

## DIFFERENCE IS A GIFT

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I grew up hearing a lie.

The culture around me taught me a lie. Everywhere I turned the lie was confirmed. And that lie found its way into my faith.

Yes, my faith taught me many wonderful and inspiring things. The church taught me that Jesus loved me, a gangly, pimply, awkward teenager. The church taught me that God had a purpose for my life, a purpose that involved friends and love and service. Yes, the church taught me many things, but my church also taught me one big lie. And that lie was that I was not different, that I was just like the person next to me.

To understand why that is a lie, let me tell you a bit about my story. I was born in Puerto Rico, the most beautiful island in the world. I grew up speaking Spanish in my home, eating *arroz con gandules* and *tostones*. When I was five years old, my parents sent me to an English-speaking school. At that point, I knew how to say “Hello,” “Yes,” “No,” and, most importantly, “Where is the bathroom?” But when you are five years old, language comes relatively easily. I learned English quickly. And so I lived in two worlds: an English-speaking world at school but a Spanish-speaking world everywhere else. That all changed when we moved to Slidell, Louisiana. There, I learned quickly that I was no longer at home. For one, I wore my socks all wrong! The style back home was to wear socks up to your knees. Not so much where I moved. The other kids, as you can imagine, were quick to remind me to wear my socks the “right” way.

But I was adaptable. I figured out how to blend in so much so that my friends growing up would eventually say, “You know, I don’t even see you as Puerto Rican. You’re just like us. You’re one of us.” As a teenager, I was relieved to finally fit in! But now I see things differently.

You see, my friends were trying to be generous and welcoming and loving. They wanted me to feel at home, to feel like I had a place. But in denying who I was, in denying the language I spoke at home and the food I ate, in denying my culture, they denied a critical part of who God made me to be. In trying to include me, they embraced only part of me.

Here’s the truth: God does not create *generic* people. God created me. God created you. God created the languages we speak. God created the cultures where we find meaning. God created our differences. God loves our differences. God does not want us to be the same at all. Your God-given value is in the unique, particular, beautiful way that God created you and you alone.

We are not all the same and that's okay. In fact, God made me and you and everyone else in the world different and beautiful. Our differences are a gift from God. God wants us to be different because our differences are reflections of God's creativity and God's grace.

The Bible teaches us exactly this, but I think we have missed it. Do you remember the story of Pentecost? Do you remember when the untamed Holy Spirit made a hot mess among the disciples?

The disciples are all gathered together in one place waiting for a promise, a promise Jesus made to them. Suddenly, the wind picks up. Tongues like fire rain down from the heavens. And those tongues bring with them a precious gift, the Holy Spirit. And with the Spirit's grand arrival, something incredible happens. The disciples begin speaking in languages from every corner of the world. Everyone that day hears the good news of the love of Jesus in *their own language*. This is an amazing moment.

Raise your hand if you have ever tried to learn a new language. It's easy, right? ...

Language is never just about words. Language is about culture and family and food and everything that helps give our life meaning. Language is about having the words to say who I am, who we are. You encounter the holiness of another person when you can hear their language. But also language is complex and messy, as complex and messy as our identities! Languages have rules, but languages break those rules all the time. Some languages have words that we just can't translate! For example, there is a Spanish word *sobremesa*. *Sobremesa* refers to those wonderful conversations you have after dinner when everyone is done eating, but the dishes haven't been put away. Spanish can say all that in one word! Some languages like to put verbs at the beginning of sentences, others at the end. Some put adjectives in front of nouns, others go the other way.

A new language is a hard thing to learn, so notice what God does at Pentecost. God does not ask us to learn a new language. God does not create a new, perfect language that everyone can understand. God does not make us learn God's language.

Instead, God learns and speaks in the many languages of the world. God learns and speaks in all the complexities of our languages. God learns and speaks the languages that will most touch our souls, that will most clearly communicate to you and to me and to everyone else the wonders of a God whose love knows no end. No matter what language you speak, God speaks to you. No matter what culture shaped you, God meets you there. No matter who you are, God sees you and communicates with you in ways that you can understand.

And one more thing! Think about how difficult it is to learn another language, how another language refuses to fit into the grammatical and lexical and semantic and syntactical boxes we have in our own language. Notice that languages have different words, different ideas, different imagination imbedded within them. And then wonder this with me: did everyone gathered at Pentecost hear the same good news, the same gospel? What if the wholeness of the gospel, the breadth and depth of the good news of Jesus cannot be contained by any single language, any single set of experiences, any single culture? What if the breadth and depth of the gospel was

found not in one language but in the many? What if we can only learn the fullness of the gospel by turning to a neighbor at Pentecost who heard the good news in a different language and ask them what did you hear? What did you hear in your words? Pentecost teaches us that the good news can only be found by turning to our diverse neighbors and asking them for their stories and sharing with them our own stories.

So, what does this mean for you and for me?

It means that when we look around at our neighborhoods, our nation, our world and see more and more diversity, we should not worry. *These are not burdens.* When we see migrants and refugees clamoring to join our communities, we should not worry. *These people are not a problem we need to solve with a wall.* When LGBTQ+ neighbors share their stories of exclusion and rejection in churches where they should be included and embraced, we should not return to worn out ideas about whom God has made us to be. When we hear the cries of our LGBTQ+ neighbors and their call for equality and belonging, we should not retreat in fear. These kin of ours are not a hurdle our churches have to cross nor a mere “issue” we put up for a vote. We should not see our differences as an obstacle on the way to becoming the church God wants us to be. In fact, God wants us to be different, calls us to be different.

It means noticing that diversity is not a problem that we need to solve but the very place where God acts most powerfully. The problems we face are not because we are different, because we are of different races and genders and orientations. The problem we face is that sinful and dangerous proposition that our differences are a way to figure who belongs and who doesn't, that our differences are a way to tell some people “Welcome” and others “You have no place here.” This is what we call sin. Taking a gift God gave us and turning it inside out and upside down. Our differences are a gift from God, ways in which we can see God's mighty acts of grace. And we have turned them into ways to exclude instead of love.

I have two beautiful, brilliant, awesome kids. Elena and Nico are Puerto Rican like their dad and white like their mom. Their identities are wonderfully complex. But so often our culture is not ready to deal with their complex identities. When we first enrolled them at our local school, we had to fill out a form with all the typical information: name, birth date, address. But the form also required us to identify their race. There was no option for my children on that form. They are not white or Latinx. They are both!

The administrator who was helping us told us we had to pick a box and only one box. A neighbor shared with us that when they found themselves in a similar situation, they were going to refuse to pick a box. The administrators told them that if they did not pick a box, someone would come to their child's classroom to look at them and pick a race for them! {Say a bit more. Data is important. The point isn't that we need no boxes.}

God has called us to the big stuff of life in all these ordinary moments. The disease of racism, the plight of hatred may not end in our lifetimes. But by ordinary, everyday acts of courage by people like you and me, by following God's embrace of diversity in ways both great and small, God will show up in your life in a mighty way.

The truth is that I need you to be Christians who make a difference. You are the church who will help make our churches places where difference is embraced not feared.

You are the church where my children don't have to pick a single box, where their wonderfully complex stories are not problems but gifts from God. You are the church where they will feel welcomed and embraced. And they are welcomed and embraced because it was God, after all, who made them this way.

God does not create *generic* people. God created me. God created you. God created the languages we speak. God created the cultures where we find meaning. God created our differences. God loves our differences. God does not want us to be the same at all. Your God-given value is in the unique, particular, beautiful way that God created you and you alone.

I grew up hearing a lie. But God's truth is that we are all wonderfully and beautifully and differently made. God's truth is that we are all called to hear and care for and carry each other's stories with compassion and curiosity. God's truth is that we are burdened with each other's stories.

So share your story with others. Place that beautiful burden on someone else's shoulders. And then listen to the stories of others, especially those others whose stories are nothing like yours. Carry their burdens. But don't change their stories... or the way they wear their socks. Don't put their stories in your language. In the end, we'll find that these burdens are light because in these burdens God frees us to see God's truth that we are all wonderfully and marvelously and differently made.

#### Benediction

May God bless us with the precious gift of someone else's story.

May God bless us with the presence of God's face in the face of the stranger.

May God bless us with the good news that we are not mistakes but God's very creative act.