

Prejudice Is More Than Black and White

If racial differences are not a stumbling block for you, great. But like me, you may be prejudiced and not know it.

Most prejudiced people see through a black or white glass. But I grew up judging through a multifaceted prism the many races, cultures and ethnic groups that surrounded me.

I was born in Puerto Rico to a Cuban family, which makes me “Hispanic”—the general descriptor for people from all Spanish-speaking countries, regardless of racial background or ethnicity. Growing up Cuban meant that I learned at an early age to be proud of who I am and where I came from. (I can trace my family history back through four generations in Cuba all the way to the Basque region of Spain.) It also meant that I inherited a good dose of prejudice—the sort of prejudice that becomes a way of thinking and clouds one’s perception of life.

You see, Latinos are prejudiced against other Latinos. We have our own “rating system,” in which some countries of origin are viewed as more prestigious than others, some races are more accepted than others and some dialects of Spanish are considered better than others. For example, Cubans and Argentineans have always perceived themselves as the “elite.” A famous joke in Latin America states that the definition of “ego” is the little Argentinean or Cuban inside all of us.

But in my family prejudice was not aimed only at Latinos—and at times it was very subtle. When I was young, I was honored to hear the story of how my family had befriended a black man named Juan whom my great-grandfather employed in the family business. Every day my great-grandmother made sure there was

enough food for Juan to eat with the family.

What I did not consider until many years later is that the family never spoke about him as Juan; he was always Juan, el negrito (John, the little black boy), and he always came in the house through the kitchen door. Furthermore, the plate, silverware and glass he used the first day he sat at my family's table became his forever. Yet I was taught to be proud of the way my family "welcomed" blacks.

When I was older, I was discouraged from dating boys who were not Cuban, with the exception of Anglo boys from the United States. The goal was to preserve—or improve—the family line.

In high school I developed a close friendship—not romantic—with a young man from Panama who was mulato (half black, half white). I still remember the speech I got in which I was discouraged to continue the friendship because of what our neighbors would think! After all, we were in a new country (my parents had emigrated to Puerto Rico from Cuba when Fidel Castro established a communist dictatorship there), and we needed to prove our worth. In college I once dated a guy from Mexico, and my dad's reaction was so strong you would have thought he was having a heart attack!

My parents were also concerned about my choice of college—Auburn University in Alabama. I received a long lecture about the "backward" thinking of southerners, who "think Latinos are a weird mix of brown and do not understand that we are not all the same." I was warned that I would be viewed as a minority.

Sadly, I found that many of the warnings I received were not completely unfounded. It was in Alabama that I came face to face with the ugly side of prejudice and was discriminated against—though most of the prejudice I encountered was based more on ignorance than on hate.

Many people did not know I was Hispanic because I did not look

Mexican. You have no idea how many times I had to explain that Latinos are not all Mexican! Blacks who would never consider dating white women (that is prejudice too!) thought I was somewhere in-between and considered me "exotic." Anglo men thought I was European.

To everyone, I was "different." I made the effort to deal with every negative encounter with humor and grace, always trying to educate people on the Latino way of life. Some days my experiences bordered on ridiculous; others turned into funny anecdotes I will share with my grandchildren someday.

While attending the university, I gave my heart to the Lord. Slowly but surely, God began to deal with the prejudice and judgmental attitude that had been ingrained in me since my earliest years. I had to look in the mirror and realize that I, too, was a prejudicial person.

If racial differences are not an issue for you, you may not consider yourself prejudiced. But I have discovered that each of us has some form of prejudice of which we are unaware. My family was wealthy and educated and completely ignorant of their prejudice. Today, they are professionals who contribute to society—yet are still prejudiced!

Why? Because their way of thinking has been passed down from generation to generation, and no one has acknowledged that it is wrong. The same wrong thinking applies to the black and white students I met in college and—dare I say it?—the well-intentioned Christians I have met in many churches. I'm talking about white churches, black churches and Latino churches. I'm talking about the United States as well as Latin America and Europe.

We are all predisposed to judge or be prejudicial against that which we consider foreign or unknown. We make attempts to reach out to those "other" groups, but our efforts fall short because we are still focused on our differences—and that is

not what God calls us to. He calls us to unity—the sort of unity that allows us to celebrate our differences while we make the effort to be color-blind, nationality blind and even socially blind.

It's time to acknowledge that prejudice is more than black and white. Whether you realize it or not, you may have inherited some subtle form of prejudice that prevents you from seeing others through God's eyes.

So why not take the challenge today and allow God to deal with your heart? Then make an effort to get to know others based on who they are inside, not on where they came from or what color their skin is. You might be surprised to find they are a lot like you!

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