

The struggle to live in unity when everything's divided

We know how to wield a sword, but nobody taught us how to cultivate a field.

by [Brian Bantum](#) in the [October 21, 2020](#) issue



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We are always changing, from the time we are conceived to our first breath of air to our last. Sometimes the changes are almost imperceptible—until they're not. You go to sleep. You wake up. Over and over again. Then, one day you go to give your mother a hug and you tower over her. You never felt it happen, yet there you are.

Sometimes change is seismic and sudden and shattering, those life-changing moments that mark our lives indelibly. Sometimes it falls between the imperceptible and the tragic: friends moving, restaurants closing, new faces in the neighborhood, a high rise where the corner coffee shop stood. Sometimes it's births of children or new puppies or marriages that blend two families together.

Living inside change can be frightening. For some people, certainty was a given. In a world shaped by colonialism, there was a natural order, there were self-evident truths. The White homogeneity of their schools and neighborhoods and workplaces

was a confirmation of what they believed God intended. But change always comes, and the prospect of giving something up can feel disorienting. They might grab whatever they can that provides a sense of purpose and place, even if it is nothing more than a hoax or a con. But change comes.

Or, more precisely, change was always there. Difference was always a part of the community, but it could be ignored because it had been pressed to the outside of White cultural and political life. For all the talk of polarization and division, we are living in a moment when the change, the difference, the multiplicity of the world has begun to disperse the illusion of homogeneity. For those of us who have lived trying to cut through the veil, change has been a constant as we find some pockets of wholeness or life in the midst of this illusion. The prospect of change allows us to move forward each day.

As we imagine our lives amid this tumult, I am reminded of Ephesians: “In Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near” (2:13). The author is writing to a community in the midst of a movement that hasn’t quite settled. They are trying to discern who they are amid multiplicity, change, and conflicting customs. The letter reminds them that they are one in Christ—not because their differences don’t matter but because Christ has gone to where they were. Our God of presence met them in the far places and the near ones.

When we deal with real people in real places with stories and losses and joys, we can begin to fathom the miracle of holding these different bodies together, the far and the near. The change that Christ calls us to is not a change of belief but a transformation of who we imagine ourselves with or for—and the lengths we are willing to go to make that community possible.

As we face the changes of our world, the One who has no beginning and no end meets us, holds us, and takes us into himself. We are one in Christ because, in Christ, God holds all difference within herself. We are no longer strangers but citizens—and this citizenship is about being knit into a body, a temple, a holy place that walks in the world. We are the gilding on the ark, the acacia branch, the blue thread knit into a veil that hems in the holy of holies.

This is a dangerous, liberating claim—if we believe with Mary that the rich will be brought low and the hungry will be fed. This is the ground of our identity as Christians: to be grafted into the one who draws the outside in and the inside out,

until we begin to see that this tidy world of ours is in fact an expansive, undulating field that somehow flips the beginning and the end, the last and the first, until we don't know which is which.

If we follow Christ, our unity is not in our certainty but in our movement. We remember that some thought they were the center but were actually the edges, that some were pressed beyond the wall but God came near. In that presence, unity emerges—a unity that requires us to drop our weapons. That's scary, because with a sword in our hand—the right doctrine, the right hermeneutic—we think we're safe. What happens when we drop it and it turns into a plowshare? We knew how to wield a sword, but nobody taught us how to cultivate a field.

If the plowshare is our hope, we have to look not to the warriors but to the mothers, the grandmothers, those who fed babies and mended cuts and made churches spaces of life even while men took all the credit. If the plowshare is the end of our change, we might need new heroes and saints to emulate.

Maybe this is what it means to be “one in Christ,” where unity is not rest or unyielding tradition. It's rhythm: God's life joining ours, spinning us, grafting us into others, until one morning we wake up and don't quite recognize ourselves. We see the world from a different height and feel it from new angles.

Sometimes change can feel like nothing but loss. But right now the world is showing us how violent intransigence can be. Is Christianity more than stubborn tradition or a dry husk for White supremacy? Does the incarnation mean that transformation is always possible, that human flourishing is more than holding on to the world we knew? I am praying so; I am living for it.

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