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The Myth of Subtle Racism

IN ALL THINGS IS COMMITTED TO A CHRIST WHO STRETCHES AT LEAST AS WIDE AS THE COSMOS

I was seventeen years old when I came face to face with my own racist tendencies. As a new college freshman and an eager overachiever, I found myself with my hand in the air one morning, ready to answer the question posed by our professor: “Do you think people of different races should marry each other?”

I wish I remembered the context of this question. But the memory is relegated to a thirty-second snippet during which I was called on and pridefully answered that no, I did not believe that biracial marriage was a good idea. My argument was based on the theory that life would be hard for people in mixed families. (As if the greatest indicator of a good life is ease.)

With the calm self-assurance that I had answered thoughtfully, I watched as a girl a few rows ahead of me raised her hand. “My mom is white and my dad is black,” she said. “And I couldn’t disagree more.” She turned and gave me a smile, one that I didn’t deserve and that contained the sort of grace that leveled me. The professor encouraged her to share more, and I listened with a growing sense of my own foolishness.

It may sound melodramatic, but that one small exchange hit my soul with the magnitude of an earthquake. The fissures that extended from this experience carved deep into my family history, my personal beliefs, and even my sense of identity.



Ideas like the one that I espoused in my general ed course are the direct result of growing up in a slowly simmering pot of “subtle racism.” Sure, there are overt racists, the ones who carry torches and shout ugly slurs and tattoo swastikas on their necks. But this overtness makes

their voices conveniently easy to dismiss. We are free to give ourselves a pass from believing we could be like that. Our brand of softer, subtle racism is not just more palatable, it’s considered *normal*. This sort of racism is comprised of jokes that lean heavily on racial or ethnic stereotypes. It’s made up of national pride that borders on hegemony, paternalistic overtones in missions, and the secret wish that our children would marry someone who looks like them. But there is no such thing as “subtle racism.” Even seemingly insignificant attitudes and beliefs slowly

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erode our capacity to understand and respect one another, and destroy our ability to say with integrity that we believe all men are created equal. This is especially true in Christian circles where we give lip service to passages like Galatians 3:28 (“...for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”) and Revelation 7:9 (“...there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people, and language...”). Either we believe what we say we believe—that we are better together, that we are one body, that we are all a part of the Body of

Christ—or we don’t.

I fear white Christians are blind to their own ignorance. We don’t know what other races experience, we can’t begin to put ourselves in the shoes of the marginalized, and frankly, we’d rather not try. We tend to shy away from hard things, preferring an easy existence that ignores the fact that Jesus said: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.” (Luke 9:23) We often believe our “crosses” are minor inconveniences and we don’t much want to hear about issues that require us to wrestle, possibly feel shame, and *repent*. I fear our pride prevents us from living out the greatest commandment as we learn to fall in line with the mantra: “Me first.” And the philosophy of me and mine first is nothing less than idolatry.

I am ashamed of the girl I was and know that the woman I am has far to go. But I pray that I can humble myself to be soft and teachable. To seek peace even if—*especially* if—it requires my repentance. And saying those words is just the first step. From word to action to cultural transformation, may we be the incarnation of the incarnation, the universal Body of Christ in each and every corner of the world.

Maybe the in-breaking of the kingdom of God begins with a simple, heartfelt “I’m sorry.”

Oh, friends. I am so, so sorry.

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In All Things is a journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God’s creation. We want to expand our imagination for what the Christian life—and life of the mind—can accomplish. In pursuit of this end, we will engage in conversation with diverse voices across a wide range of traditions, places, and times.