

August 20, Ordinary 20A (Genesis 45:1-15; Psalm 133)

## **The challenges to unity are great. The reward of unity is tremendous.**

by [Jost Zetsche](#) in the [August 2023](#) issue

It echoed throughout my childhood: my mother's exasperated voice, entreating my brother and me to stop our constant fighting before it cut years from her harried life. She was right on one of those assertions and wrong on another: my brother and I did indeed fight a lot, but he and I will gather peacefully in Hamburg, Germany, this year to celebrate her 80th birthday with her, so she was happily wrong about the life-shortening consequences of that bickering.

Having siblings can be a uniquely rich experience, but growing up with those same siblings can be hard. Very hard.

In many languages, including English and biblical Hebrew, the same word is used for biological siblings as for those who are deeply united in a cause, such as fellow Israelites serving the Lord or fellow Christian believers in the New Testament. The biblical text contains ample testimony to both the pitfalls and the thrills of forging that outward union into an inward unity.

“How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!” The first line of Psalm 133—likely sung as people from across Israel made their way to Jerusalem for the High Holy Days—can evoke either jubilation about a unity and togetherness that is firmly in place or a pleading reminder that much needs to be done to achieve that unity.

Either way, the rewards the psalmist mentions are tremendous.

It's like the soothing, healing, fragrant oil from above that runs down the hair, through the beard, and onto the robe of Aaron, where it pools on his chest plate containing the 12 stones that represent Israel's tribes. (In both Spanish and Catalan Sign Language, Aaron's name is signed by pointing to where the stones on his chest plate would be.) It's also like the metaphoric covering of the whole land with life-

giving, refreshing moisture, all the way from Mount Hermon in the far north to Jerusalem in the south.

Complete unity. Oneness, given from above.

The reality is often different, though, and the biblical authors know it. In the most well-known biblical story of a sibling pitfall, Joseph's brothers throw him into an actual pit in Genesis 37. The long and detailed story that follows is filled with repeated betrayals but also with loyalty, forgiveness, and redemption.

When Joseph eventually calls out to his brothers in Genesis 45, he uses the same Hebrew word for brother that Psalm 133 does. If there's any doubt that reconciliation is hard, complicated, and sometimes downright confusing while paradoxically also sweet and celebratory, there is no better story to illustrate it than this one.

I look at God's family today, the church, and I long for this kind of reconciliation. I long for the unity that Jesus prays for in John's Gospel: "I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one" (John 17:20-21). That's radical, and that's us.

An example from the Bible translation into Kikuyu—a language spoken in central Kenya by 6.6 million people, the vast majority of whom are Christians—illustrates just how radical this is. When the Bible was first translated into Kikuyu, translators ran into a problem with the word *one* in the sense that the Gospel of John uses. In Kikuyu, a grammatical agreement is needed between a plural subject ("all of them") and a numeral such as "one."

While one could find a roundabout way of translating this, the Kikuyu translators chose a different approach, one that ended up being uniformly used in all Bibles for all confessions: they created two new words as possibilities. The first word—*amwe*—means "one" as in a family or group of friends; *ũmwe*, the other, means "one" as in being the same person. Both were newly minted words, and though the latter was grammatically even more awkward at first, it was *ũmwe* that the translators chose. *Atĩ othe matũike ũmwe ki*—"that they may all be one" (as in "one person").

This sense of one may seem radical in its demands on North American Christians who reflexively defend our individuality. But we also know from how Jesus interacted with his disciples that he completely understood and cherished different

personalities.

I don't know how to mend our self-inflicted fractures, fractures that have been so amplified throughout the last few years. And it's possible that some parts of the church will simply break off to look for their hope in political fever dreams. But I pray they won't. I pray that we all can be bold and humble enough to become *ũmwe*. Like Joseph and his brothers who fought through to hard-won forgiveness. Like the oil on the 12 fractious tribes of Israel or the dew on the war-torn Promised Land. Like the bickering apostles and the diverse church facing the same God.