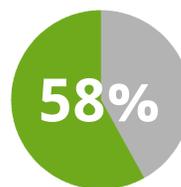


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“These people?”



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My friend, whom we'll call Manny, is no stranger to religious and ethnic conflicts. Manny lives in a place where tensions between different racial, ethnic and religious communities run high—and the flames are often fanned by people seeking power of various kinds. (To one degree or another and, whether we admit it or not, the same is true of all of us. Our televisions, cities or even neighborhoods are places where conflicts rooted in racial, ethnic, religious or other differences seem to be never-ending.) Still, in the midst of it all, Manny was surprised.

Years earlier, he had gone through the pain of being expelled from the community into which he was born. He was even cast out of his own family. When he publicly declared his faith in Jesus as Savior and Lord, his family experienced a tsunami of shame in the eyes of their tightly-knit community. The family had to do **something** to restore their honor as a family within the community. Unwilling to kill him, they did the only other honorable thing. They cut him out of the family entirely. So, Manny had lived through gut-wrenching pain in his own family as a result of a faith commitment. Still, Manny was surprised.

By the grace of God, Manny had rebuilt his life, moving to a city and identifying no longer with the community into which he was born, but throwing himself whole-heartedly into the life of the group known as Christians. So, when his pastor preached the Great Commission from Matthew 28, Manny lived it. He went out into his world to tell people about Jesus and invite "all nations" to find life in following him. And that is what led to Manny's surprise.

As the Biblical writers might say, "the Lord was with Manny." As he shared with others the love of God in Jesus, Manny saw people respond in faith. Very different kinds of people. People from other racial, ethnic and religious backgrounds. Manny brought them all to the congregation where he worshipped, the congregation where he heard the Great Commission. That's where he got surprised.

One Sunday a small group of Manny's new friends came to worship. They had become followers of Jesus through Manny's witness. But people in the community into which those men had been born felt betrayed, shamed and angered by their decision. So, as the men were worshipping in the congregation alongside Manny that day, a larger group of men from their birth community suddenly appeared, entered the sanctuary, dragged the new followers of Jesus into the street in front of the church building and began to beat them severely. Fortunately, Manny had a friend in the local police force who was patrolling nearby. As soon as Manny called him, the police came, stopped the beating and saved the lives of the new believers.

This event was terrible. But, given Manny's context, it was not completely surprising. The surprise came next.

The church was, naturally, very traumatized by what had happened. As a minority community in the midst of much larger communities, they were scared. With good reason. But the surprise came when Manny's pastor, the same one who had called the church to fulfill the Great Commission, said to Manny:

"**These** people? They are **your** problem!!"

Manny was stunned. He had responded to the call. God had blessed. The men had found grace, meaning, peace and purpose in Jesus. But they would **not** be finding a home in the church. At least, not anytime soon.

Manny had read his Bible enough to know that in God's future, people from every tongue and tribe and people and nation would be bound together in love, anchored in (and worshipping) the one God who had made them all. But maybe, he began to think, getting to that oneness could be a process, rather than a single leap. After all, in his parables Jesus had explained that the Kingdom of God was like a growing seed and like gradually-acting yeast. Maybe it would take time for people to discover and embrace their oneness in Christ.

At the same time, Manny thought about the pattern he saw in John's portrayal of Jesus and Luke's description of the work of the Spirit. John explained that in Jesus, God had entered fully into a specific human community and context (or, in Peterson's rendering, "moved into the neighborhood" [John 1:14, The Message]). And, when the Spirit of God came upon the believers on Pentecost, the amazing news of God's mighty work was proclaimed in the languages that were the expression and vehicle for all of the different cultures present that day.

So, he thought, maybe rather than calling people to leave their communities as the first step in following Jesus, one could faithfully follow the model of the Spirit and of Jesus himself by entering deeply into the life of each community, to begin transforming it from the inside out.

Today, Manny is pursuing this approach as he works with people in several radically different communities. He moves to meet them "on their own turf." He patiently walks alongside them as they grow in grace and the knowledge of Jesus Christ, as they discern the ways the Spirit is speaking in **their** language and explore the ways Jesus wants to live in **their** neighborhood. As they grow, they gradually deepen their understanding of how Christ calls them to turn away from some parts of their traditions, reinterpret other parts and build upon yet other parts, as the Spirit empowers them to become increasingly faithful followers and reflections of Jesus. And along the way, they continue to share the good news they have found in Jesus with others in the communities they have not left.

Ironically, Manny realizes his pastor was right. "**These** people?" Truly, they are his problem. They are his problem because he has heard and is responding to the call of the God who loves them and offers them life in Jesus. They are his problem because he can no longer remain content in any "us," that does not live out love for "them." As Manny patiently works, he prays for the day when all of God's children will see that the dividing wall between every "us" and "them" has been torn down in Jesus. In the meantime, he meets them where they are.

It is a privilege to have the chance to participate in some small way in what God is doing through Manny and others like him. Thanks so much for the prayers and gifts by which you make it possible for me to come alongside them, encourage them and learn with them what it means to follow Jesus in our world today.

Blessings,

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