

“When Deidra first told me about this book, I heard in her voice the heart and hope behind her work. I heard the struggle inherent in writing, researching, and attempting to live the core principles you’ll find in these pages. I also heard steady hope and faith. *One: Unity in a Divided World* is a moving and thoughtful critique of the status of oneness, restoration, reconciliation, and grace in America. This book will challenge, excite, transform, and inspire everyone who dreams of an end to division and polarization—in the Church, in our communities, in the workplace, in our homes, and in our very own souls.”

—John Perkins, cofounder, Christian Community Development Association; founder, John and Vera Mae Perkins Foundation for Reconciliation, Justice and Christian Community Development; author of *Dream with Me*

“*One: Unity in a Divided World* is not only a timely book for today’s Church, but it’s also desperately needed. We emerge from the wreckage of ‘culture wars’ and church splits broken and scarred. Prejudice and privilege have damaged us, relational dysfunction and division have seared our souls. We stand separated, alone. Yet Deidra dares to walk among the wreckage, uncovering truths, rediscovering words like *reconciliation, forgiveness, oneness, unity*. Tenaciously and tenderly she reminds us of an identity and calling lost and forgotten. If you’re searching for tools to help you rebuild unity in today’s divided world, learn from Deidra. She’s a wise, humble, and hope-filled guide.”

—Jo Saxton, speaker and author;
board chair of 3D Movements

“In *One: Unity in a Divided World*, Deidra points us toward change in our hearts. Unity must begin with each one of us before we can transform the Church. We the people must change! This is a timely book that will break through the ethnocentrism we have allowed to dictate our hearts and churches. The process toward reconciliation will begin in our hearts and communities first. *One* brings hope and healing to a divided and broken people. I highly recommend it to those seeking to understand the first and next steps toward racial unity.”

—Tasha Morrison, founder of Be the Bridge

ONE

Unity in a Divided World

Deidra Riggs



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For Mom and Dad
So Much Love

A Great Need

Out
Of a great need
We are all holding hands
And climbing.
Not loving is a letting go.
Listen,
The terrain around here
Is
Far too
Dangerous
For
That.

By Hafiz

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INTRODUCTION

The only reason I knew I'd hurt Steven's feelings is because he told me so. One afternoon, in a room at the church we both attended, Steven and I sat face-to-face, a table between us. I remember it like it was yesterday. He had asked if we could talk.

"Something you said to me really hurt my feelings," he'd said to me during a phone call. "Can we talk about it?"

I was completely caught off guard. I racked my brain trying to remember everything I'd ever said to this man I'd known for just a few weeks. My husband, Harry, was the new pastor of this church and I, the new pastor's wife, had already stumbled into my first altercation. Steven had become a fast friend to my husband and me. He greeted us warmly each Sunday in a comfortable way that made us feel welcomed. He did not put on airs. He did not try too hard. He liked cigarettes and beer and was doing his best as a single dad to raise his son. We liked Steven and were grateful for his friendship.

So when Steven told me I'd offended him, my heart sank. "Of course we can meet," I told him. We checked our calendars and found a day that worked well for both of us. The fixer in

me was frustrated that we couldn't just go ahead and get it over with right there on the phone, but I knew it would be best to meet face-to-face. That was important to Steven, and to me too.

Confrontation is a sticking point for many of us. Upon reaching an impasse with someone in our family, workplace, neighborhood, or church, we'd much rather avoid the situation than confront it. It feels easier to sweep the event under the rug or press it down inside of us. At face value, these seem like the less painful options. In some cases, we truly are able to release our hurt or disappointment without holding a grudge or letting it drive a wedge between us and the other person. Sometimes we really can work it out between us and God. From time to time we do find healing without ever needing to mention the discord to the other person.

More often than not, however, the thing just won't let us go. Each time we see that person or think of them, the impasse rises up to meet us. My body often tells me when I've let a situation get the best of me. I feel a tightness in my chest and a flush comes over my body. A pit opens up in my gut. My mind seems to ramp up a notch, as if it's preparing for a war of wits. Here's how I used to deal with people who got on my bad side: I put them on a mental list and made them work really hard to get off it. That was my go-to reaction. It was the wrong reaction.

Long before I spoke the words that offended Steven, God had begun to show me a new way of responding to people whose words or actions caused me pain. Using the teachings of Jesus found in Matthew 18, God began showing me how to respond when my feelings get hurt. What I learned is that when someone offends another person, God's way of responding is counterintuitive. God tells us to go directly to that person and

let them know. “Work it out between the two of you,” Jesus says to us (Matt. 18:15 Message). This passage is dealing specifically with sin in the body of Christ, but God has shown me the same principle applies when dealing with misunderstandings too. Jesus raises two important points in one short verse. First, he instructs us to go to that person and tell them what they’ve done. Second, we are admonished to keep it just between the two of us. Don’t broadcast the disagreement. Don’t shine a spotlight on the situation for all to see. Go quietly, with humility and respect, and face the offense together.

As I began to understand what God was showing me in Matthew 18, I slowly started to see confrontation as a gift God extends to us. God desires oneness and unity for us. When we hold grudges and add people to our unappealing short lists, we invite division and disunity. One way to stop discord in its tracks is to bring it out into the open, set it down on the table between you and the other person, and talk about it face-to-face. After all, the word *confront* means to “bring face-to-face.”¹ We can take courses, read books, and listen to podcasts, which give us specific techniques for dealing with confrontation, but I’ve found the very best instruction right in the pages of God’s Word. When we come to the table to talk face-to-face with someone who has offended us, or someone we have offended, these are the two very best things we can do: (1) be filled with the Holy Spirit, and (2) embrace the truth of the famous love chapter, which tells us love “is full of trust, full of hope” (1 Cor. 13:7 Weymouth).

Love Hopes the Best

Some would say we’ve gotten too generous with love. They say too much talk about love waters down the gospel. I would

caution us to reconsider. The good news of Jesus Christ is deeply rooted in love. However, the love we're talking about here is not weak or scripted. When we try to minimize the love-to-gospel ratio, we are treading on dangerous turf. I would argue that what we've watered down is not the gospel, but our understanding of love in the kingdom of God. This love transcends patriotism, ethnocentricity, language, belief, and even reciprocity. Consider the example of Christ who, in a supreme demonstration of God's love for us, died in our place *while we were yet sinners*. The love God calls us to is greater than life. To love like this is to live in such a way that, should we ever be faced with the choice, we too would pay with our lives as a demonstration of our love.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is God's love letter to his creation. We can no more water it down than we can convince God to stop loving us. We proclaim, along with Paul: "Christ's love compels us" (1 Cor. 5:14).

By the time Steven asked me if we could talk, I'd had many opportunities to test this theory of confrontation from Matthew 18 and find that it is true. Going straight to a person who has hurt me (and to that person only), filled with the Holy Spirit and full of trust and hope, is always better than the alternative. The alternative is to talk badly about that person to anyone who will listen. The alternative is to practice snarky speeches I will recite to that person the next time we meet. The alternative is to let my hurt seethe and roil beneath the surface until it morphs into anger and, inevitably, hatred.

I later learned that Steven *had* gone to someone else before he came to me. He told me he had talked to his grandmother and told her I'd said something that had hurt his feelings. And

do you know what Steven's grandmother did? She told him about Matthew 18. Then she told him he needed to talk with me face-to-face!

Sitting across from one another at a table, Steven and I each had our hopes solidly anchored in the words of Matthew 18 and confronted the issue at hand. Yes, it was awkward at first. He wanted to say what he had to say just right. I wanted him to know I was not his enemy. As the conversation progressed, it was clear that following God's process was worth it. Our conversation remained calm. No one yelled or acted defensively. I apologized. We prayed together.

If Steven had not confronted me, I never would have known I had hurt him. I probably would have kept on offending him and, over time, our friendship would have fallen apart. We would have avoided each other at church on Sundays, walking down opposite aisles and timing our arrivals so we wouldn't have to converse. I would have shrugged it off, blaming Steven for the rift between us, never realizing I'd been complicit in our friendship's demise. It doesn't matter that I never intended to hurt Steven. What matters is that he was hurt—and because of something I'd said. We found our way to that table through the power of the Holy Spirit. And thankfully, we came out remaining friends.

Later, when I began experiencing anxiety attacks (unrelated to my talk with Steven) that made it difficult for me to attend church, Steven and I sat together in the balcony for the service every Sunday. Our confrontation laid the foundation for a solid friendship. To this day, Harry and I both hold Steven in high esteem. God blessed our friendship. He reconciled us—through a face-to-face conversation at an ordinary table on a typical afternoon.

God's Invitation

I wrote this book because I think God has extended this same invitation to us. I believe God is inviting us to sit down face-to-face and deal with some of the stuff that keeps driving us further and further apart from one another.

Authors joke about giving birth to a book. We speak wryly about how writing a book is like cutting our wrists and bleeding out onto the page. We chuckle about excavating words, sentences, paragraphs, and chapters from somewhere within us we didn't know existed. Only, we are not joking. And there is no epidural for this.

Bringing new life into the world is risky business. The creative process requires a reckoning of heart, mind, body, and soul. We know our readers want us to get to the crux of the matter in a way that offers a tangibly satisfying answer to the question, "Who cares?"

The honest truth is that the words in this book scared me. I did not want to be the messenger of them. To do so meant I'd have to take my ideologies, experiences, preferences, and comfortable places and offer them up to God for examination. To explore the truth of what it means to be one and to work toward unity, I'd have to confront the schisms and divisions I've harbored in my heart and rationalized as justified. In other words, I'd have to come clean.

All of this was going on inside of me—all without my knowledge. I was afraid of the book, but I didn't know I was afraid. All I knew was that I was stuck. I could not write. Not a single word beyond the twenty thousand I had already written. With my deadline quickly approaching, I became a wrecking ball to anyone who dared ask how the book was coming along. I

shut down, and I shut people out. The less I wrote, the less I was able to write. I asked for an extension on my deadline. I scrapped the twenty thousand words I had. I cried. I stared into space. I prayed. Still, nothing.

Then one evening, while I was at a retreat, feeling as if all hope was lost, a gentle and kind woman walked up to me and said, “I really don’t want to do this, but I think God wants me to pray for you.” I had no leverage. I was out of options. So I told this sweet woman yes, and she prayed that I wouldn’t be afraid of the book. I don’t know how she knew I was afraid, but I needed that prayer. Her prayer seemed to come easily to her. It was not judgmental. She prayed like someone who was acquainted with prayer, but maybe not so much with walking up to someone and telling them they think God is asking them to pray for you. She was not showy or fancy. She was simply doing what she felt God was asking her to do. And her prayer broke me open.

I left her and wrote throughout that entire night and into the morning, without sleep. I wrote past the fear. I wrote out my biases and my prejudices so I could get to the crux of the matter—because that is the point, after all.

I wrote the bulk of this book longhand, in one of those Moleskine journals. The kind with a black cover and an elastic band. The elastic band wraps around the edge of the book when no one is writing in it, to keep it closed.

This book is a product of my body, and I don’t say that to be dramatic. It began inside of my brown, wide-hipped female body. It made its way onto the page through my cramped fingers—fingers that wrapped around a pen for hours each day. Together, the Messenger of this book, the prayers and good cheer of the faithful, and the physical work of my hands coaxed

these words out from the places they'd been hiding and into the light.

When I wrote the very last word of the last chapter of this book, I rose to my feet on the deck at the back of our home. My spine and rib cage, elbows and knees unhinged and unfolded. My muscles and tendons and ligaments lengthened. As I rose, I became aware of an ache, deep in the hollow of my left hip, in the space where the joint rests. I stood in the sun, the heel of my left hand pressing hard against the soft curve of my womanly hip, and I wondered why it hurt. The ache had not been there when that woman prayed for me that night. It had not been there when I began writing this book. But here it was, settling down into the depths of my left hip. When I moved to take my first step after writing that last word, I discovered a limp that had not been there before.

Slowly, like a Monarch butterfly on a lazy day in June, a single word floated across the fence of my backyard and marked a circuitous route to my consciousness. Solid and profound, it slipped between hand and hip and gave a name to the pain. “Jacob” was the one-word reminder, and I had to catch my breath. Indeed. I had wrestled my way with God through every black mark on each white page of this book that has found its way to you.

I imagine if you're reading this that you bring your own struggle to the page. I imagine you're walking with a limp of your own, or you are headed in that direction. Maybe you are out of breath from all the back and forth you've been doing with God about whatever it is that made you pick up this book. I suspect there are some schisms and divisions in your own soul that you've got to contend with before God.

You are welcome here.

A friend called the words on these pages a “treatise on oneness and unity.” I had to open my dictionary to discover whether treatise is a good thing or a bad thing. Ultimately, however, that will be for you to decide. Here’s what I’d like to suggest, if I may. I think it will help to bring your whole self to this book. Bring your body, your mind, your heart, and your soul. Bring your biases and your prejudices. Bring your hopes and your dreams. And bring your fears. Bring what makes you angry, along with the experiences that heal you. I’ve written some questions at the end of the book, should you feel an invitation from somewhere in your soul to venture a few steps further into the content of each chapter. Use the additional study for your personal growth or together with a group of trusted friends.

These are not hard words. At least not in my estimation. But they might just change something deep inside you as you work your way to the very last page. I pray these words gently bring us face-to-face with some of the hard truths about ourselves. I pray God’s grace will transform us. I trust God’s mercy to bring us to the very last word on the very last page of this book as people surrendered to the process of being reconciled first to God and then to ourselves, so we may finally be fully reconciled to others—even those we now call our “enemy.”

These are the dreams I have for us. I feel like that gentle and kind woman who prayed for me that night. I’m tucking my dreams into the prayer Jesus prayed for all of us on the night he was betrayed. “I pray that they will all be one,” Jesus said, “just as you and I are one—as you are in me, Father, and I am in you. And may they be in us *so that the world will believe you sent me*” (John 17:21, emphasis mine).

Oneness is God’s desire for us. Unity is what Jesus prayed for us. The odds are definitely in our favor.

One afternoon I was reading a chapter in a beautiful book when a few words rose up from somewhere within me, like a poem. I scrambled to find my Moleskine journal so I could write down the words before they drifted away. Slipping that elastic band off the edge of the book, I scribbled the words in green marker onto one of the few remaining blank pages in the journal:

*When I die, I want to be wide open.
I don't want to be tight-fisted, holding on
to grudges or regrets. I don't want to
have my back up because I'm still
defending the walls I've built and
the trenches I've dug and the invisible
lines I've drawn.
When I die, I want to go wide open.*

I hope this book breaks us wide open, to receive God's gift of oneness, unity, and reconciliation—in the trenches of life, yes, but also at ordinary tables, on typical afternoons.

ONE

A SOUL THAT HEARS WELL

The purpose is not to defeat your enemy, but to defeat the force that makes you hate each other. —Michelle Higgins

When my husband, Harry, was young, maybe three or four years old, his mom took him to a child's birthday party. Another boy at the party was bigger than Harry and fairly tough looking, as preschoolers go, but just a few weeks older than him. We'll call him David.

When Harry showed up at the birthday party, David was holding a helium-filled balloon. Spying the balloon, Harry walked up to David, looked into David's eyes, and said, "I'm going to take your balloon."

After Harry laid down the gauntlet, professing his intent to separate David from his balloon, David stared down his nose at Harry and said to him, "I will beat you up if you take my balloon."

Needless to say, Harry didn't get the balloon. He later recounted the details of the incident to his wise mom, who listened closely to the story and, in that moment, decided the best way to handle the situation would be to set up a playdate for Harry and David. She contacted David's mom, arranged a day for them to get together, and the next thing anyone knew, Harry and David were becoming best friends.

Their friendship grew and their families became close. They traveled together and spent holidays together; they grieved together and celebrated together.

Then one day, when Harry and David were about ten or twelve years old, David became very sick. He spiked a high fever—high enough that David had to be hospitalized. After he arrived at the hospital, David fell into a coma and the doctors and nurses worked resolutely to restore his health. Harry's family gathered to offer support and, thankfully, David began to recover. On the day David awoke from his coma, he asked to see Harry.

Being just a young boy, Harry had been fairly oblivious to the details of David's illness. All he knew was his friend was sick, so when Harry's mom told him David was awake and wanted to see him, Harry didn't think twice. He got in the car so his parents could drive him to the hospital to sit with David.

All these years later—almost five decades!—Harry and David remain close friends.

When I hear a story like this, I start feeling all warm and fuzzy on the inside and think to myself, *I love a story that ends well like that*. It's easy for me to forget how one wise and seasoned mother positively impacted the trajectory of this story. When Harry and David met, both were focused only

on having that balloon. Harry's mom, however, was focused on the relationship between the young boys.

Isn't that how it goes? As those two boys saw it, getting that balloon was most important. But there was just one balloon and that one balloon could not be divided. Only one boy could have it, and each assumed the balloon should belong to him. As David saw it, the balloon was his in the first place. But, as Harry saw it, the balloon was something he wanted, and Harry was used to getting what he wanted.

In her great wisdom, Harry's mom knew more was at stake than just a balloon. What mattered most was the relationship between these two boys, and the impact a friendship could have on them both.

What's at Stake

When I watch my brothers and sisters in the body of Christ argue with one another or hear of churches splitting up or notice a congregation or conference with little to no diversity, I have to wonder what's at stake. I wonder what it would take to set up a playdate of sorts so we could try to figure out what common ground might look like. I wonder what answers I might get if I started asking questions like, "What's at stake for you here? Why are you arguing so loudly and calling people names? Why can't we keep worshiping together? Why can't we figure out how to add some people of color (*or* some white people or some women or some fill-in-the-blank, depending on the situation) to the speaker lineup? What are we clinging to so tightly?"

What's "at stake" for you?

Despite our good intentions, passion for justice, or desire to "defend the gospel," we often let ourselves get in the way.

In his book *The Road to Character*, David Brooks emphasizes this tendency:

The United States ambassador to the United Nations, Samantha Power, perceptively observes that some people put themselves “at stake” when they get involved in a cause. That is to say, they feel that their own reputation and their own identity are at stake when decisions are made. *They are active in the cause in part because of what it says about them, and they want their emotions and their identity and their pride to be validated along the way.*¹ (emphasis mine)

This question of identity is a crucial element in the journey toward the oneness Jesus desires for us. If we can extricate our identity from the result of any discussion, argument, debate, or conversation, we stand a much better chance of achieving the harmony we so richly desire. Our identity is not impacted by whether or not others agree with us, or even by what others think about us. Instead, finding the right perspective on *who we are* is based on understanding *whose we are*. If I can rest in the confidence of knowing that neither my reputation nor my identity is founded on whether I “win” a particular argument or choose the “right” side, my investment becomes less and less about proving you wrong and more about building a relationship with you. A relationship based not on the ways we differ but on the elements of our stories, personalities, and experiences that enrich, stretch, and refine each of us.

Of course, this doesn’t mean our differences automatically disappear. They don’t. Nor should they. All kinds of differences contribute to the beautiful fabric of God’s creation. As we grow in relationship with one another, our differences

become supporting players in the main act of what we are building together.

Passing Through

In a 2012 podcast, Krista Tippett interviewed Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, who said, “[We] are enlarged by the people who are different from us.”²

This is a profound thought, and it calls each of us to invite God to broaden our horizons, expand our views, and stretch us by teaching us how to pass through the differences of those who journey with us—but not like us. What does it mean to *pass through our differences*? We pass through our differences by being fully present when we encounter them. With our full attention, we give praise to God for his creative work, made manifest in the unique makeup of each person we meet. We suspend judgment—and pray others do the same for us. We listen with our hearts and let our view of things take a breather. As Terry Tempest Williams writes, “Can we listen with our whole beings, not just our minds, and offer our attention rather than our opinions?”³

Either we lean into all of who the other person is, or we don’t. Either we acknowledge, celebrate, and honor the differences between us or we ignore or disparage them and, by extension, cut short the potential for experiencing the fullness of the relationship—the depth of the friendship. Passing through our differences does not ignore or negate them. But passing through them, rather than pushing against them, lets us absorb and be absorbed by the things that make us different from one another. We pass through our differences again and again. This is not the same as wallowing in them until they

become all we see. We pass through them in celebration and thanksgiving to God for his extravagant creativity and rich imagination. The direct result of passing through these differences is that we each stand as better, richer, more complete representations of God's image in the world. Passing through leads from the heart. The opposite is bracing against. Passing through our differences is an exercise in grace. Grace is essential to finding oneness.

An Understanding Heart

I often wonder how best to help us find our way to *oneness*, which is not the same as *sameness*. How can we help take the focus off our personal, metaphorical, helium-filled balloons and get us to collectively focus on what matters most of all?

I guess one step might be to identify the balloon, right? For some of us, the balloon might represent power, health, comfort, wealth, safety, or the conviction of being right or justified or vindicated. For others, the balloon might represent freedom, status, peace, or shelter—for ourselves or for others. Or maybe we're simply driven by the fact that all we've ever known is the importance of hanging on to our balloon. No matter what.

While Harry and David may have gotten distracted by that birthday balloon, let's be fair in our conversation here. Many of the disputes in our history have had, at their root, the question of who gets to claim ownership of something (or—when we're at our very worst—*someone*). One of the most intriguing accounts of this type of dispute is outlined in the Old Testament book of 1 Kings.

In that story, two prostitutes present themselves to King Solomon, asking him to resolve a dispute between them.

“Please, my lord,” one of them began, “this woman and I live in the same house. I gave birth to a baby while she was with me in the house. Three days later this woman also had a baby. We were alone; there were only two of us in the house.

“But her baby died during the night when she rolled over on it. Then she got up in the night and took my son from beside me while I was asleep. She laid her dead child in my arms and took mine to sleep beside her. And in the morning when I tried to nurse my son, he was dead! But when I looked more closely in the morning light, I saw that it wasn’t my son at all.”

Then the other woman interrupted, “It certainly was your son, and the living child is mine.”

“No,” the first woman said, “the living child is mine, and the dead one is yours.” And so they argued back and forth before the king.

Then the king said, “Let’s get the facts straight. Both of you claim the living child is yours, and each says that the dead one belongs to the other. All right, bring me a sword.” So a sword was brought to the king.

Then he said, “Cut the living child in two, and give half to one woman and half to the other!”

Then the woman who was the real mother of the living child, and who loved him very much, cried out, “Oh no, my lord! Give her the child—please do not kill him!”

But the other woman said, “All right, he will be neither yours nor mine; divide him between us!”

Then the king said, “Do not kill the child, but give him to the woman who wants him to live, for she is his mother!”
(1 Kings 3:17-27 NLT)

The women who stood before the king were motivated by intense feelings of loss and fear, grief and shame, anger and pain. Imagine yourself in their place. At first, it may be

tempting to jump to the defense of the woman whose child was alive and had been stolen in the night by the woman whose child had died. “How could anyone steal another woman’s child?” we may be tempted to ask. But what must it be like to wake up and discover your child’s lifeless body there beside you in the bed, and then to realize their life had slipped away while they lay sleeping, beneath your own body? How must that impact your sense of reality? It was a tragic situation, to be sure, and the two women found themselves at an impasse. Blinded by their very real and legitimate anguish, these two women sought a solution in the court of the king.

This story has stood the test of time as an example of the great wisdom of this young king. Not long before these two women stood before him, desperate for a resolution, King Solomon had asked God for an understanding heart to lead his people, and God granted his request (see 1 Kings 3:9–12). Many translations of the Bible render the phrase *understanding heart* as wisdom, and that’s not far from the truth. However, we get closer to the true meaning of Solomon’s request when we return to the original language for the phrase “understanding heart”: שָׁמַע לֵב, pronounced *shama’ leb*.

Shama’ means “to hear, listen to, obey.” Maybe you’re familiar with the Jewish prayer found in Deuteronomy 6, which begins, “Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one” (v. 4). This prayer, called the Shema (based on this same Hebrew word for “hear”) is a call to remember and revere the foundational truths of the Jewish faith. Solomon would have known this prayer. As he asked God for an understanding heart, Solomon may have been rooting his request in a deep-seated devotion and desire to honor the God of his fathers as he sought to rule fairly over God’s people.

While *leb* means “heart,” it refers to more than the organ with four chambers that pumps blood through our bodies. *Heart*, in this instance, means inner person, mind, will, understanding. In this instance, the word *heart* is closer in meaning to the word *soul*. And so, what King Solomon was really asking for from God was a soul that hears well; a soul that listens and then, based on what it hears, chooses the path that best honors God and serves others.

Looking at those two distraught mothers standing before him, King Solomon must have recalled his request for an understanding heart. Each woman had a lot at stake as they stood there, presenting their cases and awaiting his verdict. Like Harry’s mother, who had to make a decision about how to deal with two boys who wanted the same balloon, King Solomon desired an outcome that would have a deeper impact than a simple decision *about* the baby. Solomon, as God’s ambassador, was even more concerned about the heart of each woman who stood in his court, seeking justice. He was equally concerned about the heart of that child who would live his life under the import of Solomon’s decision. Solomon’s decision was *for* the baby. And Solomon’s focus didn’t stop there. His decision was also *for* the women. Both of the women.

Longing to Be Right

You and I might quickly look at two boys arguing over who gets to keep a birthday balloon or two distraught women seeking justice when only one baby is left between them, and try to figure out which one is “right.” A longing to be right is often at the heart of our arguments, our divided churches, and our small social circles where everyone thinks and looks and lives

exactly like us. We choose a side, and we fight for that side. When we do this, our focus is calibrated toward *about* rather than *for*.

What Solomon's and Harry's mothers knew is that being "right" isn't the goal. Jesus didn't say, "I have come that they may be right." It's easy to get confused. I know this, because I've done it. I've gotten mixed up and thought the whole reason Jesus came to earth, died on the cross, and then rose from the dead was to make sure I am always right (I'm sure my family members will gladly confirm this confusion that sometimes overtakes me). But what Jesus actually said was, "I have come that they may have life" (John 10:10). I know—"be right" and "have life" sound a lot alike. But let's be clear: it's life that Jesus came to give us. And not just any life. What Jesus came to offer us is *abundant life*.

When I do the math, the promise of abundant life carries more potential than a life in which I am always right. What a boorish lot that would make us all, if we were all always *right*, right? In fact, consider these thoughts from David Brooks:

We are all sinners together. To be aware of sin is to feel intense sympathy toward others who sin. It is to be reminded that as the plight of sin is communal, so the solutions are communal. We fight sin together, as communities and families, fighting our own individual sins by helping others fight theirs.⁴

In Western culture, we are not so familiar with this communal perspective. We are individualists who often experience life with our needs and desires at the center of our focus. In contrast, cultures that foster a communal, or collective, perspective consider the group or the community to be of greater concern. I'm not here to say that one of these perspectives is

correct and the other is not. My point is simply to present these two perspectives for our consideration. It's helpful to identify the perspective that best fits us as we think about how we work our way to the other side of our divisions—as individuals and as communities. Of course, whether we resonate more with an individualistic or a collective perspective, God's invitation to abundant life doesn't excuse us from the weight and consequence of our sin. As David Brooks reminds us, "We are all sinners together." Miraculously, once we realize this, we also understand that a benefit of having access to God is being empowered by the Holy Spirit to focus on loving our neighbor, without being concerned about whether our neighbor is right.

How Do We Love Well?

So, if this is true, how does it change the way we live today, in this moment, with all of the people in this world who think, act, believe, and live differently than we do? How do we love God in a culture and context filled with people with whom we disagree?

Let's begin here: God loves us. He loves all of us. God loves women who've had abortions. God loves men who dress in drag. God loves people who kill unarmed black men in America. God loves terrorists. God loves people who cheat on their taxes. God loves people who shoot to kill in movie theaters and elementary schools and then turn the guns on themselves. God loves the man who cheats on his wife, and God loves the wife abandoned by that man. God loves the woman who sleeps with a married man. God loves the person who cheats on a final exam. God loves the mom who lies about her drug use. And God loves the son who falls in love with the boy next door.

It is precisely because God loves us that he chose to reconcile us to himself. William E. Pannell says it this way: “Love precedes reconciliation, as Paul argues in his Corinthian letter—it was the love of Christ that was the wellspring of all his actions.”⁵

But love is hard. It’s easier to draw a line in the sand and then determine who’s on our side and who isn’t. It’s easier to try to decide who gets the balloon and who doesn’t. It’s the way we often operate, isn’t it? The haves and the have-nots. The Democrats and the Republicans. The police and the unarmed black man. Straight people and gay people. The Jews and the Gentiles. The clean and the unclean. There is nothing new under the sun.

Whatever keeps me from loving my neighbor is in direct opposition to God’s desire for my life and for the body of Christ. God desires oneness, but when I let something come between me and my neighbor, I am living the opposite of that desire. That’s not to say we should all “just get over” our hurts and disappointments. This is a lifelong journey. We take steps forward, and we take steps backward. The goal, however, is to not give up hope. The goal is to invite God to continually make all things new—in our relationships and in our view of others; even our enemies. We are seekers trying to figure out a way to navigate this great tension between God’s promise to us of abundant life and the reality of a world with limited resources and people who scare, confuse, and misunderstand us.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). This verse is an old favorite, right? It doesn’t matter if you’ve been in church all your life or if you’ve

never set foot in a sanctuary. You've probably heard some version of this verse sometime during your life. You may even have it committed to memory or matched up to some melody in your mind. But what does it mean, really?

Eugene Peterson paraphrases that famous passage in this way:

This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life. God didn't go to all the trouble of sending his Son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. He came to help, to put the world right again. (John 3:16–17 Message)

Remember: God sent his Son as the culmination of his great plan to win us back to himself. Now, the Bible tells us that we have this ministry of reconciliation—of living at one with God, ourselves, and one another (see 2 Cor. 5:19). Paul calls us Christ's ambassadors, and these are our marching orders:

God put the world square with himself through the Messiah, giving the world a fresh start by offering forgiveness of sins. God has given us the task of telling everyone what he is doing. We're Christ's representatives. God uses us to persuade men and women to *drop their differences* and enter into God's work of making things right between them. We're speaking for Christ himself now: Become friends with God; he's already a friend with you. (2 Cor. 5:18–20 Message, emphasis mine)

God is calling us to fill the role of the wise parent or the wise young king mediating a dispute between two distraught members of his community. As God's ambassadors, we are

called to raise the level of discourse and bring healing to those who are hurting and who draw deep lines of division or build tall walls of separation. Parker J. Palmer, author and founder of the Center for Courage and Renewal, states it this way:

Today we . . . need to find a Third Way. That does not mean making cheap compromises, as in, “I’ll stop caring about the poor if you’ll stop caring about more money for the military.” Instead it means holding our differences in ways that open us to possibilities we never would have imagined if we had failed to hang in with each other.⁶

To live into the oneness Jesus desires for us, we must keep hanging in with one another.

We are called to courageously own up to the ways we’ve drawn our own lines and built our own walls. This is how we love well. When we get called on the carpet for our complicity in systems, perspectives, and practices that divide, we act like the humbled basketball player who gets caught traveling on the court: we raise our hand and ’fess up. “My bad,” we say. We take the penalty. We make course corrections. We apologize. We lament. We recognize that, though we are called to elevate the conversation, we are not above the conversation or immune to our own prejudices. And when someone from the other team raises her hand and says, “My bad,” we do not shout her down or shut her out. Always, always, always, oneness is our goal.

An understanding of the Third Way lies at the end of the road to personal reconciliation. We must be reconciled first to God, and to ourselves, before we can be reconciled to one another or be agents of reconciliation in the world. This personal reconciliation is at the heart of the Great Commandment,

through which Jesus entreats us to love God and then love others as we love ourselves.⁷ Slowly, as we grow in love for God and for ourselves, we also grow in our ability to direct attention away from the superficial distractions (distractions designed by our true enemy to keep us suspicious of one another) and toward the oneness Jesus prayed for us. Sometimes this ability is a function of being an adult who mediates a dispute between their child and another person's child. Other times the ability to see the Third Way is the result of the supernatural intervention of, and our surrender to, the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Time and Spirit

We are often the child at the birthday party and a playdate is the very last thing on our minds. Other times, we are deeply and sincerely wounded and grieved, blinded by our own distress and in need of someone who will help us find our way. In moments like these, time helps us grow and the Holy Spirit heals us. While we await the work of time and Spirit, we also wait for the right moment to extend the invitation to a conciliatory playdate. There's no need to force a playdate when the time just isn't right or we are simply not ready for it. The work of time and Spirit is also part of the journey toward oneness, prepping us and shoring us up for that moment of rolled-up sleeves, hard conversations, and the staggering work of forgiveness. Let time and Spirit do their jobs. Reap the benefits of their care and wisdom. Then, once their work has been fulfilled, the places in our souls that once sagged wide open and where our grief and distress threatened to erase our voice, our hope, and the embrace of our holy identity stands a bit taller.

The Myth of Scarcity

Our enemy wants us to believe there's not enough goodness to go around. Our enemy has us surveying the landscape for the most desirable plot of grass atop the most fertile soil. We drive a stake into the ground, tie a flag to that stake, gather our people to ourselves, and dig a trench around the whole shebang. It is a never-ending torrent of division and separation. It is the opposite of oneness and reconciliation. And it is built on a myth that has worked so well for so long that we have come to mistake it for the truth.

The myth of scarcity tells the powerful to accumulate and take and dominate, to be driven by the fear of Not Enough and Never Enough. We make our decisions out of fear and anxiety that there isn't enough for us. These core beliefs can lead us to the treacheries of war and hunger, injustice and inequality. We must keep others down so we can stay on top. We stockpile money and food and comforts at the expense of one another and our own souls. Throughout Scripture, we can see the myth of scarcity's impact on—and even within—the nation of Israel. The prophets wrote and stood in bold criticism against the empire's myth of scarcity that built on the backs of the poor and oppressed.⁸

This belief that there is not enough to go around, not enough of God's blessing or favor or goodness, keeps us insulated and in our silos—our buildings, our doctrines, our programs, and our budgets. Meanwhile, the world is watching us as we stand on our islands with our backs turned outward and our shoulders hunched.

I've looked for some deep meaning in the word *one* Jesus used in his prayer in John 17. But everything I read points to

a simple, uncomplicated meaning of the oneness Jesus was speaking of. The oneness Jesus referred to was, quite simply, one. Undivided.

Of course, a person could substitute the word *reconciled* for the word *one*.

I don't have this all figured out; I'm on the same journey you're on. I struggle with wanting what I want when I want it. I struggle with making sure my anger doesn't guide me when faced with injustice or naysayers or angry people who try to quiet me down. I have to work at not putting other people down so that, when compared to *my* version of them, I come out smelling like roses. I am like the early Christians who had hoped for a valiant warrior who would teach them to slay ten thousand men with one awesome flourish of the sword. I want to be the bloody victor. I want to be the winner, and I want the world to stand up and take notice.

But Jesus's strategy is subversive, to the extreme. According to Jesus, everything we think we know about winning has to do with losing. Everything we think we know about gaining has to do with letting go.

God went first. He emptied himself. He humbled himself. He gave up his life in our place. The entire story of the Bible—from Genesis through Revelation—is a story of reconciliation. This God keeps hanging in with us, and he's motivated by love. The work of reconciliation weaves together being reconciled to God, being reconciled to yourself, and being reconciled to those around you. By this, the world will know that Jesus was sent by God.

When I disparage my neighbor, when I justify my dislike of my sister in Christ, when I rationalize my acts of unkindness or injustice, I am guilty of sin. When I mock or shame or

exclude or ridicule—and especially when I do it in the name of Christ—I am in the wrong. When I turn a deaf ear or a blind eye to those who are gasping for breath, and when I tell the woman caught in adultery that she deserves what she gets, I have wandered off the narrow path and need someone to point me back to the Third Way.

When I imagine the Third Way, it looks like a vast table or a gigantic wraparound porch. My friend John Blase, a poet and theologian, describes it like this:

Everyone's here. . . . It was a late summer picnic, people were wearing shorts, and there were stop-traffic legs but also regular-old legs. Speaking of legs, there were all these vets whose legs had been stolen in combat, and their legs had all been returned, and they were running around chasing each other like boys while their dear mothers stood with tears in their eyes and hands on their hips saying *Now wouldja just look at that*. Suddenly I feared there would not be enough food for everyone, but a young Natalie Wood cleared her throat and eased me: *John, there's so much here. This is the everlasting*. All my family and friends were there, plus famous people I've followed over the years like Johnny and June Carter. Yet also people I wouldn't have necessarily chosen to invite. But when I saw their faces, I couldn't help but feel a gathering tenderness toward them, so I walked over and could not stop saying, *I'm so glad you're here*. One of them, an older man who took his life when I was a young preacher, said, *Me too*. It was then I began to weep because I realized I, too, was a guest. And with God as my witness, that was such a gorgeous thought for this first-born who usually tries to ensure everyone's having a good time at the party, but there in that next place, I saw we were all free at last to lay down every role, real or perceived, every burden great or small. Everyone was there, and it was like we were laved in the eternal light of talk after dinner.⁹

Reconciliation invites everyone to the table, the wraparound porch, the picnic on a summer afternoon. All of us, even those we wouldn't have necessarily chosen to invite. And isn't that the point? We are not in charge of the guest list. We are guests along with everyone else.