

More Than an Impression

Unity Defined

There are a surprising number of definitions for the word *unity* in a standard dictionary. One could be forgiven for assuming that it would be a much less complex term and that one or two synonyms—*harmony*, *accord*—would be sufficiently descriptive. It seems, however, that the word itself is as complex and multivalent as our attempts to live into it.

Perhaps one of the most interesting among the definitions as it relates to Christian faith and practice is, according to Encarta World English Dictionary, “the arranging of separate elements in a literary or artistic work to create an overall aesthetic impression.” This definition of unity maintains a respect for difference while suggesting that the whole is bigger than the sum of the parts. The vision of Christian unity, and the unity that Christianity might, at its best, encourage across the whole of creation, is not a homogenizing quest to find the lowest common denominator but rather a grand vision encompassing both a celebration of diversity and a recognition of common ground. Seeking unity as a practice of faith in light of this definition becomes living the question “How do we bear witness to the integrity of individuals, communities, and creation?”

Of course, to return to the definition above, one hopes that the process of seeking unity runs deeper than aesthetic impression. Why settle for giving the impression that our individual congregations and the wider church are united when we could actually be united? Why settle for giving lip service to the interdependency inherent in creation when we could actually commit to

Lectionary Loop

Trinity Sunday, Year C, Psalm 8

supporting the integrity of people, cultures, ecosystems, and the whole of creation?

Beyond Definition to Calling

Unity is more than an abstract definition. It is a sacred calling present and pulsing within every aspect of our Christian spiritual inheritance: text, song, art, and stories of those who have come before us in the faith. The call to unity can be found in the demanding visions of the prophets, the comforting songs of the psalmists, and the compassionate prayers of Jesus. It echoes in the words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and shimmers in artistic renderings of Isaiah's vision of the peaceable kingdom. We sing its praises in familiar hymns like "In Christ There Is No East or West" and "Blessed Be the Tie That Binds" and newer songs like "We Yearn, O Christ, for Wholeness."

Choosing but one voice among the cacophony of tradition, Psalm 8 represents the call to unity in a special way. The psalmist's celebration of creation and our place in it could be summarized in a quote from naturalist John Muir: "When we try to pick out something by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe." As the creatures with the capacity to recognize the unity of all things as creations of the one God, we have a very special caretaking role within the whole. We are custodians of unity.

Beyond Calling to Transformation

Unity is much more than an idea to be dissected and studied. Each of us has a lived experience of it in one form or another. Before going further in this study, reflect on your own experience of unity. Let me prompt you with a story from my own experience, one that is fleeting and highly personal and thereby rather insignificant in relative terms to global unity or even unity among Christian churches. Nevertheless, this experience gives me a sense of unity that helps me seek it on greater scales and in situations that have more impact on the wider world.

My favorite hobby is long-distance running, a sport that has brought me any number of spiritual gifts. On the occasion of my first half-marathon race I had an

Study Bible

Read the commentary in *NISB*, 758-59, which addresses "celebrating the majestic nature of God's name in all the earth." All creation is connected through the "descending spatial hierarchy" of the psalmist's worldview.

experience of unity that was full of refreshing grace. It came at the moment in the race when all my energy was flagging. I could see the finish line, but it felt worlds away, and I wondered if I had that last bit of push to bring me through the gates. A little something you need to know about me before I continue the story: I am extremely competitive. So when I saw a man, twice my age and seemingly less fit than I, looking as if he was going to fight me for the next place in the finishing chute, I tried to kick it into gear. But I had nothing more to give. With the push of competition I knew I would make it across the line, but all I could do was keep pace with him once he caught up to me. I looked at the gate. He looked at the gate. I looked at him. He looked at me. Suddenly, he smiled and reached out his hand. I understood his gesture immediately despite the fog of weariness clouding my senses. I grabbed his hand, and we crossed the line together—triumphant and united. It was one of my best moments in racing.

Now, as I said, this is not an earth-shattering example of unity that changes lives. But it transformed that moment for me, and I hope and imagine the same for the other runner. As with all aspects of the call to Christian discipleship, the call to seek unity has at its core a vision of transformation—transformation from death to life, from fractured to whole, from loneliness to community, from scarcity to abundance. It is a call rooted in the very nature of the God we serve, “forever One, whose nature is community” and is at the very heart of the race we run by faith.

“In Christ we come to break and bless
the bread of the new society,
created for togetherness
from infinite variety,
so praise the good that’s seen and done
in Spirit-given unity,
revealing God, forever One
whose nature is Community.”

—Brian Wren, “When Minds and Bodies Meet as One”¹

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Reflections

Spend about twenty minutes in the following quiet meditation. First, imagine yourself sitting in a favorite place. Repeat the words “That all may be well with me” until you can feel yourself saying it as well as hear yourself. Now imagine a close friend. Repeat the words “That all may be well with [name your friend].” Next imagine someone you barely know: the person who sells you a cup of coffee in the mornings. Repeat the same phrase even if you don’t know the person’s name. Next, imagine someone with whom you have a broken relationship or some measure of enmity. Use the phrase again with her or his name inserted until you can feel yourself honestly blessing this person. Finally, imagine yourself and these three persons together in a place. Bless everyone with a compassionate prayer for wellness. When you are finished, reflect on this experience as a practice of unity.

Teaching Tips

Prompt people to think about their own experiences of unity by compiling a list of quotes on the topic. Have participants choose a quote that sparks a memory or resonates with an experience. Alternatively, assemble a set of images (try “Google Image”) and invite people to choose an image that speaks to them of an experience of unity. Encourage people to relate an actual experience rather than an intellectual understanding of the concept.