

“BLEST BE THE TIE”

Psalm 133; Ephesians 4:1-16

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Those words from the letter to the Ephesians are echoed so beautifully in today’s focus hymn, “Blest Be the Tie That Binds.” Now, the title of that hymn has sometimes, in recent years, been appropriated by writers both inside and outside the church as a way to describe familial or religious “ties” that bind people to dysfunctional relationships, restrictive expectations, oppressive rules, unjust systems, and the like. “Ties that bind” is a catchy shorthand phrase, but I’m always sorry when I hear it co-opted in that way, because none of that is what this hymn is about – far from it.

In fact, it’s a celebration of healthy and loving relationships, of community and caring and connection in the context of a community of faith. What is bound in the song is “our hearts”; the “tie” is made by the power of God’s Spirit; and the nature of the connection is “Christian love.”

This hymn was written in 1782 by John Fawcett, who was the pastor of a small congregation in Yorkshire. He received a call to move to London and serve a church there – which would almost certainly have represented a big step forward in his career. But he couldn’t bring himself to leave the little church, the “fellowship of kindred minds” in which he had experienced such a deep understanding of Christian community and a glimpse of heaven. I can understand that.

Fawcett’s words describe the kind of church it would be hard to leave, the kind of church just about anybody would want to be part of. But I want us to notice that, although we kind of think of this hymn sentimentally, as an “old-timey” sort of hymn, its content really is not sentimental. It’s both deeply theological *and* deeply real. It understands that the church – any church – is intended to reflect the nature of the kingdom of God. The “tie” is not shared interests or convenience or proximity or any sort of quid-pro-quo relationship or even or mutual liking or common dogma but *covenant* ... a committed belonging and connection established in relationship with God.

When we sing “Blest Be the Tie,” we affirm a church with a particular set of values.

We lift up the value of community in a world that urges preoccupation with the self and pursuit of individual interests and individual goals.

We acknowledge the mystery of God in a world that doesn’t have much time for mystery, for anything that can’t be explained or dissected or commodified or controlled. We celebrate the work of God’s Spirit in and among us. We admit to a need for strength beyond our own and affirm faith in a God who is good, all the time.

We lift up honesty in a world filled with denial. It’s kind of odd that there should be so much denial, what with a 24-hour news cycle and so much information at our fingertips and a

dozen things every day that make you want to weep... but there is: advertising offers us all kinds of false hopes, our national myths deny a lot of ugly truths, an astonishing number of people claim the environmental crisis is a hoax, we are encouraged to deny both our own privilege and our pain.

In the Christian community, though, the reality of the human condition can be acknowledged together and in the presence of God. Prayer, you will notice, is at the heart of the hymn writer's experience of community, as it is at the heart of ours also. In a world that believes in self-help, that in itself is a counter-cultural value.

"Before our Father's throne, we pour our ardent prayers." Clearly this is not talking about eloquently composed prayers or prayer as a dutiful routine, but prayer from the heart. And prayer in which we are not alone but praying together: "Our fears, our hopes, our aims are one, our comforts and our cares."

We live in a world beyond our control and in prayer together we can acknowledge this reality, and help each other give our fears to God. This kind of prayer lays out our hopes as well: Walter Brueggemann writes that "prayer is the opportunity to anticipate from God gifts that we cannot conjure for ourselves but ...desperately need...." (p. 66). Coming together in prayer, we also realize that we are part of a purpose larger than our own self-interest, meaning beyond what we can see in front of us in the moment, a vision for human life that is infused with the compassion and holiness of God.

We share gratitude for the comforts – the blessings – that God gives, especially for the gifts of community. We also know, as we pray for one another, that we all share in life's struggles – nobody gets a pass on this – and we aren't alone, whatever it is we are going through.

Sharing joy and laughter is wonderful, but where you *really* come to know the value of community is when you are carrying sorrows and burdens. The New Testament tells us "bear one another's burdens," (Galatians 6:2) and "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Galatians 5:14). It reminds us that in true community "if one suffers, all suffer; if one is honored, all rejoice." (1 Corinthians 12:26). Christian community is not just sitting beside each other in worship on Sunday and then going our separate ways. It's knowing that in time of grief or need somebody will be there with empathy and understanding, a listening ear, a hand to hold, a casserole, a ride, money, a reminder that you are not alone, an acknowledgement of your pain.

When we sing "Blest Be the Tie" we embrace a vision of solidarity, of the common good, of mutual responsibility and care that is a witness against our culture's ideologies of privatism, individualism, competition, self-reliance. In the church, we know that God made us for community and connection, and that we are bound together – by God – both in common humanity and ties of Christian love. We are one body with one hope, one calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God," as the letter to the Ephesians reminds us. That it's not easy to live this out is evidenced in the plea made in those first couple of verses: "I beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." We are still individuals with our different gifts and perspectives – and with our own particular struggles and pain, too.

Community is not easy. But the love of God for us all brings us together to pray and hold one another and commit ourselves to the life Jesus calls us to.

And in that life together we are a people who claim and sing a radical hope in spite of what looks like a lot of evidence to the contrary. We know that our sorrow, our toil and pain, our struggles with sin will not last forever. Part of what we are about as Christian community is helping each other hold on to that faith which looks beyond this life into God's timeless future. We don't know or claim to know what that looks like – but we believe “the promise of the gospel that death does not terminate the good rule of God.” (p. 69)

So of course then we live in and sing about God's goodness in the *now* as well. We choose to be in community when we could stay home. We choose love when we could succumb to hate and suspicion. We choose to see when we could turn away and weep when we could numb our pain. We choose prayer when we could give in to despair.

And we are blessed.

Are all congregations like this? Certainly not. Is any congregation like this all the time, in every particular? I doubt it. But what a privilege and a joy it is to sing this old hymn as a congregation in which it still resonates with truth and power, with people who believe in this vision of the church, and strive to live it. I don't know about you, but I am so grateful to that long-ago pastor John Fawcett for putting it into words for us.

“Blest Be the Tie that Binds”

Blest be the tie that binds
our hearts in Christian love;
the fellowship of kindred minds
is like to that above.

Before our Father's throne
we pour our ardent prayers;
our fears, our hopes, our aims are one,
our comforts and our cares.

We share our mutual woes,
our mutual burdens bear,
and often for each other flows
the sympathizing tear.

From sorrow, toil, and pain,
and sin, we shall be free;
and perfect love and friendship reign
through all eternity.

Resources:

Walter Brueggeman, *A Glad Obedience: Why and What We Sing*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2019.