

June 1, Easter 7 (John 17:20-26)

The question of unity always raises another question: On whose terms?

by [Liz Goodman](#) in the [June 2025](#) issue

Published on May 26, 2025

I've always loved the idea of unity. That all may be one just as Jesus and the Father are one: this was my hope long before I even knew that Jesus ever prayed such a thing, as he does in this week's gospel reading. A faint memory has me on a family trip to Disneyland, where I spent most of my time on the "It's a Small World" ride. As we repeatedly toured the simulacra of nations where animatronic children sing the song on repeat, my mother apparently had to surrender whatever hope she had for some Disney fun of her own, for here she would be with me.

Truth is, I've always been hard to get along with. On another family trip a few years later, this one to Peru where my father had lived with his family when he was young, I tried to get a live plant through airport security. When a Peruvian official approached me to confiscate it, I held on tighter. My father, it's said, began imagining the inside of a Peruvian jail cell.

The question of unity always comes attendant with the question, On whose terms?

The answer *Jesus* isn't quite the reassurance we might hope. History gives us ample evidence as to why. Time was when to say "onward Christian soldiers" wasn't merely to employ a problematic metaphor but to issue an actual threat. From the Crusades to the age of colonialism with its missionary mind-set, we've got proof aplenty of the postmodern point that all meta-narratives are just exertions of power. Heard through this claim, Jesus' prayer for comfort and peace sounds more like a gauntlet thrown down for struggle. To hope that all may be one is practically a declaration of war.

David Bentley Hart encourages us to another hearing. In *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth*, he recognizes how thoroughly this idea has

wended its way into all our assumptions, how it has resulted in a totalitarian politics for its having hobbled our theo-poetical imaginations. We've basically surrendered to this cynical idea—as if it were not itself an assertion of power—and this has muted the confession of the liberal wing of the church, muted us so much that we hardly confess our faith even to ourselves.

Summing up the correction Hart means to issue, Pascal-Emmanuel Gobry notes in a 2014 Patheos post that “because God is infinite, he has no interest in fitting differences within a mere totality, which could only be an oppressive, man-made myth . . . but rather, because he is infinite, Trinitarian *beauty*, all differences find their yes in the splendorous harmony of . . . self-giving, [in the] union in love of the Father and the Son, in the procession of the Spirit.”

Where words struggle to get at this, Hart is happy to turn to J. S. Bach, whose compositions of many moving parts always manage to hold as one. What's more, his harmonies come less from melody and supporting voices and more from polyphony: no line dominates, and the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, but the loss of any of its parts would be an impoverishment of the whole. Jesus praying, on the last night of his life, that his disciples may be one as he and the Father are one should awaken in us an image of oneness that is as busy as a page of music taken from a Bach mass. So many notes!

Truth be told, putting it together can be crazy-making. I am singer enough to fear the thought of it. I've fallen off enough Bach runs to know sometimes your only hope is to wait it out until the next one comes and then (fingers crossed!) jump in on time. Living is even harder.

There is much to grieve in the well-storied dwindling of the mainline church. Our congregations are smaller than ever. The two I serve are smaller than small. That said, a small congregation can foster the sort of polyphonic unity Jesus prays might manifest. In a small congregation, every person is felt in all their particularity, every personality come to bear, every spiritual gift given to each and every, felt for its never being lost in the crowd or plowed under by the power of the group. The totalizing tendencies of megachurches are so far from possible that we need not even keep a cautious eye out.

Our massive politics commands one sort of oneness, exertions of power, “owning the narrative” or at least “flooding the zone.” Our congregational lives can foster a different oneness, one busy with gifts offered and received, alive with the Spirit

always pushing beyond known bounds, and free for flourishing amidst the expanding infinite, each and every, which is the flourishing of all.