

The Future of Your Body *Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians*

Friendship Across Cultures *1 Corinthians 9:19 – 22*

Rescued Church Boston, July 12, 2015

Introduction: Friendship Across Cultures

I'd like us to reflect on what it means to follow Jesus into friendships that are cross-cultural. In 1995, when I was 23 years old, I moved into East Palo Alto, CA. In 1992, East Palo Alto had the highest murder rate per capita in the nation. But I had met Jose and Jennifer Espinosa, a Mexican-American and white American couple. They led a Spanish speaking Bible study in that community. I had started to get involved in their ministry, and I really respected them as mentors. So I moved into one of their ministry areas: an apartment complex of very poor but very beautiful Mexican immigrant families. As a Japanese-American young man, raised in a quiet suburb, I moved in and introduced myself, 'Hi, my name is Mako.' Now my full name, Makoto, is one of the Japanese words for truth. In the Japanese New Testament, where Jesus says, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life,' the translators say, 'I am the way, the *makoto*, and the life.' I only found out about that late in high school when I gave my life to Jesus. Until then, raised in a mostly white American neighborhood, I had always felt a little embarrassed about my name. But by the time I had gone through college, I had become quite happy about my name and its meaning. That's important for you to know about this story. When I moved into East Palo Alto, I would introduce myself as *Mako*. The kids laughed. The parents sometimes did a double take, or raised their eyebrows, as if to ask, 'Really?' I went back to Jose and Jennifer, my mentors, and asked them, 'Hey, what's going on?' Jose said, 'Oh, it's because your name Mako is close to the Spanish word moco which means boogers.' I said, 'Great. Should I go by my full name, Makoto?' He said, 'No... you probably don't want to do that.' 'Why?' I asked. In Spanish, the -ito ending means small. The -oto ending means big. So Makoto is close to mocoto which means big boogers!' I thought, 'I guess it's just a drop in the ocean of what Jesus went through. My name Makoto means 'truth' but in Spanish it sounds like 'big boogers.' So I went from being 'truth' to being 'big boogers.' That was what it meant for me to step into another culture: leaving behind all the perks I had built up for myself in my own culture, and becoming a learner again; leaving behind English and having to work on my broken Spanish; leaving behind being taken seriously and becoming laughed at and embarrassing myself sometimes.

Relevance

Sometimes when we step into someone else's culture, we feel awkward. We have to ask questions like, 'Why exactly do we take our shoes off in your house, Mako? Why do Asian households do that?' We feel incompetent because we don't know about each other's hairstyles. We feel like we might offend someone else, like when we ask, 'You like what kind of music?' And yet, everyone who follows Jesus is called into that posture. It's not a Rescued issue, just because we happen to be diverse. It's a kingdom of God issue, a Jesus issue. The great Christian missionary and church planter Paul wrote in his first letter to the Corinthians a great summary statement:

¹ Cor.9:19 For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may win more. ²⁰ To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law though not being myself under the Law, so that I might win those who are under the Law; ²¹ to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, so that I might win those who are without law. ²² To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some.'

In other words, Paul recognized different cultures, and to some degree modified how he communicated and related as he crossed these cultures. By culture, I mean the ways we interact with each other, including language and actions and how we interpret each other.

Now why does Paul say this? Two reasons. First: Because Jesus stepped into a culture to love people. In John 13, for example, Jesus washes his disciples' feet. He said, 'Love one another like this.' Let me ask you: When was the last time you washed someone's feet? Why not? Jesus said to do it, right?! Well, he said to love one another, but in our culture washing feet is probably not the best way to express love. Back in Jesus' day, there were dusty roads; people wore sandals; and there was a servant role in people's homes where the servant helped you wash your feet so

you wouldn't track dust and mud into the house. For Jesus to take that servant role meant something. It is like if I came into your suite and said, 'Let me clean your bathroom.' There is a principle – love – and there is the cultural expression – washing feet, or cleaning bathrooms. Christian faith is always expressed through a culture. So we have to know the culture of the people that we're trying to love in Jesus' name, because if we don't, then they probably won't feel loved by us.

In fact, Jesus came from heaven to earth. Can you begin to imagine what that was like for him? If I went from being truth to being big boogers, just imagine what it was like for him! He went from knowing everything that was happening to seeing stuff through limited human eyes and knowing stuff through a limited human brain. He gave life to all things, yet he became a limited human body, with peeing and pooping, puberty and pimples. So if Jesus crossed the greatest barriers, because he loved us and wanted to give us life, how can we not cross cultural barriers, to love others and be loved in return?

This sets Christian faith apart. In Hinduism, you have to learn Sanskrit, the language of the elites. In Islam, you have to learn Arabic because the Qur'an was written in Arabic, and make pilgrimages to Arabia because there is something special about that place and implicitly that culture. But in Christian faith, missionaries translate the Bible into your own language for you. You don't have to learn Greek or Hebrew or Aramaic. At Pentecost, the Spirit of God empowered Jews to speak in all these different languages they didn't know before. Why? Because God wants every person to hear about Jesus in their heart language. That's amazing! You don't have to make pilgrimages anywhere. There is a dynamic in Christian faith to engage each culture on its own terms. Why? Because the Christian God does that Himself. He steps from heaven to earth. He speaks in people's heart languages. There's a scholar of African history and African church history named Lamin Sanneh who grew up in a royal Muslim family. By age 14 he had memorized the Qur'an. But he noticed that Christian faith takes other languages and cultures seriously and translates itself into other people's languages and cultures. He decided that that looks more consistent than Islam, which doesn't, so he gave his life to Jesus!! He now teaches at Yale Divinity School.

Not only that, but: Second, Jesus transforms individuals and cultures. Our cultures are eternally important. They are not perfect; they are in need of healing; but they are important. I'm not talking about situations where culture is contrary to faith, like waving the Confederate flag and calling it 'a Christian culture,' or men mistreating women and calling it 'a Christian culture.' Clearly there are some aspects of culture that need to be challenged by Jesus. But there are other aspects of culture that Jesus seems to take up, dignify, and use for his purposes.

So when we read the book of Revelation, and see a vision of the throne of Jesus, and people from every tribe and tongue gathered around him (Rev.5:9), the text says 'every tongue.' Every language. Language is a part of culture, so if languages carry on for eternity, there must be some parts of our cultures that carry on for eternity, too. Even marriage does not last into eternity, as Jesus said in Matthew 22:30, but language and some culture does.

So how do we relate to each other right here and right now? I'm going to talk about 2 cultural differences. Then I'll back up and highlight some principles.

Cultural Issue #1: Direct and Indirect Communication

Illus: Let me get your opinion on this scenario. One Christmas break when I came home from college, I asked my mom, 'Mom, do you want me to do anything around the house? Work with anything in the backyard?' She said no. So the week went by, and at the end, I was getting ready to drive back to school. But my mom was totally mad at me. Turns out she had expected me to ask her again. Here's my question for you: Who's right and who's wrong?

That story illustrates direct versus indirect communication. In direct communication culture, the responsibility for communication falls on the speaker. In indirect communication culture, the responsibility for communication falls on the listener. With my mom, I was assuming that if she wanted my help, she would ask me. I thought it was her responsibility to speak up. She was expecting me to offer help again. To her, it was my responsibility to hear something she was not saying. Now Asian cultures are the most indirect, but maybe you'll find that this kind of describes you in certain situations. Like in parent-child relationships. Or in romantic relationships. 'You should know without me having to say it.' So maybe this puts some language on something you've seen or experienced.

How do you get to know someone? Do you ask questions or do you feel that that is too personal? 'Well it seems like you're not interested in me, because you didn't ask.' Or, do you assume people will tell you something about themselves? Like, 'I don't have to ask how you're doing; you oughta just tell me!'

Let's talk about how this dynamic might affect your friendships. Let's say that you are Person #1. And you are friends with Person #2. But you can't stand Person #3. Person #3 gets on your nerves because he or she is too loud. You don't like being around them. Or maybe it's the other way around. Person #3 doesn't like you. But either way, Person #2 is friends with Person #3. For some reason you can't understand, they are friends. Now apart from the love of God, your response to Person #2 is probably something like this: 'I don't really understand how you can be friends with Person #3.' That's the befuddled response. Or, it could be: 'I don't think you should be friends with Person #3, for your own good.' That's the semi-parental response. Or, it could be: 'I'm mad that you actually spend time with Person #3.' That's the insecure, jealous response. Or, it could be worse: 'I'm not going to be your friend if you're friends with Person #3.' That's the *Mean Girls* response, right? But with the love of Jesus, you would look at that friendship more positively. You would say, 'I'm really glad that you're friends with Person #3, because I can't be that friend, at least right now.' Or, you would say, 'I admire you for being friends with Person #3. I want to get there, too.' Or you would say, 'I admire you, and I'd like to learn from you how are you able to be friends with Person #3 because I'm having a hard time.'

If you choose to be in the love of Jesus, then he will shape your perspective, like the apostle Paul experienced in 1 Corinthians 9. If you choose to be in your own selfishness, then your jealousy will shape you. Your own lens will set you up to see things in a certain way. And then you'll feel excluded even if other people didn't mean to exclude you. You'll assume that other people are close just because they're loud; in reality, they might not be that close, and they might have more of a cultural friendship than a spiritual friendship.

Cultural Issue #2: Your Family's Economic Background

The second issue I want to highlight is your family's economic background.

Illus: When I grew up in high school especially, there were some things my friends did that I just knew I couldn't do. Like go skiing fairly often, which is a fairly expensive sport. Or fixing up your car. Or buying lots of sports equipment, like surfboards, wetsuits, tennis rackets, and gear. I just knew that I couldn't ask my parents for that much. Why? Because my family immigrated to the U.S. before 1965. The year 1965 is important in Asian American immigration from 1965 onwards, the immigration policy changed. The U.S. began recruiting very educated engineers and scientists and professionals from Japan, China, and Korea. That's where we get the 'model minority' myth. Before 1965, the immigrants from East Asia were working class. What I was experiencing was the economic difference between two different waves of immigration.

Now in this case, Scripture contains lots of commands to be sensitive to the more economically vulnerable. Notice what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 9. 'To the weak I became like the weak.' When there are dynamics of more privilege and less privilege, Paul orients the community towards the less privileged. Jesus directs his people to people who are vulnerable, who have fewer options. So maybe we need to eat out less and make more meals at home because it helps more people to come and more people to reciprocate. Or maybe having lemonade on the porch or coffee at the coffee shop around the corner is the most comfortable for some. Maybe it helps them reciprocate?

Now no one is responsible for the family they were born into. What we are responsible for is realizing that our families of origin didn't teach us everything about the world. So Jesus leads us to befriend people in ways that honor them.

Challenge: Explain Yourself

Let's back up and make clear some larger principles. Part of the challenge of friendship across different cultures is that you have to articulate your own culture. Sometimes, we are not good at articulating our culture. Maybe because we're embarrassed about it, or because we don't understand it ourselves. But we do have to articulate our culture. When my kids become teenagers, and have their friends over, they're going to have to interpret me and my wife to their friends. They're going to have to say, 'We take our shoes off in the house. We eat these foods. Mom and Dad are competitive at games like Scrabble or Grabble – don't worry, it's not you, it's just them. Mom and Dad will ask you lots of questions, because that's their way of getting to know you.' They will have to interpret our

family culture to their friends. You have to help them understand why your humor is this way, what growing up was like, what family stories and ethnic history were told to you. That will help people enter in. That is hospitality: Articulating our own culture so someone else can understand it and enter it and feel welcomed in. You'll have a chance to do that in a moment.

Illus: When Rick helped me understand what he and many African-Americans have heard from the pulpit about money, that was really helpful. Not just so I could know how to address Scripture but also because it's personal. And I'll just say that I need help understanding a lot of other things. Like the triangle offense in basketball. That's a small example, but it highlights a point. I will never step onto the court with JCross and Rick and some of these guys who are built like LeBron James and are ten years younger than me. Sorry, guys, that will not be part of our friendship. But I do enjoy watching the game. I just need help understanding what I'm seeing. I need help understanding certain kinds of music that you know and I don't because I need to understand the younger generation. I need help understanding your reactions to political issues because I need to understand issues of injustice.

Cultural Friendship and Spiritual Friendship

On the flip side, we have to ask if we are good at learning to like others. When I'm with people who I find hard to like, I remember one of my mentors. He had a great quality. As I observed him interacting with people, he found something in every person to like. After the small talk and chit chat, he started getting to know the other person. He tried to connect something he enjoyed to something the other person enjoyed, or could enjoy. Or if that didn't come easily, he tried to see if there was something the other person could teach him: art, baseball stats, cooking tips, an aspect of politics, etc. He enjoyed learning, and becoming a broader person. He tried to find out what the other person found funny. He worked patiently to find something in every single person he could like. That took love. I sensed that his depth and broadness as a person came from this way of relating to people. He loved people in order to find something to like in them.

I think that's like God. God loves us in order to like us. I dare say that we learn friendships in reverse. We first ask who we like. And then we learn to love them. God loves us in order to like us. And then in His family, He calls us to reflect His love. So we love others in order to like them. In order to discover in someone else what we can connect with. Or in order to develop in ourselves something that others like.

I'm not talking about cultural appropriation. But I am talking about making meaningful steps to understand someone else, so they can see it and receive it as love.