scripture?
- What relational connections are most important in your life right now? Why?
- What connections have become difficult to maintain in this nation? In our congregation? In the community? In your own circle of family and friends?
- How might our interconnectedness with Jesus as true vine help us overcome such divisions?
- When have you experienced the abiding love of God? What made that experience real to you?



PBA PRINCIPLE OF ASSOCIATION LECTIONARY RESOURCES

Epistle Lesson: Romans 12:1-8 (especially vv. 3-5)

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Devotional Reflection

We live in a time when “thinking for yourself”, “being your own person” and operating individually is culturally valued. I am reminded of toddlers who so often assert, “I can do it myself!” While claiming our own agency is a developmental step, it is not, if we are honest with ourselves, the basis of most of our actual daily living. Few of us could exist independently in the world, without the work, ideas, and care of others. We are created to be in relationship, and nowhere does the Paul speak more clearly to that fact than in these verses. By the “**transformation of the renewing of our minds (v. 2),**” Paul says, we can shed the paradigm of the world around us and reconnect to our created nature. “**By the grace given (v. 3)**” to us by God, to not think “**more highly of (ourselves) than we ought (v. 3),**” we are called to see ourselves as part of a larger, more complete whole, indeed the “**body of Christ (v.5).**”

Our membership in this body is based not on race, creed, gender, sexual preference, or even experience in faithfulness. Our participation, says Paul, is not of our own doing, but of God’s! We are “**members one of another (v. 5)**”, whether we want to be or not. And isn’t that where the challenge comes in? Sometimes it is very difficult to be in relationship with each other; the body is sometimes a cumbersome and awkward thing. It certainly can be a fragile vessel, as those who have experienced disease or aging can testify. But this body we are called to participate in is designed to overcome the faults our individual bodies/churches might possess. Together, and only together, Paul asserts, our combined gifts become our “**spiritual worship (v. 1)** in both the church and the world. Without each other, our efforts fail to fulfill God’s mandate in Jesus Christ because “**we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another (v. 5).**”

Introducing the Scripture

The Letter to the Church at Rome, what we commonly refer to as Romans, was probably one of the latest of Paul’s writings, despite the fact that it comes first in the collection of letters we call the “epistles”. It can easily be divided into two parts; the shift happens here at chapter 12. In the first eleven chapters, the Apostle Paul lays out his theology of belief in salvation in Christ; from chapter twelve to the end, he instructs us in how to live in light of that salvation.

The text we focus on today is the turning point; here Paul moves his readers from thinking and talking about salvation to living it into the world, that is, to putting true faith into action. Referencing both the Roman practice of offering sacrifices to various deities and the Old Testament practice of offering sacrifices to Yahweh, Paul begins chapter twelve by re-envisioning this idea of sacrifice, not as something substitutionary and outside

of ourselves but indeed offering our very selves—alive, whole, complete—to God and God’s service as an expression of our “spiritual worship” (v. 1). He continues this radical idea by demanding that we “not be conformed to this world” but instead be “transformed” so that we might “discern what is the will of God” (v. 2), which he then proceeds to describe for us.

It would be easy to stop right here; there is more than enough to preach about in the first two verses! But it’s not until we get to verses 3-5 that we can begin to discover concrete ways of becoming the kind of faithful followers Paul invites us to be.

The focus of verse three is on humility. Paul, and we in turn, have received what is ours, not of our own doing, but of God’s action. “Grace” reminds us that we are recipients, not creators, of faith in our individual lives. But those individual lives are quite ineffective without connection to the whole, the image of the “body of Christ (v. 5) which Paul uses here and again in 1 Cor. 12:4-31.

It is the participation in the body that is crucial to our living our faith in the world. Like a piece of a puzzle, each of us has a gift to offer the whole. Separately, we do not have all that we need to be effective witnesses to God’s love, grace and mercy in every place and every time. But together, our diverse collection of resources/gifts can make a true difference in the world around us. We are called to work, live, give, and yes, struggle together so that the gospel can be made visible around us.

Sermon Outline

1. We are called to be different than the world.
2. Only by being different can we know and do the will of God.
3. Our faith comes as a gift of God’s grace, not of our own will.
4. By being in relationship with others both in the church and in the world, we have all that we need to spread the gospel.
5. We are inter-related by God’s design. Only together can we complete the work of the body of Christ and find our wholeness in Christ.

Bible Study Discussion Questions

- What does it look like today to “not conform to this world (v.1), as individuals and as a church?
- What are the manifestations of humility? In other words, what does humility look like?
- Think about your own physical body: what do you love most about your body? What body part gives you the most challenge?
- Think about the church as a body: what do you love most about your church? What part of your church gives you the most challenge?
- In what way does your church participate in the wider “body of Christ”: in your denomination, associations, neighborhood, and wider community?
- What can you do to strengthen these relationships in order to more fully participate in Paul’s vision for the church in the world?

