

June 2, Easter 7C (John 17:20-26)

## **Jesus wants us all around the table. That can be really, really hard.**

by [Teri McDowell Ott](#) in the [May 22, 2019](#) issue

“May they all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us.” Honestly, I wish Jesus hadn’t prayed this prayer. I’d really rather ignore his desire for Christian unity, because I’d really rather ignore those with whom I disagree and, yes, heartily dislike.

On our campus, a variety of Christian groups and parachurch organizations such as Campus Outreach, InterVarsity, Cru, and the Gideons compete for my students’ attention. Some of them work with me (the college chaplain), appreciative of my invitation to do ministry at our private liberal arts college. Others aggressively subvert my authority, pitting themselves in competition with my programs and with the other Christian groups on campus. Christians, especially those of different theological persuasions, don’t play well together.

*Darn it all, Jesus, make me sell all my possessions and give everything I have to the poor, but don’t tell me I have to get along with that jerk. Maybe this is where this essay ends, with me saying, I’m sorry Jesus, but I just can’t.*

Jesus, however, appears to prioritize our unity enough to save it for last. John 17 is the final scene of Jesus’ last meal with his disciples. First, he prays for his immediate community. Then, in this Sunday’s reading, he prays for all those who will come to believe—the future Christian community. Maybe Jesus saves this prayer for last because he knows that the unity of his followers will be what we struggle with most. He prays for us because he knows we need it.

This text challenges me so much that I decided to take it in hand to discuss with a group of clergy friends. One is adamant: “Christian unity is not going to happen and shouldn’t happen with those who deny leadership roles to women or basic rights to LGBTQIA people. To seek unity with these only validates their beliefs.” This

argument makes sense to me. No justice, no peace, right?

But another friend is frustrated by this response. “If we don’t believe in Christian unity,” she says, “then what hope is there for us?” This is hard. I don’t know what to think. So I go in search of more advice.

I call another clergy friend, Erin, a progressive Presbyterian who decided to attend a conservative evangelical seminary because, in her words, “God has always called me into communities where I have different perspectives around me.” I admired Erin’s choice, while also wondering how she managed to stay in a community so theologically different—not only as a progressive but as a woman seeking a leadership role in the church.

Erin admits that it was, at times, really challenging and frustrating. But “it also pushed me to articulate what I believe,” she says, “and pushed me to build relationships and friendships with people who thought differently, had different life experiences, came from different cultures.”

The seminary Erin attended had a policy that women were welcome at the school and that nothing could be said that would make them feel unwelcome. But the microaggressions were real. “I could feel it even if it wasn’t said,” she says. “But I feel it in the Presbyterian church, too. Greeting people at the door after my first sermon as a seminary intern, an older gentleman stopped to say, ‘Well, aren’t you a cute little girl.’”

Erin is quick to add that she’s found supportive friends and colleagues as well, in both her conservative and her liberal communities. And being within a community has helped her find opportunities to speak up and challenge perspectives she believes to be unjust. “That’s part of the call,” Erin says, “to figure out those places where you can challenge and change the conversation.”

I’ve been actively involved in my county’s ministerial association since I moved here. I value the ecumenical spirit of the group, as well as our joint worship services and mission projects. A few years ago they elected me president (after I told them that as the only woman in the group I’d serve in any role but secretary). Our monthly meetings consist of the progressive mainline Protestants and one Catholic priest, but as president I feel duty-bound to invite all local pastors to participate. So I’ve reached out to the Baptists, the nondenoms, and the Pentecostals, who typically don’t respond to my emails or return my calls. It’s hard not to assume that I would

have better luck if I were, like all of them, a man.

Sometimes I've surprised them by stopping by their church offices, and I have convinced a couple of them to attend a meeting. But after they come once and get a sense of us, they don't return. And honestly, I am relieved when they don't come back. It's hard when they are there. We are more cautious as we talk. We avoid theological issues that might spur debate. I enjoy myself less.

Yet Jesus still prays, and Erin's story reminds me why. Jesus wants us all around the table—to better articulate our beliefs, to challenge and be challenged, to have the chance of changing what needs to be changed in the body of Christ.

*May they all be one.* Note that Jesus does not pray that we all think and act alike. He does not pray that we all agree or that we ignore injustice. He prays for us to be one, as he and the Father are one. He prays that we be in relationship with one another. But it's hard, really hard, and it's not going to get easier.

Keep those prayers coming, Jesus. We're never not going to need them.