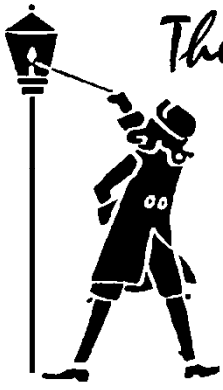


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# LAKESIDE CHURCH OF CHICAGO

3939 Howard St, Skokie, IL 60076 Fax: 847.763.9719 Phone: 847.763.9720 Email: lakesidechurchofchicago@yahoo.com

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# The LAMPLIGHTER

Rev. Stan Wiedeman, Pastor

Office: 847.763.9725

Rev. Dave Uchizono, Director of C.E.

Office: 847.763.9723

Rev. Mitsuo Suzuki, Pastor, Japanese-Speaking

Office: 847.763.9724

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IN CHRIST AND FOR CHRIST - TO KNOW CHRIST AND TO MAKE HIM KNOWN

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## CREATED EQUAL – AND DIFFERENT

When I was in the first grade my family moved from Joplin, Missouri to Hot Springs, Arkansas. I attended a public school for the next five years and do not recall ever seeing an African-American in my classes or on the playground. The years were 1956 to 1961, the most volatile in the history of school desegregation. Arkansas became the staging area for the pivotal event of desegregation, when President Eisenhower ordered 10,000 National Guardsmen to Central High School in Little Rock to ensure that nine black students would be permitted to attend the all-white school.

As a seven-year-old, all I cared about was playing baseball, playing marbles, riding my bike, and a host of other activities children do. Racial issues did not appear on my radar. If race created any tension in Hot Springs (and I am sure it did), I never felt it. I did meet African-American boys at the Boys Club, where I spent much of my time. As far as I was concerned, they were no different than any other kids their age, except they had darker skin.

I also do not recall my parents making any derogatory remarks about African-Americans. Years later, they would make extra efforts to befriend African-Americans at work or in the community. Racial prejudice did not exist in my childhood reality.

My family moved back to Joplin in 1961, and the community was very different. When I went to East Junior High in Joplin in 1962, I attended classes and played on teams with African-Americans. Although the minority of black residents lived predominantly in their own area of the community, I do not remember a single incident that suggested to me that whites in Joplin thought blacks were inferior. I just don't remember any personal exposure to racism.

Although I did not become a follower of Jesus until college, I think I always believed that a person's skin color had nothing to do with his or her personhood, and that God had indeed created all men equal. My blood still boils when I watch movies about, or hear stories of racial injustice. All mercy drains from me when I hear Coach Yoast (Will Patton) talk with contempt to the new federally mandated black head coach, Herman Boone (Denzel Washington), in *Remember the Titans*.

Stereotyping is sometimes lumped with prejudice and racism, although it differs from both. Stereotyping identifies generalized characteristics of a group of people. The group may be formed by race, nationality, gender, occupation, age, or numerous other criteria. When a substantial number of people in a group (not even a majority is needed) display a characteristic, then a stereotype may result. When a stereotype influences opinions that extend to all members of the group without distinction, then the stereotype fuels prejudice, and prejudice devalues the unique individuality with which God creates every person.

Generalization is not inherently evil. Most people I know acknowledge generalized traits of the group to which they belong, traits associated with ethnicity, nationality, or occupation. This can be helpful in knowing and understanding people as long as the generalization is not used to restrict knowledge, to treat people as if they will act consistently with that trait, without giving a person the opportunity to demonstrate inconsistency.

For example, Jews are traditionally stereotyped as frugal, or even stingy. If I go to lunch with my Jewish friend and he declares that we pay for our lunches separately, then I might form a prejudice about him based on the stereotype. Maybe his parents trained him to always pay his own way and never expect free handouts from others. To avoid the awkwardness of having to allow someone else pay for his lunch, perhaps he decided to always "go Dutch." Any number of reasons might be behind his action, including the possibility that he is frugal – or stingy.

God has created His world with magnificent diversity. That diversity is increasing at Lakeside, and every person seems to talk about his or her group with generalizations, "Koreans do this," or "Haitians are like that." I wish I had a dime for every time I have heard someone say, "Asians are ...," and you fill in the blank. People have seemed to want to help me know generalized traits about their ethnic group in order to help me understand them. Nothing wrong with that, as long as I resist the temptation to assume that every Asian will act consistently with that trait.

Since I have not grown up in the context of racial prejudice, I think I generally resist that temptation. I also think that I sense a certain freedom to use these generalizations in helpful ways. Sometimes they can be used to cause people to examine their lives to see if they live consistently with the stereotype. The trait may be positive or negative, but it allows healthy self-examination. I don't think anyone needs to apologize for educating me in these generalizations, and I would expect the same openness for me to use the generalization in a beneficial way.

Galatians 3:28 guides me in this subject. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Paul is not trying to deny the existence of ethnic, class, or gender distinctions. In fact, he must often address those distinctions from a kingdom perspective. Another reality transcends this diversity, however. Unity in Jesus Christ trumps diversity. Full acceptance, unhindered love and sincere respect should characterize our fellowship with one another.

May God enable us to appreciate more and more the freedom of fellowship in the midst of a very diverse community at Lakeside.

*Pastor Stan*