

The rock band out of Dublin, Ireland that calls themselves U2 had already been together some 15 years when I was in high school. While I, like many in my generation, enjoyed their music for its sound and the meaning in the lyrics, I was unaware of the divisions, conflict, and personal challenges that every band member was facing in the early 1990s. I was also unaware that the growing differences between band members were threatening to dissolve a group that had been making beautiful together since they were teenagers.

When members of U2 talk about that time in their lives, they speak about the common frustrations that come with growth. U2 had risen from obscurity to become famous and popular, the world knew their sound and their songs. But they couldn't stay the way they were; they were growing. Growing older. Growing from experiences like personal tragedy, disappointment, and the discovery that it isn't enough to be famous or popular, there is more to life. Their signature sound was changing. This was a change the band members all wanted, and in some ways didn't want because they were afraid. No one knew what the next steps for them would be.

When we look at their situation, we might recognize anyone can feel that way whenever there is significant change in life; like graduating from college or high school, marriage, getting a new leader, losing a loved one, getting a new job, or losing a job, any significant transition.

What helped the members of U2 through this time of change, and helped them discover the new sound they were feeling called or drawn to, and not only helped them stay together, but form a stronger bond than they had before was doing what they do best in a way they hadn't before: writing a song. While in Germany after the fall of the Berlin Wall, one band member came up with a melody that another band member liked and expanded on. When lead singer Bono heard the music, he said the words just suddenly seemed to come to him, and in less than ten minutes the song was mostly written. But a few other band members worked to polish the song, make it as good as they all felt it could be. That is how one of U2's most well-loved songs, aptly titled *One* was written in 1991.

It's a powerful song. It starts out with words that are about division, relationships ending mostly because of the ways people hurt each other and continue to hurt each other. In the beginning of the song it is clear we humans are a broken people that have trouble letting go of pain and the past, especially exemplified in sad and poetic lines like, "I can't be holding on to what you got, when all you got is hurt."

But that does not mean the song is without hope. It is a song dripping with hope. Because while the song has so many lines about the brokenness of humanity, it also reminds us that we are connected, and we are one. Listen to some of last lines of the song: “One love, one blood, one life, you got to do what you should, one life with each other; sisters, brothers. One life, but we’re not the same, we get to carry each other.”

When asked what the song is about, lead singer of U2 Bono – who by the way is an Episcopalian – said that the song is about division, and it is about what is stronger than differences that can divide us and therefore holds us together: love. But not the love of romance, or friendship. The love of God. “If we know anything about God,” Bono said, “It’s that God is love. That’s part of the song. And it’s about people staying together. We get to carry each other, not got to carry, we get to carry each other. Like it or not, the only way out of any situation is to work together.”

That’s exactly what Jesus was talking about in today’s Gospel, where we finally come to the end of a very long prayer Jesus was praying the night before his arrest, trial and crucifixion. Before his resurrection and ascension into heaven. It’s a prayer that shows Jesus’ love for his followers. Not just his followers back then, not just the folks in the room with him. If you look closely, the prayer mentions those of us who follow Jesus today. The love of Jesus transcends time, which means even though the Gospels feature events that took place long ago, and parables Jesus told thousands of years ago, there is something in the life, teachings, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ that is for us, here and now. The Love of God in Jesus is much too real and much too powerful to be kept locked in the past. It is very present here and now, actively doing what God intends God’s love to do: what the words of the song says, making us one and helping us to carry each other.

Scholars and commentators tell us this section of Jesus’ prayer isn’t just a shout out to those of us who follow Jesus today. It is a call for unity. And there is a lot of references to unity in today’s Gospel where Jesus talks about being one with God and his desire that all his disciples be one like he and God are one. Which makes this a beautiful reflection on Christian unity.

However, you don’t have to read very far into commentaries on this section of John’s Gospel before you start reading about the many reminders of how we have failed Jesus because of the many divisions in the Christian faith. The many expressions of Christianity that have fractured from each other, the disagreements we Christians have, the fights we fight, the ways we hurt each other. All the ways that can seem to justify the opinion that the Church is corrupt, hypocritical, and therefore not worth being a part of or participating in.

I wonder though, if that is a misunderstanding of what Jesus was praying for and an even deeper misunderstanding of unity. Unity is not the same thing as conformity, which unfortunately, I fear it is often mistaken for. Being together as followers of Jesus doesn't necessarily mean we are going to look the same, or think the same way, or have the same preferences, or tastes. We aren't all going to be in the same place spiritually, economically, or socially. Yet the marvelous possibility, the joyous, glorious, awesome reality is we don't have to all be the same or be in the same place to be loved by God and follow Jesus. We can be different.

Unity that is the Love of God in Jesus doesn't negate differences, it accepts them and utilizes them up, because those differences may come in handy when it comes to working together. Like the members of the band U2 discovered when their different musical skills helped them create a new song together. Those differences can even be what makes us one in Christ through love.

I've told about the time I've experienced this One Love before, and if you've heard it before that's okay. Some stories are worth repeating. When I was in the process of being ordained a priest in the Episcopal Church, I attended a very conservative seminary. Attending seminary is part of the ordination process; it involves three years of taking classes to earn a Master's in Divinity and where you live in intense community with your fellow seminarians. At my seminary, we all attended classes together, at meals at the same together in the refectory – a seminary word for cafeteria -, cared for the grounds and buildings, and attended worship services together twice a day. Not only were we all different, we were extremely different. We had lots of disagreements. Quite of a few of my fellow seminarians did not believe women should be priests, and most of the faculty shared this belief. This often made it uncomfortable and sometimes challenging for me to be in seminary, as a few seminarians were antagonistic and cruel to me. At one point it was so bad my bishop offered to transfer me to a different seminary. But I didn't take him up on his offer, because I knew God wanted me there. And this how I knew that:

One day at Evening Prayer, I was standing at the back of the chapel, which was my place as the chapel scholar on duty. A chapel scholar is a seminarian job, where we oversee the worship services at seminary. It was my week on duty, and as I stood facing the seminary community deeply engaged in prayer, suddenly I was overwhelmed by the strongest sensation of love I have ever felt. It washed over all of us in that chapel: those colleagues I liked and didn't like, the people who liked me and didn't like me and those who were indifferent. We were all embraced with this Love, and in that moment, I understood what Jesus was talking about in John's Gospel. We are one, not because of what we believed or thought or felt or said or did, but simply because God loves us. And because God loves us, it is possible to live together and work together and grow together into the people and priests God calls us to be.

It's as simple and mysterious and beautiful and complex as that.

This one-ness doesn't negate our differences, or our brokenness as people. And I don't want to make anyone who had to leave a dangerous or dead relationship or situation feel bad, because that is not what this is about. Sometimes we have to leave, sometimes that is what love looks like. I'm talking about times like seminary or when the band U2 was going through the transitions of growing up and growing together, when, if we are brave, we can let go of those things that make us broken, the hurts, the disagreements, the differences, when we can let God's Love into those broken places, that's when God works with us and in us to create something beautiful and timeless, something that speaks to the world of the Love of God in Jesus, so that everyone is shown that they too, are One with that Love. It happens any time we carry each other. That's how we can change the world and make it a better place, one more like God's Kingdom where we all know we are One.